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Spring 2024

### Gold & Blue Law Edition, Spring 2024

St. Mary's University- San Antonio, Texas

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ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY

# GOLD & BLUE

LAW EDITION

SPRING 2024



## Between housing and homelessness

St. Mary's Law students help keep our community housed



# FUN IN THE FIELD

**T**he St. Mary's University School of Law Student Bar Association hosts an annual Field Day on campus for School of Law students, faculty and staff. The September event includes outdoor games, food stations and a dunk tank.

1. Third-year J.D. student Reece LeClair plays ladder ball during Field Day.
2. First-year J.D. student Selby Draker and guest Tyler Schultz show off their ladder ball skills.

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY

# GOLD & BLUE

LAW EDITION

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ART DIRECTOR Charles Perez

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS Daniel Paniagua  
Rachel V. Lopez

PHOTO DIRECTION  
PROVIDED BY Darren Shiverdecker

WRITERS Brooke Blanton Leith (M.A. '23)  
Samantha Mendoza  
Suzi Morales  
Leticia Romero

PHOTOGRAPHERS JoMando Cruz  
Vincent Gonzalez  
Robin Jerstad  
Sarah Brooke Lyons  
Lucero Salinas  
Vanessa Velazquez

*(Denotes degree from St. Mary's University)*

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## MISSION

St. Mary's University,  
as a Catholic Marianist University,  
fosters the formation of people in faith  
and educates leaders for the common good  
through community, integrated liberal arts  
and professional education,  
and academic excellence.

## CONNECT WITH US



@StMarysU and @StMULaw



Photos by Robin Jerstad



3. School of Law students take shots on goal.
4. Ezekiel Lopez, a first-year J.D. student, takes his turn in the dunk tank.
5. From left, second-year J.D. student Carson Wienecke and third-year J.D. students Arlene Smith (M.B.A. '23) and Erica Marrow, who is also the SBA president, help set up food stations.



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**ON THE COVER:** St. Mary's University Clinical Professor of Law Genevieve Hébert Fajardo, J.D., left, joins Lisa Woods, a School of Law Real Estate Clinic client, in front of Woods' home. Clinic faculty and students worked to update the property title to reflect Woods as the proper owner as part of a larger program to keep local residents in their homes. Read more on Page 12. Photo by JoMando Cruz.

# Embodying Marianist principles for *positive change*

by Patricia Roberts, J.D., St. Mary's University School of Law Dean and Charles E. Cantú Distinguished Professor of Law

As we begin a new year and start the spring semester, I am filled with gratitude and hope. I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to share some of the amazing things our St. Mary's University School of Law family is doing to make a difference around the globe. When you read our latest stories and the impactful work of those featured, I know you will also find reasons to be inspired.

In a world that can be violent and difficult to understand, the practice of law becomes a powerful tool for positive change. Our commitment to service and justice is inherently intertwined with the pursuit of peace. As members of the St. Mary's Law family, let us approach our work in this new year with a dedication to building bridges, resolving conflicts, and contributing to a society that thrives on justice and leads with compassion.

Let us pause and reflect on the blessings surrounding us. Gratitude strengthens our community and elevates our collective spirit. Following in the footsteps of the alumni featured on these pages, I encourage you to take a moment to express thankfulness for the opportunities we have, the support we receive and the impact we can make as legal professionals.

As lifelong learners, we are called to be beacons of justice and sources of inspiration. In the coming months, let us continue to be a community that upholds the highest standards of legal education and practice and also embodies the principles of understanding and gratitude.

May this spring semester — and all of 2024 — be marked by a profound sense of peace, both within ourselves and in



Photo by Robin Jerstad

**"Our commitment to service and justice is inherently intertwined with the pursuit of peace."**

our interactions with others. Together, and consistent with our Marianist and Catholic mission, we must stay focused on nurturing a community that is academically rigorous and deeply rooted in the values of service and justice. Praying for peace on earth must start at home.

Thank you for your continued dedication to the School of Law, and I look forward to the positive impact we will make together in 2024. ■

## Dean's Circle

*Annual gifts of \$1,000 or more qualify donors to be part of the Dean's Circle. The gifts listed were received between June 1, 2022, and May 31, 2023.*

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*Continued on Page 20*



Winston Erevelles

**St. Mary's University appoints Winston Erevelles as its 14th president**

Following a national search, the St. Mary's University Board of Trustees has unanimously appointed

Winston Erevelles, Ph.D., as the next president of St. Mary's University, beginning June 1, 2024.

Erevelles is a dedicated St. Mary's community member who served 12 transformative years as Dean of the School of Science, Engineering and Technology from 2009 to 2021. Since then, he has been working on two new initiatives — the University's anticipated Nursing Program and the creation of the three-story Blank Sheppard Innovation Center. Erevelles is also a Professor of Industrial Engineering.

"Winston will be a great champion for St. Mary's University," said Lynda Ellis (B.A.S. '81), Chair of the Board of Trustees. "Those involved in the national search process demonstrated great enthusiasm for Winston's candidacy for president, given his character and personal warmth, as well as his reputation and track record for advancing the St. Mary's Catholic and Marianist mission and advocating for its distinctive education."

"I am deeply humbled by the trust and responsibility that the Board of Trustees has placed in me through this appointment to serve as the 14th President of St. Mary's University," Erevelles said.

Read more at [www.stmarytx.edu/erevelles-president](http://www.stmarytx.edu/erevelles-president).

**M.Jur. in Special Education Advocacy becomes first-of-its-kind in the nation**

This semester, the St. Mary's University School of Law began offering a new Master of Jurisprudence degree concentration in Special Education Advocacy, the first concentration on this topic nationally.

This new graduate degree concentration can aid school personnel, service providers and those advocating on behalf of students with disabilities and their families in gaining a greater understanding of the law in this area, as well as effective advocacy skills. It is the first and only program to receive acquiescence from the American Bar Association.

