

Impact Report

Andre Finds Safety and Acceptance in America

As a gay, disabled man living in Jamaica, Andre faced daily beatings, bullying, harassment, and discrimination. When he was 28-years-old, he fled his home country to seek asylum in the U.S.

Andre suffered a lot as a child and a young man. He was bullied relentlessly in school and endured daily beatings from his stepfather, who at one point even hired a hitman to kill him. As he grew older, Andre was harassed by neighbors and the police, and he was violently attacked several times. Over the years, many of Andre's friends were murdered because of their sexual orientation.

"I used to have to run for my life all the time."

At the age of 10, Andre was enrolled in a school for children with intellectual disabilities. He found refuge from the bullying by joining the track, basketball and hockey teams. Andre excelled at sports and was chosen for the Special Olympics program. He qualified as the Jamaican national champion twice and competed in the Special Olympic World Games in China and South Korea. It was during this travel that Andre first experienced life free of homophobic violence and felt that he could be himself. "I didn't have to look over my shoulder. I liked that feeling."



Left: Andre is pictured with De Novo Senior Immigration Attorney Lisa Laurel Weinberg outside the USCIS Asylum Office in Boston in 2023 after being granted asylum.

With a visa he received to travel for the Special Olympics, Andre visited Florida for the first time in 2013. Here in the U.S., he saw men being openly gay. "I felt like I just came to the promised land, like I was going to be safe here and protected," said Andre. "I felt like I would have a chance in this country to better my life and be who I want to be and accepted for who I am."

Andre was introduced by a friend to the LGBT Asylum Taskforce in Worcester, Mass. The taskforce paired Andre with a host family here and connected him to De Novo for help with applying for asylum.

Andre's request for asylum was no easy process. His case was stuck in the asylum backlog for nine years before it was adjudicated. When Andre was finally scheduled for an interview with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), they denied the dis-

ability accommodations his lawyer had requested for him. Andre's experience with USCIS was so troublesome that Human Rights First featured his case in their annual report exposing USCIS failures to provide accommodations to immigrants with disabilities.

Even more, in his hearing, the immigration officer only elicited testimony about the abuse Andre experienced as a child and failed to interview him about the harm he faced as an adult or the threat of future harm he would face if he returned to Jamaica.

Despite these challenges, De Novo never stopped advocating for Andre. His attorney made sure his testimony was heard and ultimately, Andre was granted asylum. While leaving the courthouse after his case was granted, Andre looked to the sky and yelled, "Asylum is over! I finally have my freedom!"

Today, Andre has found a second family and a community who accept him for who he is. He loves to attend pride parades and posts about his life as an openly gay man on social media. Cooking is a passion of his, and he hopes to attend a culinary program.

De Novo Celebrates its Volunteers and Community Partners at Annual Appreciation Event

On October 11, De Novo celebrated the work of over 120 volunteers and many community partners at its annual Volunteer Appreciation Event and Dr. Joseph H. Brenner Award Ceremony at the Multi-cultural Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass. This year's celebration also included the presentation of the inaugural Herb Epstein Volunteer Excellence Award, named in honor of the long-time volunteer immigration attorney who passed away in 2020 and his legacy of selfless service.

De Novo volunteers serve in a wide range of capacities, from legal representation, to mental health counseling, to interpretation and translation, to administrative support for vulnerable community members. They also provide outreach to underserved populations, and advocate for improved access to civil legal assistance and mental health services.

"I'm always amazed by the appreciation for my small contribution. On more than one occasion I've been singled out by Mojdeh [De Novo's executive director] with appreciation for my work. I didn't even know I was known! As a volunteer it's really nice to feel appreciated," said Bob Landy, a volunteer interpreter/translator who works with Spanish-speaking clients. Laurie Van Loon, a volunteer clinical social worker, spoke about her experience conducting forensic psychological evaluations for clients' humanitarian relief applications.

Among the evening's highlights, Natalia, a former immigration client, spoke about her experience working with a De Novo volunteer and staff attorneys. "It was hard to trust and even harder to open up. It was not the first time I was talking about what I was going through, but it was the first time I felt like I was being heard... I was given time and space to heal knowing that I wasn't facing any of it alone anymore."

