

The New Jersey State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division – A Tribute

By Jonathan Amira

Twelve years in membership, 11 *Dictum* articles written, six CLEs paneled, five committee seats, four trustee positions, and one Young Lawyers Division award. It's hard to overstate how good YLD has been to me. I've traveled up and down the state and Washington, D.C., with them, held Zoom watch-parties during the pandemic, and even spontaneously performed on a couple occasions at the Annual Convention reception. Honestly, with all its faults, social media has been fantastic for refreshing my memories.

After passing the Bar in November 2015, I had a low-paying part-time job and still lived with my parents. I say that not with disdain, but with realism; I knew I was destined for better things. So, I began attending CLEs statewide through the New Jersey State Bar Association and the Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey for the purposes of networking. Since 2014, I took advantage of the free NJSBA/YLD membership as a law school graduate; a benefit that persists to this day, and one I still encourage all my mentees to pursue.

I attended my first Young Lawyers Division event in early 2016 – a cigar-tasting at Smoker's Delight in Union Township. In the words of a former U.S. President – “I didn't inhale,” but I became acquainted with wonderful individuals such as then-Chair-elect Rajeh Saadeh, and Gary “The Greek” Ahladianakis. Gary still reminds me, how bold I was, in May 2016, when I attended Annual Convention, out of my own pocket, and approached YLDers with the same intention – “I'm not a board member of YLD (yet), I'm just here to network.” That same convention, I also met fellow YLD member Jake Davidson, and Joe Surman; we've been friends ever since. When State Bar members say YLD is a good place to start when you're trying to get your foot in the door, believe them.

In June 2016, I obtained my first full-time legal job, and it was challenging, but I owe the YLD CommunityNet message boards in helping get me through. When ignorance and inexperience hamstrung my abilities,

my boss was reluctant to lend a helping hand, or did so with crushing retort. The kind lawyer souls, whose names I regrettably don't recall, helped guide me through complex issues over online correspondence my baby-lawyer brain couldn't wrap itself around at the time. Regrettably, the long hours forced me to put my YLD involvement on pause. However, if help in practice is what you seek, I can say with conviction there is no short supply of it in YLD.

In January 2017, I was hired as an Assistant Prosecutor at the Gloucester County Prosecutor's Office and moved to Cherry Hill. The flexible work-life balance allowed me to renew my involvement with YLD. I went hiking at Sourland Mountain under the leadership of then-Sussex County Rep. Tiffany Heinemann, whom I've known since I was in law school, and the following year, officially joined YLD as Gloucester/Salem/Cumberland District Representative under the Chairship of Ryan Gaffney. Among my colleagues were law school classmates like former-Mercer County Rep. Kiomeiry Csepes, and familiar faces of State Bar like Sam Berse, as well as Past-Chairs Brandon Lee Wolff, Katrina Homel, Cory Rothbort, and Emily Kelchen; who in her then-capacity as Editor-In-Chief of *Dictum*, helped me publish my first article. Additionally, I found myself in the company of fellow APs and Deputy Attorney Generals like Kim Gilhooly, Deirdre Laws, Diana-Marie Laventure, Chris Keating, and my *Dictum*-compadre, Brett Yore.

In 2019, Emily assumed the Chair and invited me to participate on YLD panels at the Solo and Small-Firm Conference, as well as “What I Wish I Knew” at the Annual Convention. In fact, Emily had invited me to many more, but work obligations often intervened. I continued to publish legal-themed film reviews with *Dictum*, as was my “specialty”, and eventually elevated my way to Editor-In-Chief, where I left my mark by introducing the *Ipsum* feature, where I profiled fellow YLD members and their extracurricular lives outside of the law, including my prede-

cessor, Ali Loprete, Frank DeRienzo, Janice Arellano, and my successor, Jason Krisza.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us into the safety of our homes, until science allowed a reprieve. During this time, I remained busy with YLD, doing virtual events and panels. I even returned to the stage, playing the role of Jason in Masquerade Theatre's virtual production of *Wit*, having fortuitously connected with co-owner, and then-Burlington County Rep. Megan Balne. By the waning days pandemic, I had been on the YLD Board for four years, and much had changed – from membership, with committee colleagues like Chris Jackson, Travis Nunziato, Rob Holup, Will Dungey, Lauren Jones, Joe Natale, May Wedlund, Maralee Sanders, Brandon DeJesus, Graham Stanton, and Mike Griffith, to my dear friends Jake Davidson and my law school roommate Steve Kornas joining the fold.

In April 2022, I hopped on Zoom for our monthly meeting, and Chris Keating was on the call to announce I was the recipient of that year's Service to the Community Award – The first ever professional accolade I earned in my seven years of practice. As Chris listed my accomplishments and reasons why the Awards Committee chose me, I felt a wave of euphoric validation. For years, I worked quietly behind the scenes in various organizations, just with the intent of investing into my social capital, and broadening my opportunities, usually with little to no more than a simple "thank you." This was the first time I felt seen as a hard-working professional, and I owe that gratitude to Chris, to the Awards Committee, and to YLD. Getting honored alongside Jake as Young Professional of the Year, Katrina for Service to the Bar, and my Rutgers "sister-in-law," Stacey Gorin for Young Lawyer of the Year was also a plus.

Today, I live with my dog, own my own home, and am approaching 10 years at GCPO. As I wind down my time with YLD, it's amazing to see how many of us have grown; professionally and personally. Some career highs within the past couple years included celebrating with Steve, Stacey, and Rick Wille my reception of the 2024 Rutgers Law School Camden Distinguished Recent Graduate Award. Also, getting sworn into the Supreme Court of the United States, and watching one of our own – the Honorable Frank DeRienzo – ascend to the bench in Morris County. My parting words to my remaining YLD colleagues – you've got this. Despite the challenges, we are stronger together with engagement and involvement. Be open and receptive to opportunities, continue working with like-minded people, and eventually, the appreciation will come.

Remember: It's not "goodbye", just "see you later." ■



Jonathan Amira is the outgoing Gloucester County Trustee for NJSBA-YLD, and an Assistant Prosecutor with the Gloucester County Prosecutor's Office, where he practices in the Special Litigation Unit. Jonathan is a Rutgers Law School-Camden ('14) alumnus. The views and the opinions of this article are those of the author and do not represent those of GCPO.