According to *Education Week's* website, 14.7% of students between the ages of 3 and 21 in the United States qualified for special education services during the 2021-2022



**ST. MARY'S LAW REMEMBERS A SUPREME PARTNERSHIP**

St. Mary's University Professor Emeritus of Law Gerald Reamey, J.D., LL.M., left, and former Supreme Court of the United States Justice Sandra Day O'Connor try on Tyrolean hats in the historic Old Town, Innsbruck, Austria. Confirmed as the first woman to serve on the nation's highest court in 1981, O'Connor also taught School of Law students as a guest lecturer at the Institute on World Legal Problems in Innsbruck during the 1990s. O'Connor died at the age of 93 on Dec. 1, 2023.

academic year. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics states that employment of special education teachers and advocates is projected to grow 3% between 2020 and 2030.

"As the destination for advancing legal education, St. Mary's recognizes the critical need for grassroots advocates in our schools and champions the training of professionals in special education advocacy to shape policymaking," said Assistant Dean for Graduate Law Programs Shannon Sevier (M.P.A. '21, J.D. '07).

**St. Mary's Law lands on U.S. News' most diverse list**

U.S. News and World Report named the St. Mary's University School of Law to its short list of 23 racially and ethnically diverse law schools across the U.S. and its territories. Students identifying with minority racial and ethnic backgrounds composed nearly 57% of the J.D. student body at St. Mary's Law in 2023. Of the 803 students, 50% identified as Hispanic.

St. Mary's awards more law degrees to Hispanic graduates than any other Texas law school.

A 2020 report from the American Bar Association stated, "Nearly all people of color are underrepresented in the legal profession compared with their presence in the U.S. population." Only 5% of all lawyers are Hispanic, up only 1% from a decade earlier, according to the report.

**Immigration reform discussion draws legal, political experts**



Erica B. Schommer

To continue St. Mary's University's dedicated pursuit of fostering meaningful dialogue for our community, the St. Mary's Center for Catholic Studies hosted a Fall 2023 panel on Finding Common Ground for the Common Good: Immigration Reform.



Nelson Wolff

Erica B. Schommer, J.D., St. Mary's Clinical Professor of Law and Englehardt Research Fellow, in addition to The Hon. Nelson

Wolff (B.B.A. '66, J.D. '66), University Distinguished Service Professor; U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales and Sister Norma Pimentel (M.A. '89, Let.D. '23), spoke about uniting public servants and experts with extensive experience in tackling a range of challenges — including those linked to immigration — and working with others to serve the common good.

## St. Mary's Law Advocacy Program earns Top 4 ABA ranking

Ranked fourth in the nation by the American Bar Association in the 2022-2023 ABA Competitions Championship, the St. Mary's Law National Team has added more awards to its trophy case.

The School of Law's Advocacy Program. The team prepares students to become practice-ready advocates through training and competitions against other teams nationwide.

The ABA ranking was based on participation, hosting and awards earned in the competitions focusing on arbitration, negotiation, client counseling and mediation, as well as the National Appellate Advocacy Competition.

Since the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, members of the National Team have won the following national, regional and state titles:

### National:

- E. Earle Zehmer National Moot Court Competition

### Regional:

- 74th annual National Moot Court Competition, Dallas Region
- ABA Regional Negotiation Competition

### State:

- 26th annual Mack Kidd Administrative Law State Moot Court Competition
- Texas Young Lawyers Association State Moot Court Competition

As of January, the Moot Court Team was ranked No. 1 in the nation.

## Law Alumni Association honors 2023 distinguished graduates

The St. Mary's University Law Alumni Association honored three graduates at its Distinguished Law Graduate Dinner in October 2023.

Honorees were:

- The Hon. Marla Cuellar (J.D. '96), district judge of the 275th District Court of Hidalgo County

- Robert E. Valdez (B.A. '76, J.D. '80), attorney with Valdez and Treviño
- Lauren A. Valkenaar (J.D. '13), attorney with Chasnoff Mungia Valkenaar Penning and Stribling

## School of Law announces faculty retirements

The St. Mary's University School of Law will be saying farewell to three of its members as they retire in May 2024. They include:

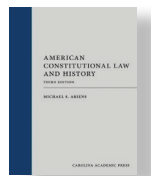
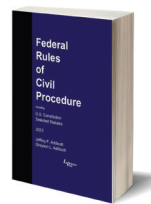
- Service Professor of Law Nancy Farrer (J.D. '90), taught legal research and writing as an adjunct professor for 12 years before joining as a full-time instructor in August 2017.
- Research Professor of Law Roberto Rosas, J.D., J.S.D., who will retire as a Distinguished Professor of Law Emeritus, at which time the University will establish the Dr. Roberto Rosas Distinguished Law Scholarship in recognition of Rosas' 30 years of commendable service to the University.
- Professor of Law Robert L. Summers Jr., J.D. (M.A. '07), who previously served as the Director of the Sarita Kenedy East Law Library for 22 years. He also served as the Director and Co-Director of the LL.M. Program.

## St. Mary's Law faculty in the books

When not teaching future lawyers, the St. Mary's University School of Law's faculty continue to demonstrate their expertise by publishing books and articles. The following works are a sampling of those published by School of Law faculty:

### Books:

- Jeffrey Addicott, J.D., and Greyson Addicott wrote *The Federal Rules of Civil Procedure including U.S. Constitution Selected Statutes*, Imprimatur Press, 2023.
- Michael Ariens, J.D., LL.M., wrote *American Constitutional Law and History, Third Edition*, Carolina Academic Press, 2023.



### Articles:

- Adam MacLeod, J.D., wrote *Vested Patents and Equal Justice*, *Catholic University Law Review*, 2023;

*Opus as the Core of Property*, *Texas A&M Journal of Property Law*, 2023; and *The Bare Necessity of Natural Law*, *Journal of Christian Legal Thought*, 2023.

- David Schlueter, J.D., LL.M., and Lisa Schenck, J.D., wrote *Transforming Military Justice: The 2022 and 2023 National Defense Authorization Acts*, *The Military Law Review*, 2023.
- Greg Zlotnick, J.D., wrote *Facing Emergencies with Equity: Adopting ARPA's Emergency Rental Assistance Eligibility and Documentation Standards for Undocumented Individuals as a Model for House Stability*, *Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law*, 2023.