“ Being an evaluation volunteer is a gift. Bearing witness to our clients' stories is a privilege. What they reveal about the human capacity for basic survival, for deliberate action, for renewal, are lessons in courage, and I'm grateful to be allowed in this small way to accompany them. ”

— Laurie Van Loon,
Counseling Volunteer



Left: Andrew Cornell, a long-time volunteer family law attorney, accepts the inaugural Herb Epstein Volunteer Excellence Award from De Novo Legal Director Ellen Wilbur. Andrew's unwavering dedication to assisting domestic violence survivors is not only empowering, but also inspirational. De Novo is grateful for Andrew's tireless commitment to social justice.

Right: Tina Alu, Executive Director of the Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC), pictured with De Novo Deputy Director John Froio, accepts the Dr. Joseph H. Brenner Award for her continuing work with De Novo to create a positive change in the community. Her passion, collaborative spirit, and deep community connection serve as an example to us all. De Novo is grateful for our partnership with Tina and CEOC.



NEW COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



De Novo Launches Monthly Family Law Clinic in Somerville

De Novo has launched a new monthly Family Law Clinic to provide free legal advice on a range of family law matters including divorce, custody, child support, parentage, and parenting time. The walk-in clinic is being held at the Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS) offices at 66-70 Union Square on the third Monday of each month from 4:30pm to 7:00pm. No appointment required. The clinic is generously funded by City of Somerville ARPA funds.

Dr. Paul Goldmuntz: A Remembrance

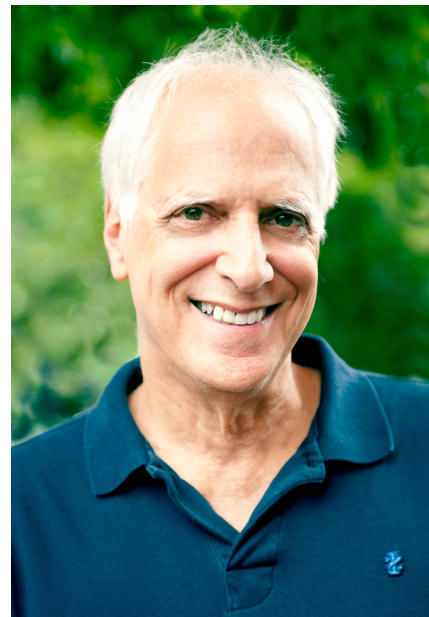
In March 2023, the De Novo community was stunned by the news that our beloved former Clinical Director Dr. Paul Goldmuntz had passed. As we gathered together to memorialize his life and legacy, we were reminded of the indelible mark Paul left on his clients, colleagues, and friends.

To many of us, Paul was the heart and soul of De Novo. He was known not just for his passion, commitment, and leadership, but above all for his great heart, his kindness, and solidarity with others.

Paul dedicated his life to improving access to mental health services for the most vulnerable members of our community. Over his 37-year career at De Novo, he embodied a spirit of social justice, working tirelessly to promote human rights and human dignity. Paul's greatest legacy, however, may be the generations of clinicians, lawyers and other advocates he taught, mentored and inspired.

"Paul's compassion, humanity, intelligence, and sense of humor has permeated this organization and has affected everyone who works here," said Andrew Cornell, a volunteer family law attorney at De Novo since 1994. "Paul has shown us how we can act in this world with compassion and dignity that allows others to gain meaning and joy in their lives."

Paul first came to De Novo, then called the Cambridgeport Problem Center, as a counseling volunteer in the late 1970's. He was hired as De Novo's very first Clinical Director in 1984. Under Paul's leadership, the Counseling Program grew from a small cohort of volunteer clinicians to four staff social workers who serve 425 clients annually. Paul both saw clients and oversaw the recruitment and supervision of over 300 volunteer clinicians during his tenure, allowing over 4,000 clients to access critical mental health



services. He retired as clinical director in 2021.

"For patients and therapists alike, you made bearing with the unbearable somehow bearable. And through that, hope has a handhold," said Janet Amphlett, a counseling volunteer who worked with Paul since 1988. "Thank you for imbuing the De Novo walls with kindness, making it possible for so many of us to connect, and continue connecting, in such a rich and meaningful way."

