

# URBAN ARTS CENTER

2019  
Annual  
Report

# UJC IN 2019

**12,444 CASES CLOSED**

**27,404 PEOPLE IMPACTED**

*by our direct services.*

**\$2.9 MILLION RECOVERED**

*in public benefits for clients in desperate need.*

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## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Friends,

One of the main things that has gotten me through this difficult year has been seeing the incredible ways we – as people, as Americans, as concerned citizens of the world – have pulled together and taken care of one another. From the wildfires in California, to the dumpster fire in the White House, the crises we face today are far beyond the ability of any one person to solve.

*Only through collective action do we stand a chance.*

That is the theme of our Annual Report for this year: lifting up the stories of the many, many people involved with the Urban Justice Center, from the staff we employ, to the activists we train, to the community members we work with. In these pages, you'll meet the at-risk students in the Bronx who participated in a basketball tournament organized by Power of Purpose (part of the inaugural class of our Social Justice Accelerator program), which the local police precinct credited for preventing violence all summer long. You'll meet the Safety Net Activists, a group of incredible volunteers – all with personal experience of homelessness and precarity – who have been successfully lobbying the city to make change on behalf of themselves and people like them. You'll read about our urgent law suit, developed to protect our clients from being ambushed by ICE, which is supported by State Attorney General Tish James, among many others. And you'll hear the stories of some of our most difficult cases, where our clients needed help that spread across many of the Projects we house.

Together, we are making a difference – and you are an important part of that “we.” Without your support, there would be salaries for our staff, no office to train activists in, not even the paper on which to send you this report. Our community – my community – is stronger because you are in it.



A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink.

Doug Lasdon  
*Executive Director*



# DEFENDING INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS



Salma with Brooke Taylor from the Mental Health Project and Rosie Wang from the Sex Workers Project

Photos by Aidan Sullivan

## OUR STRENGTH LIES IN OUR UNIQUE STRUCTURE

which empowers diverse advocates to tackle intractable problems in groundbreaking ways. Each Project sets their own course, but is united by a shared commitment to social justice, enabling us to defend individuals' rights in ways smaller agencies can't.

For instance, when our client Salma first came to our office in 2016 she had been living on the streets, in and out of shelters for several years. A human trafficking survivor, Salma was referred to our Sex Workers Project to get help applying for a trafficking visa. SWP staff provided trauma therapy, case management and legal assistance until—after many, many meetings and applications—she won a coveted T-visa. Remaining connected to SWP for continued case management support, Salma was finally able to move out of the city's shelter system and into her own supportive housing apartment. However, the toll and trauma of the trafficking and years of homelessness, transphobia and violence Salma endured, manifested in severe PTSD symptoms and prevented her from being able to secure employment in the formal economy.

Salma initiated her own application for disability benefits and UJC's Mental Health Project quickly added their expertise to the fight, joining Salma's interdisciplinary team, and collaborating with SWP to educate the Social Security Administration about T-visa holder's eligibility and Salma's mental health disability. Months of tireless holistic advocacy from the team and dogged persistence on Salma's part resulted in yet another win—Salma is living safer and healthier now, a visa holder, in her own Brooklyn apartment, with life-saving Medicaid and disability benefits.

*"I wish there was a UJC in every city in the world."*

— Salma





Photo by Brent Stirton



# BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

## AT UJC, WE BELIEVE WE ARE STRONGEST WHEN WE WORK TOGETHER.

For this reason, many of our Projects partner with others to push for systemic changes in New York City – often, organizing with people directly impacted by these issues. Not only does this grow the community of people advocating for social justice, it also empowers community members and gives them new tools to create change for themselves and others.

In 2014, the Safety Net Project and impacted community members launched the Safety Net Activists, a volunteer group of New Yorkers who have lived experience with poverty, homelessness, and the public benefits system. Jonathan Sunshine, pictured here, has been part of the Activists for many years.

*"Never forget that many superheroes were just regular people before their circumstances transformed them and made them what they are."*

— Johnathan Sunshine



Safety Net Activists at City Hall Rally

In 2019 alone, the Safety Net Activists:

- › Significantly raised awareness on how the City's poorest and most vulnerable communities are subject to arbitrary abuse at City benefits offices. As a direct result, in August 2019, the City Council passed an oversight package aimed at requiring new training methods, improving services, and increasing accountability and transparency at the offices.
- › Released a report that showed the harmful effects of "transfer" practices carried out within NYC shelters, revealing that homeless families and individuals are subject to arbitrary and forcible shelter moves across the city, often with no notice or reason provided and no ability to contest the move. The report was covered in the New York Times.

In 2020, the Safety Net Activists will launch a new Know Your Rights guide, the first resource of its kind to provide critical information to homeless New Yorkers about their rights in shelter and resources in the difficult process of finding housing. The guide will be distributed to homeless New Yorkers across the City.



# FUELING SYSTEMIC CHANGE



UJC Staff at ICE Lawsuit Rally

*“You can’t have true justice if you are afraid to go to court.”*

*— Atossa Movahedi  
Domestic Violence Project*

When our client CZ went to court seeking an order of protection against their abusive ex-partner, the last thing they expected was to be ambushed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The American courthouse has always been a symbol for sanctuary, but in the last year, ICE has perverted that image, using our nation’s courts as traps to attack noncitizens - without judicial warrants - at the most vulnerable moments of their lives. As a result, CZ is terrified to return to the courthouse, and even considered reuniting with their abuser in order to survive.