## Fondest Farewell

### Delores Mayer, J.D., Ph.D.

Delores Mayer, J.D., died at age 70 on Aug. 18, 2023. She had been hired as an Assistant Service Professor in Law and joined the Law Success team to teach the course Legal Communication, Analysis and Professionalism. Mayer obtained a J.D. from the University of Notre Dame Law School in Indiana and a Ph.D. in Rhetorical and Composition Theory from Wayne State University in Michigan.

### Gilbert Vasquez III (B.B.A. '02, M.B.A. '05, J.D. '20)

Gilbert Vasquez III died at the age of 44 on Sept. 17, 2023. While in law school, Vasquez was a member of the Alternative Dispute Resolution team, helping lead the Advocacy Program to a Top 4 ranking by the American Bar Association. He later returned to St. Mary's Law to coach the Dispute Resolution Team.



# FIGHTING

## FORCED LABOR

### Associate Dean makes humanitarian causes her career mission

by Leticia Romero



Photo by Lucero Salinas

Ramona Lampley, J.D., is a self-proclaimed “farm girl from North Carolina.” As a child, her first encounter with an attorney was at a county commissioner’s office, where the local farmers had hired a lawyer to represent them in a rezoning dispute.

“I was so impressed by how articulate she was and how she was able to advocate for the rights of these farmers in front of the county commissioners,” Lampley said.

This desire to champion on behalf of a cause became a calling for Lampley, inspiring her to attend Wake Forest University School of Law and focus much of her legal work on preventing forced labor in international supply chains.

Now the Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development and South Texas Professor of Law, Lampley said that before joining the St. Mary’s University School of Law, the University’s mission piqued her interest.

“The emphasis on social justice and components of the Marianist mission were a huge draw for me,” Lampley said. “It changed the trajectory of my life.”

### SAFEGUARDING SUPPLY CHAINS

From 2017 to 2018, Lampley served as chair of the American Bar Association’s Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) Subcommittee on Sale of Goods. The broader UCC committee provides timely information and trains its members and the wider bar on recent developments in commercial law, commercial transactions and commercial practices. Her interactions in this subcommittee compelled her to learn more about forced labor, including child labor, and how it was a significant problem in international supply chains.

“Under American law, a large sports retailer, hypothetically, agrees to buy 100 soccer balls from a company in another country,” Lampley posed an example. “If the company delivers the soccer balls according to the contract specifications, they have satisfied their end of the contract, regardless of how they were made, if there were environmental hazards or if they used 6-year-old kids to sew the soccer balls.”

After seeing the lack of disciplinary action, Lampley worked with the subcommittee to create Model Contract Clauses, which domestic companies use in international supply agreements requiring the supplier to meet terms that include human rights.

“Incorporating those terms would give the American company the legal grounds to refuse products when they found out they’d been made with abusive labor,” Lampley said. “The international community does want the means to have a contractual remedy when they find abusive labor practices.”

In 2019, Lampley published an article in the *American University Law Review* titled, *Mitigating Risk, Eradicating Slavery*. Her research centered on whether U.S. courts would hold companies liable when they knowingly benefit from forced labor in their supply chain.

Lampley’s research continued in a forthcoming article to be published in 2024, in which she dove deeper into victim recovery.

“If there’s an abuse of labor in the supply chain here in the United States, there is typically an avenue for recovery against the employer, but a lot of times these victims don’t have a voice or someone to bring the claim or even know that there is an avenue for recovery,” Lampley said. “That is a humanitarian tragedy in and of itself, which my work and the work of others is trying to avoid.” ■

# FROM MEDIC TO LEGAL MAVEN

**Military veteran turns legal interest into second career**

by **Samantha Mendoza**



Photo by Vanessa Velazquez

**D**avid Louis is proof that it's never too late to start a new career.

After serving 20 years as a combat medic in the United States Army, Louis received his J.D. degree from the St. Mary's University School of Law in 2020. Using his military mindset to excel in his studies, he eventually made the leap from St. Mary's to clerk for the Supreme Court of Texas.

"St. Mary's really prepares you to hit the ground running and practice law," Louis said. "All of my professors had an amazing role to play in my journey."

The son of Haitian immigrants, Louis was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. Unsure of which career to pursue, but propelled by his interest in health science, Louis enlisted in the Army at age 18. As a combat medic who served in Germany, Iraq and Afghanistan, he managed teams of medics in the combat field, providing them with the equipment and training to distribute medicine and care where most needed.

After exactly 20 years and seven days of service, Louis was ready for a new career challenge. Recognizing the racial disparities many minorities in the U.S. face when trying to access legal services, Louis realized that studying and practicing law could allow him to help himself, his family and others, no matter which career path he chose to pursue.

Louis enrolled in the St. Mary's School of Law as a first-generation college student. A standout scholar, he became the Managing Executive Editor of *The St. Mary's Law Journal* and was inducted into the Harlan Society.

"Entering a new field, I felt like I was starting from the bottom. I was self-conscious, but St. Mary's prepared me to be a great researcher and writer," he said. "St. Mary's was instrumental to me becoming confident in my analytical skills."

Louis' academic excellence led professors to set high expectations for him; so high, in fact, that Professor of Law Albert Kauffman, J.D., nominated him for an opportunity with the highest court in the state.

"I was so impressed by David's ability to get to the heart of legal issues that I recommended him for a Texas Supreme Court internship," Kauffman said. "Based on his skills, he parlayed that into a full clerkship with the Texas Supreme Court. That is the best preparation possible for law practice in Texas."

Louis clerked for Justice Rebeca A. Huddle, J.D., which allowed him to hone his skills with some of the top legal authorities in the state. Louis now practices civil defense law at Valdez & Treviño Attorneys at Law, PC, in San Antonio. He remains connected to St. Mary's Law as a mentor, as an executive committee member of the law school's Board of Visitors and through his participation in the Dean's Circle for those who give \$1,000 or more annually.

"I left New York at a young age, and St. Mary's is the first place where I felt a sense of community. It was like the TV show *Cheers*, where everyone knows your name," Louis said. "I've made a promise that whenever the School of Law needs anything, I'll do my best to help, whether it be financially or through mentoring other students. St. Mary's will always have a special place in my heart." ■

# TRUE TO HER ROOTS

## An urban litigator brings small-town values to practice

by Suzi Morales

**J**ulia Mann (J.D. '94) has held just about every job one could have at a law firm.

She is the managing partner of Jackson Walker LLP's San Antonio office and led the firm's move to its new location at the recently opened Jefferson Bank building near The Pearl. Still, her legal career had a decidedly more humble start.

