



Ken Grody Ford
#1 in Carlsbad, CA
1.800.730.4098
5555 Paseo Del Norte, Carlsbad CA

TRADE UP TO Ford

SCORE YOUR BEST DEAL
Get 0% A.P.R. FOR 60 MONTHS OR \$7500
On 2011 Focus, Fusion, Escape, Flex, Expedition and Ranger

ALL 495+
2010/11 IN STOCK
MAXIMUM
DISCOUNT
TAG PRICED

SIGN ON
SAN DIEGO

 PRINT THIS

Local business owners rely on free USD legal clinic

BY TANYA MANNES

TUESDAY, MARCH 8, 2011 AT 6 A.M.

Chula Vista resident Gwen Pierce wanted to be a positive voice for the African American community, so in 2007 she began publishing a magazine with inspirational content aimed at people of color.

As her subscriber base grew, Pierce needed legal advice on handling contracts with writers and advertisers at **"The Chocolate Voice" magazine**. So she turned to the **University of San Diego's entrepreneurship clinic**, staffed with law students who assist local business owners at no cost.

"They helped me draft an advertising contract and contracts for writers, and helped me do research into copyright issues," Pierce said. "I have this document that was drafted up for me, so I refer back to it."

The USD legal clinic is among just two in Southern California (the other is at the University of Southern California) that help entrepreneurs with their businesses.

It limits its services to low- and moderate-income business owners in San Diego County despite requests from business owners in Los Angeles and Orange counties, said Donna Matias, the clinic's director.

"We're a San Diego school and we want to help people in our community," she said.

The USD legal clinic doesn't handle lawsuits, focusing more on "transactional" law such as drafting contracts, forming corporations and handling copyright issues. It was established to serve the needs of students who aim to be corporate lawyers, not litigators.

The clinic has closed 526 cases in the 10 years since it was established. It has assisted a wide variety of businesses, from pet sitting companies to restaurants and breweries, as



EDUARDO CONTRERAS / P>

Gwen Pierce and her interns, Emily Cohlheim of Eastlake High and Shyana Brown of High Tech High, assemble packets of the latest issue of "The Chocolate Voice" magazine for mailing out.



PHOTO BY JOHN GIBBINS

Anthony Ruiz, co-owner of Nexus Plumbing with his wife Rachel, installs a natural gas line valve as part of an extensive remodel of the backyard of a

well as business consultants, hairdressers and plumbers.

home on Soledad Mountain.

Many business owners go without legal advice because of the cost, which can be prohibitive for a struggling entrepreneur. The average billing rate for attorneys is \$284 per hour, according to a 2009 study by Incisive Legal Intelligence. Business owners seeking legal advice at USD need to submit financial documents to prove they need the help.

Most law schools don't offer legal clinics for entrepreneurs, in part because of the expense of paying attorneys to oversee each case. Law schools with legal clinics have traditionally focused on helping vulnerable individuals, such as people needing tax assistance, tenants in disputes with their landlords, and domestic violence victims, not businesses, Matias said.

In the 1990s, the University of Chicago was among the first law schools to establish a legal clinic for businesses as a way to train students who aimed to work in corporate settings, said Matias, who worked on that project and later came to USD. Today, about 50 U.S. law schools offer free legal clinics to business owners, sometimes in specialized areas such as intellectual property, community economic development or nonprofit organizations.

Matias said that the legal clinic is a way for USD to give back by helping struggling business owners achieve self-sufficiency.

"It's not like we're doing really complicated legal transactions for them, but from their perspectives it makes a huge difference," Matias said. "You're helping them help themselves."

The legal clinic helped Pierce avoid costly mistakes with her magazine venture. She now asks advertisers to agree to contracts that clearly spell out billing terms, along with a printing-error disclaimer. "It certainly makes me do things more efficiently and conscientiously, instead of just jumping in," she said.

San Diego business owners Rachel and Anthony Ruiz contacted the legal clinic in 2009 for help in establishing their company, **Nexus Plumbing in San Diego**. Anthony had worked in commercial plumbing for years, and decided to start the business when his employer began cutting salaries.

The couple filed paperwork on their own to establish the business as an S-corporation, and obtained a general contractor's license. The law students helped them perform all the required tasks, such as drafting a shareholders' agreement. "I wanted to register with the state as a minority-owned business, and they require lot of documents," Rachel Ruiz said.

She said the clinic helped her to understand the business better. "It gave us the opportunity we probably wouldn't have had, working with an attorney to learn the ins and outs of why we were doing certain things," she said.

USD law student Arine Harapeti is in her second semester of working at the legal clinic. "You get the hands-on experience, and you see how the law and what you learn applies in real life," said Harapeti, 23.

Her clients have included San Diego resident Antonio T.J. Johnson, who is applying for nonprofit status for a theater company.

Harapeti is helping Johnson write bylaws, assemble a board of directors and file documents. "It's just really putting the papers together," Johnson said. "She gave me a to-do list."

Johnson, 58, is an actor who appears in local dramatic productions. Years ago, he was homeless because of his alcohol and drug abuse. That experience motivated him to establish what he plans to call the Vagabond Theater Project. He wants to offer dramatic classes for young homeless people at his church and host a theater festival at a local community

college.

“Working in the theater kept me grounded and kept the magic in my life, and I want to offer that to other people,” he said.

Pierce’s magazine business is steadily growing. She’s on track to be profitable in June, with 200 paying subscribers. “It’s a ton of work, and I spend a lot of time on it,” she said, “but it’s a labor of love.”

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2011/mar/08/local-business-owners-rely-free-usd-legal-clinic>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2011 The San Diego Union-Tribune LLC.



NETFLIX

Instantly watch *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* on your PC, Mac or right on your TV.

Click here