

Students can get legal help at school Attorney opens clinic at Harding High

By Linda Conner Lambeck

BRIDGEPORT —

Miguel, 16, holds everyone he meets at a distance. His answers to questions, translated from English to Spanish by his attorney in a small makeshift office at Warren Harding High School, are short and to the point. He does not discuss the father who abandoned him or the mother he watched die of cancer when he was 11 years old. He makes no mention of living on his own in Honduras for four years before making it to the United States border, or of being apprehended, or that he is facing deportation.

He will leave those details to his attorney, Edwin Colon, who is trying to prove in Probate Court that Miguel is an abandoned child — the first step in a process to allow him to stay in the country legally. For now, Miguel, a freshman at Harding who declined to give his real name, is struggling to learn English and to read in any language. He has to get back to class.



Autumn Driscoll/Staff photographer

Edwin Colon, an attorney from the Center for Children's Advocacy, talks to former student and client Christina Coke during his office hours at Harding High School in Bridgeport. The teen law clinic provides free legal services to students on school issues, immigration, homelessness and more.

faced with custody and child support battles, students who age out of the Department of Children and Families system with nowhere to go and children who run into trouble at school.

Invited to Harding in 2008 by then-principal Carol Birks and run by the Hartford-based Center for Children's Advocacy, the clinic is based on an idea introduced by Georgetown Law School in the nation's capital back in the 1970s to bring free legal aid services to youngsters where they are — in schools, group homes, shelters and sometimes hospitals. The center also has offices in two Hartford hospitals and Yale-New Haven Hospital.

Were it not for the "Teen Legal Clinic" sign on the door, the small office, located stage right in the Harding auditorium, might be mistaken for a dressing room or a storage closet with chipping paint on the walls and a sink. Indeed, Colon shares the space with security and maintenance staff. But from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays, it is a free legal clinic.

"The concept is if you provide free legal aid to youths and their families for issues that may be barriers to the kids being able to graduate, you increase the chances they will achieve their diploma," said Colon, 38, a social worker-turned-attorney who has been stationed in the Harding clinic for three years.

Colon said his days are exhausting, but he loves Harding. "I get a positive energy from the work I do with kids here," he said.

The center itself, as well as the work of the clinic, is backed by donations from private foundations and individual donors. Some funding also comes from the Connecticut Bar Association. The center's budget is about \$1.3 million a year. The cost of running the teen legal clinic at Harding is \$68,000 a year and is completely covered by the center.

"They have to be able to stay in school and function," Colon said, before issuing Miguel a hall pass. "We are here to give them hope, not take away from their energy or their main reason for being in school, which is to learn."

While many urban schools host medical clinics, bringing doctors' services to schools where children in need can easily access them, Harding has the only school-based legal clinic in the state and is one of just a handful in the country. The clinic's attorney has no shortage of work. Helping undocumented youths achieve legal status is but a small portion of the clinic's case load.

One of Bridgeport's three comprehensive high schools, Harding serves 1,113 students and, in 2012, had a graduation rate of 66.1 percent. Their legal needs range from abuse or abandonment by parents to teen parents who are

According to Colon, about 95 percent of the clinic's clients stay in school. Last year, the clinic served 47 students in Bridgeport and 87 in Fairfield County. When he is not at Harding, Colon works out of an office in the Burroughs Community Center on Fairfield Avenue, as does Kathryn Meyer, another center attorney whose clients tend to be younger. Colon also spends time working on cases as needed in Norwalk, Stamford and Hartford.

"The center does work that no one else seems to be concentrating on: our kids. They do it quietly and efficiently," Bridgeport Town Clerk Alma Maya said. Maya used to sit on the center's board of directors. Harding Principal Carmen McPherson called the clinic a resource, especially for students who have issues that get in the way of learning. "They are not adversarial," McPherson said. Even when the clinic represents students during hearings to determine services, McPherson said the attorneys seem more like mediators.

At times, however, the relationship can be awkward. In working to represent several students in the district, the center filed a complaint against the Bridgeport schools last year over the district's "systematic disregard" for the state's Child Find Law. Child Find requires districts to determine if students who are chronically absent, misbehaving or getting poor grades need special education services. The state ruled in the center's favor and the district had to develop a plan to address the issue.

The center has also been aggressive in its work to improve the district's alternative education programs.

"I have a unique role," said Colon. "Cases where we end up becoming adversaries are very few, to be honest. Most (cases) are where we are really here to support the kids."

Colon has about 15 open cases. He helped a girl get a restraining order after a fellow student sent her threatening text message pictures of knives. There are students applying for financial aid who need help compelling their parents to release financial information. Another teen is couch surfing because her mother threw her out and hasn't been coming to school. Colon spent half of one afternoon searching the school for the student so he could help her sort through her options.

"We are a legal agency, not a social service agency. We don't provide shelter, but I will make sure I connect her with any entitlements she should be receiving," he said. "If denied, I can be her lawyer."

Another client, Christina Coke, 18, graduated last year from Harding and now attends Norwalk Community College. Born in Jamaica and abandoned by her mother at birth, Coke came to the U.S. to live with the niece of her fifth-grade teacher. Because she is undocumented, however, she couldn't get a driver's license, a work permit or financial aid. Someone told her about "Mr. Edwin" and the law clinic. She left him a note.

"It is not the type of thing you publicize to friends," Colon said about needing an attorney.

"I was like, 'Wow,'" Coke said when she learned the service not only existed, but was free. "I was incredibly lucky and very happy about it. I needed to get my status correct." Colon was able to prove Coke had been abandoned and turned the case over to an immigration attorney. Coke's case is pending.

"Without intervention, she would have been removed from the country," said Colon, who with Coke recently testified in Hartford in support of a bill that would codify federal language that says abandoned, abused or neglected children are entitled to stay in the country.

Miguel's is one of those cases in progress. Colon described his situation as particularly heartbreaking. Not only did he watch his mother's slow death from a non-treated cancer, the end came three days before Christmas. "He told me she couldn't breathe," Colon said. "She was in agony but afraid to go to sleep; afraid to die and afraid for her son to see her die, so she sent him away. (Miguel) told me he is still waiting for someone to tell him if she is still alive."

Miguel somehow made it across the border into the U.S., only to be apprehended. He was aided by the International Institute in Bridgeport and has been taken in by a Bridgeport pastor who wants to become his legal guardian. So far, they have met three times as Colon draws up a petition that will be filed with the probate court and heard sometime this summer. A decision could be made that day. Miguel's case would then be turned over to an immigration lawyer who will work to get him a green card. Colon is also advocating on behalf of Miguel's education needs, working to get him additional services.

Because Miguel never attended school in Honduras, it is like starting from scratch.

"The thing I want most in the world is to learn to read and write," Miguel said in Spanish, through his attorney.

Harding High School Teen Legal Clinic. The legal clinic serves:

47 kids per year in Bridgeport

87 kids per year in Fairfield County

95% of clients served remain in school

Funding comes from the Connecticut Bar Association, several private foundations and individual donors.