As a high school student, she worked at the law office of her father, George T. Wommack Jr., a litigator with 50 years of experience in Lake Jackson.

"One summer, I was the assistant to the runner, which means I did everything from cleaning the boss' fish tank to making sure those paper filings that we used to do in the old days got to the courthouse on time and returned with that actual file stamp on them," she recalled.

As a student at the St. Mary's University School of Law, Mann continued to value practical experience, particularly with *The St. Mary's Law Journal* and the mock trial team. Beyond giving her a solid foundation in legal writing and advocacy, these activities taught her time management and how to forge meaningful relationships with peers.

"I enjoy having relationships with my opposing counsel," Mann said. "I don't want to fight with them about silly things, but let's fight about substantive things. Let's trust each other. It's better for our clients in the long run."

Mann has been a litigator her entire career, assisting clients from oil and gas to banking. For many of her clients who are leaders in their respective fields, being a party to a lawsuit and not being able to control the situation is a new experience. Mann takes pride in listening to them and serving as their voices in complex legal situations.

Mann continues to be an active presence at St. Mary's Law, including as a new member of the law school's Board of Visitors. She particularly enjoys sharing her experience as a guest lecturer, including during a recent visit to the leadership class of St. Mary's Law Dean Patricia Roberts, J.D.

"Julia Mann's exceptional leadership and lawyering skills have enabled her to succeed in positions and practice areas traditionally dominated by men," Roberts said. "She's achieved her professional success alongside the joy of raising her family and serving her community."

In August 2023, Jackson Walker's San Antonio office moved into the new building at 1900 Broadway. Mann and other firm

leaders were deliberate about the work environment they hoped to cultivate. That care can be found in everything from easy access to parking to ample conference space serving as a hub for the firm and the San Antonio community.

There are few physical similarities between Jackson Walker's new office and her father's small-town practice. For one thing, there's no fish tank for her to clean as she did in her father's office.

"Our new office reflects a more modern law practice," she remarked.

According to Mann, her early experience working for her dad "shaped me into a servant leader."

"I will not ask anyone to do a task that I am not willing to do, and in many cases have actually done, myself," she said.

The lessons she learned at St. Mary's Law about building relationships with colleagues and competitors shaped her into the lawyer she is today. Even though the surroundings have changed since those days, some things remain the same. ■

***"She's achieved her professional success alongside the joy of raising her family and serving her community."***



Photo by Sarah Brooke Lyons

Open  
to

# INTERPRETA

## Alumnus leads international legal transactions in Mexico City, philanthropic efforts at home as board chair of the San Antonio Area Foundation

by Jennifer R. Lloyd (M.B.A. '16)

Many may see Alex Pérez (J.D. '96) as an international attorney, a tax law expert or a leader in San Antonio's philanthropic efforts as the San Antonio Area Foundation's board chair. But he views himself, fundamentally, as an interpreter.

His Chilean father arrived in the United States at age 16 before joining the U.S. Army, gaining citizenship and meeting Pérez's American mother. Pérez grew up in a Spanish-speaking household, moving between Chile and the United States before finishing high school in Mexico City.

Pérez described a childhood of frequent moves as his family looked for economic opportunity in the U.S. When Chile's economy faltered, many of his relatives joined his parents, living under one roof in the U.S.

"I grew up as a bridge between cultures, as an interpreter of cultures between my family and the outside world," Pérez said. "As a 10-year-old kid, I would interpret the world for my grandparents, who did not speak English, and go to Kmart to ask about my grandmother's stockings if she had a question."

Pérez grew comfortable navigating the liminal space between American culture and his family's cultural background. This skill proved key to his career journey, both as a German linguist in the U.S. Army Reserves, during a break from his undergraduate studies at Purdue University in Indiana, and in his current international legal expertise.

As an attorney at Clark Hill and the member-in-charge of the firm's Mexico City office, Pérez represents Latin American businesses and high-net-worth families in their investments and expansion of operations into the United States.

"That's the tie to what I do as a lawyer: I, essentially, serve as an interpreter between two cultures, two legal systems and two languages," Pérez said.

### Birth and taxes

For Pérez, the draw to study law arose out of a combined love of rhetoric, argumentation and logic he discovered during high school debate and Model United Nations, along with a touch of romanticism for trial law from reading John Grisham's *A Time to Kill*.

Pérez decided to attend the St. Mary's University School of Law to be closer to his mother who lived in the area and because of the law school's approach to ensuring the success of its Latino students. A nontraditional student, Pérez married and welcomed his first of three children during law school.

"I have fond memories of bringing my son in my papoose strapped to my front, going into class and burping him in the middle of the professor's lecture when my wife couldn't take him," Pérez recalled.

Though, initially, he practiced trial law after graduation, two tax law classes with Professor of Law Mark Cochran, J.D., LL.M., planted a seed that later propelled him to earn an LL.M. in Taxation from the New York University School of Law.

"I always enjoy following the achievements of former students, and it is especially gratifying to know that Alex's remarkable journey in tax law began in my introductory course," Cochran said. "His intellectual curiosity and his demonstrated commitment to public service provide an inspiring example to current and future students."



Photo by Lucero Salinas

Alex Pérez, an attorney at Clark Hill, stands in the firm's San Antonio office. ▶

## Equitable transactions

Pérez became a tax and corporate lawyer at the San Antonio firm formerly called Cox Smith for many years, often representing Mexican and Latin American clients, and worked as a corporate lawyer handling international business matters in Amsterdam for a medical device company.

“I always knew I had this international component that was built into me in my upbringing and heritage,” Pérez said. “I wanted to go into transnational legal work, and transactional work lends itself to that.”

He later co-founded Sañudo Pérez, PLLC, in Mexico City and San Antonio, to handle Mexico-U.S. transactions before joining Clark Hill two years ago. His work now focuses on nearshoring, which he defines as a “switch in a multinational corporation’s manufacturing operations from Asia back to, in this case, Mexico and the United States.”