Our courts must be safe spaces for people in danger, which is why we at UJC are part of a coalition that is suing ICE to put a stop to these cruel raids. For centuries, common law has recognized that civil arrests in or around courthouses threaten the true pursuit of justice, but ICE now flagrantly disregards this important precedent - “a disastrous and dangerous break from previous policy,” as State Attorney General Letitia James said at the rally announcing our case.



State Attorney General Letitia James speaks at ICE lawsuit rally

**NO ONE SHOULD HAVE  
TO CHOOSE BETWEEN BEING  
ABUSED AND BEING DEPORTED.**



# SOCIAL JUSTICE ACCELERATOR

At the start of 2019, we launched our ambitious Social Justice Accelerator (SJA), with a mission to find and incubate critical new initiatives working in the social justice sphere. Mentoring early phase projects (and the activists who create them), has always been a part of UJC's work, but with the Accelerator, we have formalized it into regular, bi-yearly classes of new Projects.

**AFTER SIX MONTHS, WE  
ASKED OUR FIRST CLASS  
TO REFLECT ON WHAT  
THIS EXPERIENCE HAS  
MEANT FOR THEM**

## AsylumConnect

*"As a young executive director, the mentorship and guidance provided by UJC's leadership team on everything from fundraising to hiring has been invaluable."*

— Katie Sgarro

## The Brave House

*"The UJC team has connected me to potential funders, assisted me with the intimidating 501c3 application process, and strategized with me as I set up my organization's programming and services."*

— Lauren Blodgett

## College Athletes Advocacy Initiative

*"We've had the invaluable opportunity to learn from and network with all the other amazing projects at UJC as we grow our cause and fight for social justice."*

— Tim Nevius

## Power of Purpose (PoP)

*"With the support of the Urban Justice Center, Power of Purpose gained immediate credibility and has grown from an idea to a non-profit poised to change the lives of Bronx youth."*

— Jenay Nurse & Kwame Thompson

## Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (STOP)

*"When I began S.T.O.P. in January, we were a dream, a name, and a desk in my living room. Today, with the help of the Urban Justice Center we are an internationally-recognized force for surveillance reform, powered by a growing staff that brings lawsuits, crafts policies, and develops software to protect the privacy rights of every single New Yorker."*

— Albert Fox Cahn





# A CLOSER LOOK AT ONE SJA PROJECT



*Championship Team, Middle-School Division, PoP Top of the Hill Tournament*

## POWER OF PURPOSE

Power of Purpose (PoP) is one of the organizations we brought in for the first class of the SJA. Centered in the Bronx, they aim to intervene in the lives of at-risk youth, before they become gang or criminally involved. With our support, they were able to launch a 12-week basketball tournament over the summer, when many youth – without other outlets – frequently find themselves in trouble. The tournament teams were purposely devised to include youth who were affiliated with rival gangs, and all youth were required to receive mentoring before and after each game.

Fresh off this success, the leaders of PoP were mentored by Urban Justice staff to successfully apply for their first major grant, to fund a school-based mentoring program based on the PoP curriculum. Starting in November 2019, this grant enabled them to launch a mentoring program for youth at the Urban Assembly Charter School for Computer Science in the Bronx.

*“The Top of the Hill tournament is directly responsible for having no shootings among my Housing Developments... this was a safe place run by the community and for the community.”*

*-Captain Keiyon S. Ramsey  
Commanding Officer, Local Police Precinct*



*Bronx Borough President  
Ruben Diaz Jr., State  
Assembly Member Marcos  
Crespo, PoP Co-Director  
Kwame Thompson, and  
two PoP members at the  
Top of the Hill tournament*



# THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

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# UJC INITIATIVES

## AsylumConnect

*uses technology to help LGBTQ asylum seekers find safe legal aid and other support.*

## The Brave House

*is a community space providing holistic services to immigrant girls who are survivors of gender-based violence.*

## College Athletes Advocacy Initiative

*advocates for the fair and equal treatment of college athletes to combat exploitation in the multibillion dollar sports industry.*

## Domestic Violence Project

*protects the rights of domestic violence survivors to allow for a self-determined and safe future.*

## Human Rights Project

*promotes recognition and implementation of the full spectrum of human rights in the United States.*

## Mental Health Project

*works to enforce the rights of low-income New Yorkers with mental health issues.*

## Peter Cicchino Youth Project

*provides legal representation to homeless youth in NYC, with a focus on the needs of LGBTQ youth.*

## Power of Purpose (PoP)

*is a solution to the violence, crime, and cycle of criminal justice involvement plaguing youth ages 14 to 18 years old in the Bronx.*

## Safety Net Project

*works to ensure access to public benefits for low-income New Yorkers.*

## Sex Workers Project

*provides legal & social services, advocacy, education, and organizing for the human rights of sex workers.*

## Street Vendor Project

*works to correct social and economic injustice faced by NYC street vendors.*

## Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (STOP)

*addresses state and local officials' growing use of surveillance technologies, especially on communities of color.*

## LIKE OUR NEW LOOK?

*Check out our new website which swept the Transform Awards North America winning both the premium awards – for 'Best overall visual identity' and the evening's 'Grand prix, designed by branding experts Superunion.*

*To see more, visit [URBANJUSTICE.ORG](http://URBANJUSTICE.ORG)*

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