"I was hired by Paul as the Associate Clinical Director in 2007. Paul was not only my clinical supervisor, but also my mentor, a trusted friend, and a part of my family," said Mojdeh Rohani, De Novo Executive Director. "Dearest Paul, you have taken your flight to the realm of light and peace, free from all the human sufferings we so often talked about. You will be sorely missed! Your kindness, humanity, humility, and wonderful sense of humor will forever remain in our hearts."



New Medical-Legal Partnerships Expand Legal Support for Housing and Health

De Novo has established new Medical-Legal Partnerships (MLPs) with the Immigrant & Refugee Health Center at Boston Medical Center and Cambridge Health Alliance to provide critical housing-related legal assistance to patients and families facing eviction. The MLPs directly connect community members to De Novo attorneys for legal advice and representation with housing or disability benefits matters to improve their housing stability — a critical part of good health and health equity.

Advancing Access to Community-Driven Mental Health Services

De Novo is partnering with Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC), a local anti-poverty agency, on a new initiative to implement community-based mental health services at CEOC for adults with mild to moderate mental health distress. Under the supervision of De Novo's clinical director, this initiative will train community advocates to provide low-intensity mental health interventions known as Problem Management Plus (PM+) in economically, racially, culturally, or socially marginalized communities.

Gary Howell-Walton Joins De Novo's Board of Directors

Gary B. Howell-Walton, an associate attorney at the international law firm WilmerHale, has joined the Board of Directors at De Novo. Gary's practice covers a variety of complex litigation matters, including intellectual property disputes, government and internal investigations, and appeals.

Gary maintains an active *pro bono* practice, and has represented clients seeking support related to housing, public benefits, and immigration status. Prior to law school, Gary earned a Masters in Social Work from the University of Southern California and worked as a clinician in a non-profit setting.



"I look forward to supporting De Novo and the amazing work the organization does in the Greater Boston area," Gary said. "De Novo's holistic approach to working with clients leads to distinct and long-lasting improvements in their lives, and I am happy for the opportunity to serve on the Board."

More Board News:



» **Christine Nelson** was named President of De Novo's Board of Directors. Chris is co-founder and retired managing director of Cornerstone Research, a 700-person consulting firm that provides economic and financial analysis in commercial litigation and regulatory proceedings. She has been a De Novo board member since 2017, and succeeds Walter Bardenwerper, who served as Board President from 2020-2023.

» **Mark Bernfeld** was elected Board Vice President. Mark is an entrepreneur, teacher, and angel investor who was co-founder of MentorWorks Education Capital and Board Chair of Tamarack Technologies. He has taught at Dartmouth College and Northeastern University, and served on multiple nonprofit boards. Mark has been a De Novo board member since 2012.



Staff News

Tanasia White was promoted to Family Law Supervising Attorney in Sept. 2023. She will oversee a growing unit of five staff members, including three attorneys, a paralegal, and an intake specialist.

Michelle Choy was hired as a Family Law Attorney and **Mariah Reliford** was hired as a new Family Law Paralegal. They assist domestic violence survivors in family law matters and staff De Novo's new monthly Family Law Clinic in Somerville.

Cindy De La Cruz and **Michelle Morales** were hired as bilingual Clinical Social Workers, providing mental health counseling and social work to Spanish-speaking clients statewide.

Katie Fustich and **Dexter Rowell** were hired as Housing Attorneys. They staff our weekly Housing Court 'Lawyer for the Day' Clinic and provide legal representation to low-income tenants in Cambridge and Somerville.

Karen Bobadilla, Immigration Staff Attorney, was appointed to the Advisory Board at Project Citizenship. Earlier this year, she was selected for the Boston Bar Association's 2023 Public Interest Leadership Program.

Briana Ong and **Rosa Elena Villanueva** were hired as bilingual Immigration Attorneys. They assist clients in petitions for asylum, VAWA, U-Visa, and Special Immigrant Juvenile status.

Paige Swanson was hired as Development Coordinator. She supports De Novo's communications, social media, and fundraising efforts.