Threaded throughout his career lies a commitment to service in keeping with the St. Mary’s University mission, which included joining the board of the San Antonio Area Foundation in 2016. In January 2023, Pérez became chairman of the Area Foundation’s board of directors, which oversees the philanthropic powerhouse with a balance sheet of more than \$1 billion in assets.

“It has been great to have Alex contribute to our board in general and in the chairmanship this year in particular,” said Lisa Brunsvold, interim CEO of the San Antonio Area Foundation. “It’s never easy to lead during times of transition, so Alex has really stepped up in his role as board chairman in providing constructive feedback to senior staff and making himself available to the entire Area Foundation team. We look forward to his continued leadership as we gear up for our 60th anniversary in 2024.”

The Area Foundation gave out \$57.6 million in grants to nonprofits throughout San Antonio and Central Texas in 2023.

“All the grants that we give have one thing in common, and that is that they’re devoted to our concept of equity,” Pérez said. “That is the idea of closing the gaps among those who need it the most, devoting our resources to some of the poorest zip codes in the country that are all, unfortunately, in San Antonio. So, I’m very proud of that mission.” ■



▲ Lisa Woods, pictured right, will be able to get much needed repairs to her home now that the property title is in her name, thanks to Genevieve Hébert Fajardo, J.D., pictured left, and the St. Mary's Law Real Estate Clinic team.

# The thin (hot)line between housing and homelessness

**St. Mary's Law clinic students gain experience while helping keep our community housed**

by *Leticia Romero*

If you were in Texas during the catastrophic winter storm of 2021, what many referred to as Snowvid, you may have experienced the turmoil of what it was like to live without running water.

For homeowner Lisa Woods, that upheaval continued over the next two years, and she's still living without running water. A simple house title stood between her and much-needed home repairs.

"Both of my uncles had originally bought the house with cash and put my grandmother's name on the title. My grandmother put one of my uncle's names on the property. When my grandmother passed, she passed the house on to my mother, and my mother passed it on to me," Woods said.

This unclear title passage is called a clouded or tangled title in the legal community.

At the advice of a friend, Woods called the St. Mary's University School of Law in hopes of getting legal help she couldn't afford otherwise.

Clearing titles and postponing or avoiding evictions, among other legal housing battles, are the primary focus of the St. Mary's Law students, staff attorneys and faculty in the Consumer Protection Clinic and the Real Estate Clinic, the latter of which started in Fall 2023.

"There is a very thin line between housing and homelessness," said Greg Zlotnick, J.D., who serves as both a Visiting Clinical Assistant Professor and Supervising Attorney for the Housing Rights Project at St. Mary's Law. "For many students, being able to serve their community and make a difference in this way is one of the major reasons why they came to law school."

St. Mary's Law operates five clinical programs, all housed in the Center for Legal and Social Justice building. Law students are eligible to enroll beginning in their second year. Third-year J.D. student Katherine Chevalier of San Antonio said her confidence has grown through her clinical work.

"At St. Mary's, you're surrounded by amazing people," Chevalier said. "I could never imagine myself talking before a judge. I didn't think I had that in me. But being able to advocate for someone else who doesn't have a voice, who doesn't know how to bring their case before a judge, really changed that for me."

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## Consumer Protection Clinic

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One of the concerns of local and federal governments during the COVID-19 pandemic was that a massive unemployment spike would lead to, in Zlotnick's words, "an eviction tsunami," leaving many people homeless.

Rising to the need in Spring 2020, Genevieve Hébert Fajardo, J.D., Clinical Professor of Law, spearheaded the creation of the Consumer Protection Clinic's Housing Hotline with support from Zlotnick and the Pro Bono Program team. The operation features a call-back hotline at which tenants facing evictions and other real estate-related problems can leave a message.

Help is in great demand. For instance, the hotline received nearly 1,300 voicemails in 2022. Some calls were general inquiries or return calls, but the majority were tenants facing a housing crisis. School of Law

"Faculty work with you to use the information you've learned through the class part of clinic and think through what would be the best outcome in this scenario for this client."

— Larissa Jackson, J.D. student

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Paralegal Rita Arce is the first to screen the calls. Arce got emotional when describing the distress of some of the callers.

"You hear them pleading with you on the phone," Arce said. "A lot of people just fell on hard times, and now they have a job and are catching up with the bills, and they have kids."

Arce then makes the tough decisions to refer callers elsewhere or route them for a 30-to-45-minute consultation with student attorneys under the supervision of staff lawyers. Clinic students conduct interviews, research a course of action, get approval from their supervising attorney and relay next steps.

In August 2021, the St. Mary's School of Law was one of 99 law schools that responded to the U.S. Attorney General's call to action to address the housing and eviction crisis. At a 2022 White House virtual convening, St. Mary's Law, along with the other schools, was recognized as a law school committed to meaningful action toward expanding access to justice and increasing housing stability, through initiatives like the Housing Hotline.

The Consumer Protection Clinic also wrapped up 332 matters related to tenants' rights and eviction prevention in 2022. This included advice, referral, information provided on the hotline and direct representation in courtroom proceedings.

Third-year J.D. student Larissa Jackson of Queens, New York, is in her second year of clinic work and said this experience is laying a solid foundation for her legal career.



▲  
Greg Zlotnick, J.D., Supervising Attorney for the School of Law's Housing Rights Project, helps students understand housing law through the Consumer Protection Clinic.



“One thing that I love about the clinic is that they don’t just say, ‘Yes, you should do this,’ or ‘No, you need to do this,’” Jackson said. “Faculty work with you to use the information you’ve learned through the class part of clinic and think through what would be the best outcome in this scenario for this client.”

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## The eviction crisis and government funding

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According to the nonprofit Texas Housers, there were 17,900 evictions filed in Bexar County in 2022 — an average of 49 filed per day, with 76% of cases won by the landlord. In 2022, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) gave the City of San Antonio an eviction protection grant of \$2.4 million to expand tenants’ access to legal representation. The City allocated \$690,000 of the grant to the St. Mary’s Consumer Protection Clinic to support the School of Law in its eviction protection work.

“I’m very happy that the students are there to help people like me who don’t have the resources to contract a lawyer.”

— *Bernadette Vasquez, client*

Along with St. Mary’s Law, other sub-recipients of the funding included Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) and San Antonio Legal Services Association (SALSA). St. Mary’s and TRLA receive grant funding from HUD’s Eviction Protection Grant Program, while SALSA and TRLA receive grant funding from the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs to provide eviction prevention legal services. Representatives from the four entities frequently collaborate.

Kristen Adams (J.D. ’18), attorney for SALSA, said there are many misconceptions about tenants facing eviction.

“I don’t think I ever met a tenant who didn’t want to pay their rent,” Adams said. “I can tell you the type of horrors I’ve heard are kind of a Sophie’s Choice as far as, ‘Am I going to pay rent?’ or ‘Am I going to bury my son?’”

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid attorney Lizbeth Parra Davila (J.D. ’19) said evictions can trigger a tremendous downward spiral for tenants — from preventing them from finding new housing, which could lead to homelessness or general housing instability — which is especially detrimental to households with children.

“When one brick falls, all the others fall as well,” Davila said.

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## Real Estate Clinic

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While its recent focus has been eviction prevention, historically, the Consumer Protection Clinic handles a range of consumer-related issues, from deceptive trade practices to other consumer-related matters like homeowner Lisa Woods’ clouded title. Fajardo created the Real Estate Clinic as a standalone transactional clinic.

“When you don’t have the title to a home, you can’t use the equity that you have in the home. You can’t get repairs. You can’t sell it,” Fajardo said. “Often in San Antonio, it’s someone’s primary asset. Their only form of wealth is in their home.”

The Real Estate Clinic works as a legal mechanism to try to get a clear title to their homes. They help with property taxes and exemptions, if there’s a threat of foreclosure, and with basic estate planning for clients, particularly if they had a tangled title in the past.

Woods was impressed by Fajardo and her team’s thoroughness as they dove into her

family line to get the signatures needed to clear up her title. The St. Mary’s Law team has worked on this case for more than 100 days.

“It was pretty awesome the way they helped me out and got things taken care of,” Woods said. “It took a while with me because there are so many family members who I had to go through.”

Jessica Henry (J.D. ’23), attorney at Porter, Rogers, Dahlman and Gordon, P.C., said learning from Fajardo provided invaluable training.

“Professor Fajardo ended up getting Ancestry.com for us because we have these big, convoluted family trees to work with,” Henry said. “We’re digging through obituaries and looking for property records. It was just a lot of title research and genealogy. I learned so much.”

San Antonio resident Bernadette Vasquez used the Housing Hotline after her landlord was trying to change the contract for a deed she already signed. Vasquez said the St. Mary’s Law students were kind and helped her resolve the situation.

“I’m very happy that the students are there to help people like me who don’t have the resources to contract a lawyer,” Vasquez said. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so I’m glad they took the chance to help me out with my situation.”

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## Know your rights

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The clinical work extends beyond legal representation into educating the community about tenant rights through resource tables at public libraries, the Justice of the Peace courts around Bexar County and local nonprofits.

Law students Chevalier and Jackson wanted to expand these efforts. They collaborated with San Antonio Independent School District’s social workers for homeless youths, providing them with tenant rights information packets. The St. Mary’s Law clinic students also presented to Jefferson High School’s Graduation Club, a group that prepares students for life after high school.

“A lot of them are going to be tenants themselves once they’re out of high school,” Jackson said. “This is stuff that I would have liked to have known as a young adult.”

The Real Estate and Consumer Protection Clinics’ work would not be possible without the unsung heroes of the clinic faculty, administration and staff.

“I’m the biggest cheerleader for the clinic,” Henry said. “St. Mary’s Law has some of the best teachers I’ve ever had. They changed the game for me. It went from feeling like school to feeling like I had a purpose.”

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### Rebuilding brick by brick

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With the help of the St. Mary’s Law clinic team, Woods is on the path to getting her much-needed home repairs and running water. Woods said the title had been held up by two family members who had refused to sign the title papers. It was Fajardo who finally got a judge to sign off on the title by showing the family members had not paid any taxes or made any contributions to the property.

“Thank God, the judge agreed, and now I have the house in my name,” Woods said. ■

“St. Mary’s Law has some of the best teachers I’ve ever had. It went from feeling like school to feeling like I had a purpose.”

— Jessica Henry (J.D. '23)



▲ In the School of Law’s Center for Legal and Social Justice, third-year J.D. students Larissa Jackson, middle, and Katherine Chevalier, right, work with Greg Zlotnick, J.D., to address the housing crisis by helping clients of the Consumer Protection Clinic.

# TRUE GRIT

## Law school alumnus goes from academic struggles to top Dallas attorney

by Nathaniel Miller

**C** Gregory Shamoun (J.D. '89) jokes he didn't know where the Sarita Kenedy East Law Library was located during his first semester at the St. Mary's University School of Law.

Before attending St. Mary's, however, he received his bachelor's degree in Finance from the University of Mississippi and his graduate degree in Finance from Dallas Baptist University, so he was familiar with the concept of university libraries.

However, after his first semester at St. Mary's Law, Shamoun's GPA was below what was required to continue. He said some doubted he would be able to raise his grades and advised him several times to find a different career path.

Undeterred, Shamoun "found that library," which he discovered was a "wonderful place." He not only raised his GPA, but also graduated and became a sought-after attorney in Dallas.

Now president of C. Gregory Shamoun, P.C., and managing partner at Shamoun & Norman LLP, Shamoun spoke fondly of his time at St. Mary's, calling his experience in the classroom and with the School of Law's Advocacy Program beneficial to his education.

"The St. Mary's School of Law handed me the experience to go do something with my life," said Shamoun, whose son, Alex Shamoun, now attends St. Mary's Law. "I've utilized those tools by getting my license, running a law firm and giving back to those I can."

Success did not come easy, Shamoun said. After passing the bar exam, he looked for employment before a friend hired him to work his first case in Denton. A year later, he was brought on for a wrongful death case in Dallas County,

where the jury rendered a verdict in favor of his client in about 90 minutes.

During his career, Shamoun has represented numerous high-profile clients ranging from Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones to making national news for bringing a donkey named Buddy to testify on its own behalf.

Due to a connection made during his time at the St. Mary's Law's summer program, the Institute on World Legal Problems in Innsbruck, Austria, Shamoun became a special adviser to Austria's Swarovski family, known worldwide for their jewelry.

But being in the courtroom is where Shamoun said he feels most comfortable.

"Once you find what you're great at in the practice of law, whatever field it's in, your day is going to be more enjoyable," he said. "Your time is going to be spent more efficiently, and you're going to be a happier person because you can feel

the greatness in what you do."

Shamoun also makes it a point to give back to the community. As a practicing Catholic, he served as an adviser to the board of trustees for Catholic Charities Dallas and works with Jesuit College Preparatory School of Dallas. He also helped bring to the Stockyards in Fort Worth a museum dedicated to the life of movie star John Wayne called John Wayne: An American Experience.

Each year, he provides pro bono work to those who need an attorney but cannot otherwise afford the service. That type of work, he said, is most important when it comes to the services an attorney can provide.

"That, to me, is more rewarding than the balance of my bank account," he said. ■

**"The St. Mary's School of Law handed me the experience to go do something with my life. I've utilized those tools by getting my license, running a law firm and giving back to those I can."**

C. Gregory Shamoun overcame obstacles in earning his J.D. to open his successful law firm in Farmers Branch, a suburb of Dallas. ►



# CLEANING

## Alumnus founds environmental clean-up nonprofit called The Clean Initiative Project

by Jennifer R. Lloyd (M.B.A. '16)

Where some would display a clichéd motivational poster in their office, perhaps with a soaring eagle and platitude about leadership, Tyler J. Ryska (J.D. '17) has an enlarged photograph of a toxin-filled yard stacked with paint cans and metal drums that have burned and contaminated the soil.

The Austin-based attorney has founded a new nonprofit, The Clean Initiative Project, born out of this inauspicious image, which stems from a legal case he encountered at his day job. As an assistant attorney general, Ryska worked first with the Texas Attorney General's Environmental Protection Division and now the Utilities and Special Issues Team.

Through donations and other funding sources, The Clean Initiative Project facilitates the clean-up of contaminated properties and drinking water, aiming to help properties in Texas and California, where Ryska grew up. For now, the first projects are in Comal County.

"I'm cleaning up the environment for my kids and the kids all throughout Texas," Ryska said. "I don't care how much in civil penalties or attorney's fees I collect. I just want the property to be cleaned up. That was a big reason why I started The Clean Initiative Project."

The original photo depicts a case that was already underway before Ryska joined the Environmental Protection Division. A property owner in Harlingen received paint to remix and sell out of his junkyard. The state sued the owner to clean up his property in a legal fight that dragged on for years until a fire burned down the paint barrels leaving contamination, which the owner is still slowly trying to clean up as he can afford to do so.

After working with the property owner for about five years, Ryska thought there had to be a better way to help clean up properties for people with low incomes. The scenarios Ryska sees most often are the "self-inflicted wound" areas where property owners have contaminated it themselves. Some of them may have mental illness, such as hoarding disorder. Others inherited property covered in solid waste or purchased property unaware of environmental contamination.

"I'm cleaning up the environment for my kids and the kids all throughout Texas."

"That was the catalyst of The Clean Initiative Project: trying to find a way that, instead of the state continuing to sue people, using all these resources on the state side, and, in the end, not really seeing the fruits of the labor and seeing the property cleaned up, maybe there could be an alternative way to help people without the state getting involved."

Ryska realized his passion for environmental law while taking an elective at the St. Mary's University School of Law, where he was also on the Board of Advocates and the Alternative Dispute Resolution Team.

Professor of Law Chad Pomeroy, J.D., said Ryska helped lead lively discussions in his class. Professor of Law John W. Teeter Jr., J.D., added that he was grateful to have been one of Ryska's teachers along the way.

"Tyler was a superb student who skillfully blended intellectual insights and heartfelt idealism with plenty of good, old-fashioned studying and class participation," Teeter said. "I'm extremely proud of Tyler's work in the Environmental Protection Division."

Ryska's work aligns with the University's commitment to Pope Francis' seven-year action plan to implement environmental sustainability measures, known as the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform.

"Ultimately, you're not just helping that person, but you're helping the community, the city, the county, and anywhere that we're able to reach out and help people," Ryska said. ■

Tyler J. Ryska, founder of The Clean Initiative Project, visits a dumping site in Comal County, which is slated for cleanup. ►

# THE SLATE

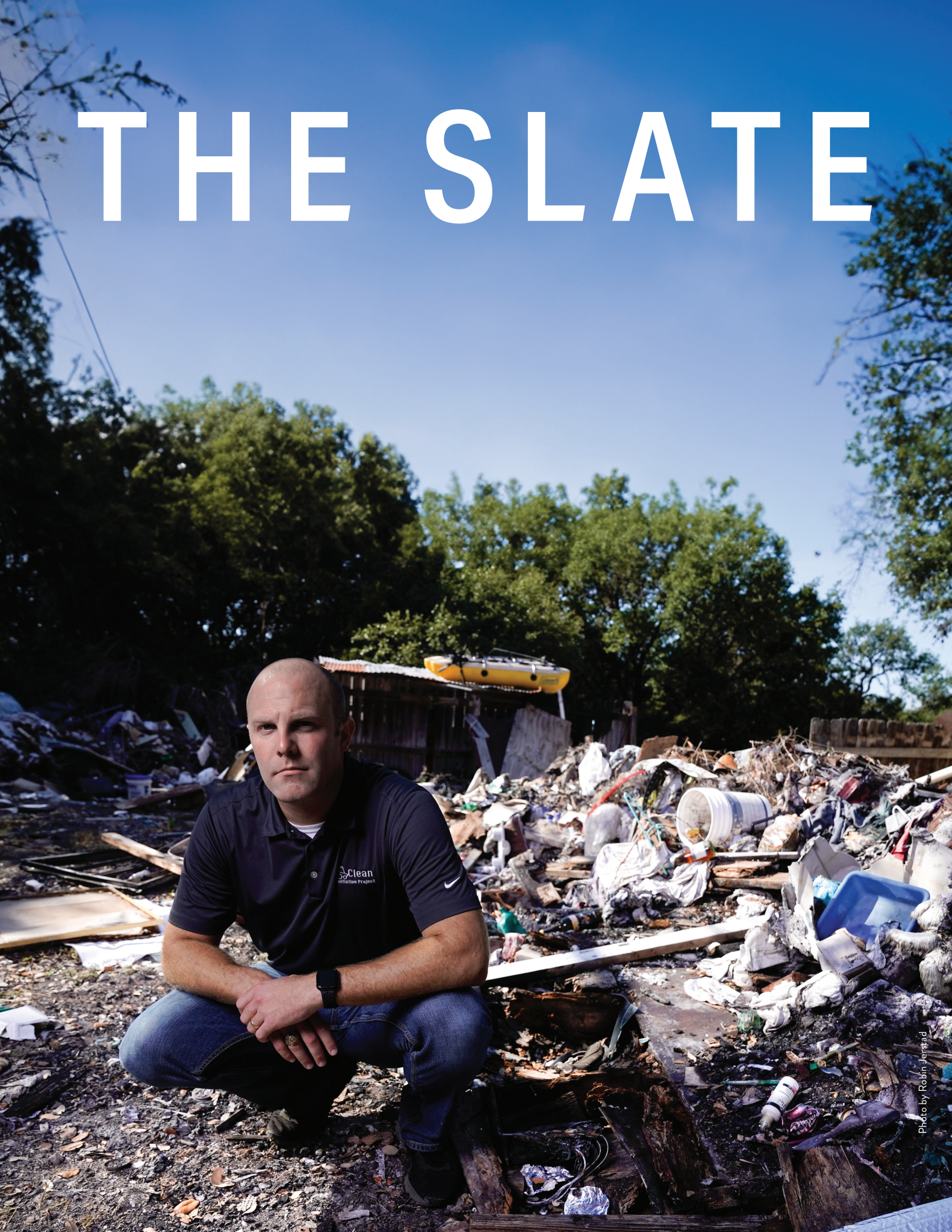


Photo by Robin Jensen

# CONNECTING WITH >>> COMPLIANCE

## Double alumna tackles Master of Jurisprudence

by **Samantha Mendoza**

**M**any consider themselves lifelong learners, but few have committed themselves to the pursuit of education quite like St. Mary's University student Priya Bhakta (B.B.A. '18, M.B.A. '19).

Bhakta is pursuing her Master of Jurisprudence (M.Jur.) with a Concentration in Compliance, Business Law and Risk — her third St. Mary's degree. When she completes the program in May 2024, she will have spent more than 10 years as a Rattler.

"The University is like a second home for me," Bhakta said. "The key Marianist pillars have made me who I am today."

Bhakta, of San Antonio, enrolled at St. Mary's with the goal of pursuing a career in business and law after being inspired by her father. A lawyer in his home country of India, he became an entrepreneur when he moved to the U.S.

Bhakta completed a bachelor's degree in Accounting in 2018, an MBA in 2019 and became an auditor with USAA. Her dream of learning more about the law was never far from her mind. She decided the M.Jur. Program was the best fit for her professional goals.

"What sets this M.Jur. Program apart is the community, the flexibility for working professionals, and that it allows you to sit for the Compliance Certification Board exam to become a certified compliance risk officer," she said.

Typically, professionals need to complete about 500 hours in a compliance officer role to qualify for the exam.

"Being welcomed into this Marianist community has been life-changing," Bhakta said of her St. Mary's experience."

Visit [www.stmarytx.edu/compliance-mjur-alumna](http://www.stmarytx.edu/compliance-mjur-alumna) to read the full story. ■

**"THE KEY  
MARIANIST  
PILLARS HAVE  
MADE ME WHO  
I AM TODAY."**



Photo by Robin Jerstad

*Dean's Circle continued from Page 3*

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The Hon. Catherine Torres-Stahl (B.A. '88,  
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# MARIANIST IN LAW

## Marianist Novice and lawyer continues his ministry through service

by Brooke Blanton Leith (M.A. '23)



Photo by Darren Shiverdecker

During his novitiate at St. Mary's Law, Guillermo "Memo" Peña Contreras lived with the brothers in the Marianist Residence adjacent to Holy Rosary Catholic Church, where he stands in this photo.

As a young lawyer in his home state of Querétaro, Mexico, Guillermo "Memo" Peña Contreras had no interest in the priesthood. While discussing religion at work one day, his boss made a joke that Peña Contreras originally brushed off.

"Maybe someday you'll be a seminarian," he said.

Peña Contreras imagined life as a priest would leave him stuck inside a parish in a sedentary life.

"No, I don't think so," replied Peña Contreras, who just wrapped up helping legal clients as a Visiting Practitioner at the St. Mary's University School of Law.

Years earlier, his grandmother had the same idea, though he didn't pay much attention at the time.

"She told me, 'If someday you want to be a *padrecito*, just let me know and I will take you to a priest,'" he said.

But while he was practicing law, Peña Contreras was introduced to a Marianist priest who invited him to his chapel, and he realized he'd been closer to his future than he thought.

"I had been walking in front of the chapel my whole life," he said. "The Marianist community was on the way to my grandma's house."

Peña Contreras joined the chapel choir and got to know several of the brothers who lived in Querétaro. He saw the work they were doing to help people within their community — not at all stuck inside the church.

He joined the Marianist brothers in 2019, and while he enjoyed his new work, his interest in the law was still alive. When the time came to be given his own ministry, his directors suggested he work with St. Mary's Law.

Starting in August, he spent four months at the law school, offering legal and spiritual support to local organizations, such as the Multi-Assistance Center at Morgan's Wonderland, San Antonio Legal Services Association, Haven for Hope, YWCA and American Gateways.

In December, Peña Contreras moved to Mount Saint John in Dayton, Ohio, to continue his formation with hopes of someday returning to Mexico and continuing his ministry.

"It's not that I'm a lawyer or a brother, but how can I use all these gifts and share them with others?" he said. "God put little seeds during my whole life, and I didn't realize until the seeds were ready to bear fruit." ■