Twenty years ago, when Santa Clara law students decided to use their legal skills to help their community, they could not anticipate the tremendous success of their efforts. Today, their vision, represented by the Katharine & George Alexander Community Law Center, known then as the East San José Community Law Center, touches the lives of thousands of low-income clients in the Valley who could not otherwise obtain legal representation. At the same time, the Law Center continues to be a practical training ground for generations of Santa Clara Law attorneys who lead through competence, conscience and compassion.

As a way to acknowledge this twenty-year milestone, it seems fitting to review the Law Center’s history while celebrating the efforts of some of the many individuals who participated and continue to participate in its success. The foundation for the Community Law Center was established in 1993, when a number of SCU La Raza law students decided to add practice to theory for the benefit of their community and their own education. Ruben Pizarro ’95, a second-year law student at the time, recalls sitting right next to former law Professor Jim Hammer during a La Raza event. Having expressed his dismay at the theoretical nature of his curriculum, Ruben found a good ally in Professor Hammer, then a Jesuit with a very practical commitment to the community.

“We had a passion to serve and our legal training gave us the tools to help those in need,” recalls Ruben. Sandra Pizarro ‘94, Ruben’s sister and also a law student at the time, agreed: “We wanted law school to have more meaning for us. We wanted to help real people with real problems.”

They did not have to look hard or far to realize that East San José, with its concentration of day workers, could use their evolving legal expertise. After some initial planning, Jim Hammer, the Pizarros and other students ventured to the former Home Base do-it-yourself store on Story and King, to speak to the workers in the store’s parking lot. “It took a while for them to feel comfortable with us, but eventually they opened up and started sharing their problems,” remembers Sandra.

The case of workers José O., Ricardo V.,
We had a passion to serve and our help those in need.

Katharine & George Alexander Community Law Center

“Athletic Program...”

The students’ first break came that same year, when Sister Mary McCusker of Most Holy Trinity Parish helped to set up a Day Workers’ Job Center in a former bakery in the historic Tropicana Center, on Story and King. Suddenly, the students had a place where they could offer their valuable knowledge and service. Their initial success, however, soon revealed a need for an operational budget and a more structured relationship with SCU’s School of Law, their source of legal supervision.

Professor Hammer and the students approached Professors Eric and Nancy Wright. The Wrights immediately saw the potential for the students and the community in a viable Law Center. On the academic front, they started offering credit to those students involved in the Center. On the financial side, the Wrights approached two major sources of funding. “We had never seen such energy and such a sense of ownership. We’ve helped a lot of folks in the last twenty years, and I think those of us who work here, as well as our clients, owe a debt of gratitude to the people who got this place started.”

Among others, Professor Hammer, Ruben Pizarro ’95, Sandra Pizarro ’94 (center) and a few new clients re-conditioned the 1765 Alum Rock Avenue location.

Kristin D. Nevarez ’96, then a second-year law student, recalls moving into the new building: “The place was in horrible condition, but we decided that it was not going to interfere with our work.”

Students attend class in the conference room, at the Alum Rock location.

Law students confer with experienced attorneys during a Workers’ Rights clinic.

Agreed: “It was hard work, but it was so exciting. We all became painters, found some donated furniture, and fixed up the place.”

For years, portable fans and heaters mitigated the extreme summer and winter temperatures inside the offices, where activity never ceased. “It was a place where I could find solace during my law school years. That’s where things made sense to me; it became my second home,” confided Nevarez, who signed up for a semester during her second year and worked there as a volunteer her entire third year of law school.

It was this location that saw the addition of Immigration, Consumer Law, Workers’ Compensation and Small Business advice to the Center’s roster of services. With additional funding from the School of Law and other private and public grants, the Law Center also added support staff to its payroll. By 2002, under the leadership of Executive Director Angelo Ancheta, it currently focuses on Consumer Law, Immigration Law, Employment Law and personal tax matters through the Low Income Tax Clinic (LITC), housed in the same building. The Law Center serves over 1,000 clients on-site per year. It also reaches out to more than 1,200 individuals through its community workshops on Consumer Rights, Workers’ Rights and Tenant-Landlord Rights. Each year, students log over 10,000 hours of direct services to their clients. During the fiscal 2013-14 year alone, the work of the Law Center and the LITC students, if billed, would have amounted to more than 2 million dollars. Their work also resulted in over $915,000 in favor of their clients as paid damages, resolved contract disputes, recovered wages, employer-related penalties, released tax returns and waived, tax-related penalties.

Scott Maurer, who now supervises the Consumer area and was in the first class of students to come through the Law Center, says: “I am still inspired by the people who founded this place. The office was barely habitable but the students who got the place going had such energy and such a sense of ownership. We’ve helped a lot of folks in the last twenty years, and I think those of us who work here, as well as our clients, owe a debt of gratitude to the people who got this place started.”

In 2002, the Law Center received notice that the sale of its building was pending. Faced with a lack of affordable and suitable office space in East San José at the time, Professor Mertens turned to the University for assistance. In May 2002, Santa Clara closed escrow on the Center’s new location on 1030 The Alameda, away from East San José. Many, including some of the founding students, had reservations about moving the Law Center out of its intended focus of operation. “Being in the community added to the comfort level of the clients, and now the Center was moving — yes, I was worried,” confessed Ruben. Fortunately, those concerns were soon put to rest when the clientele attended the new Law Center in its usual numbers. Said Professor Mertens, “We faced some constraints with our relocation, but I think that we made the best of it. Thanks to our new building, we achieved greater confidentiality for our clients, obtained suitable work areas for students, and managed greater comfort for all. But really, we could not have done it without Dean Mack Player and the University behind us.”

In 2004, George Alexander, professor and former dean of the School of Law, and his wife, Katharine, made a generous donation to the East San José Community Law Center. In recognition of their gesture, the ESJCLC was formally renamed the Katharine & George Alexander Community Law Center.

Today, the Law Center is a thriving institution that maintains its original commitment to the community and its students. Under the leadership of Executive Director Angela Ancheta, it currently focuses on Consumer Law, Immigration Law, Employment Law and personal tax matters through the Low Income Tax Clinic (LITC), housed in the same building. The Law Center serves over 1,000 clients on-site per year. It also reaches out to more than 1,200 individuals through its community workshops on Consumer Rights, Workers’ Rights and Tenant-Landlord Rights. Each year, students log over 10,000 hours of direct services to their clients. During the fiscal 2013-14 year alone, the work of the Law Center and the LITC students, if billed, would have amounted to over $1,000,000 in favor of their clients as paid damages, resolved contract disputes, recovered wages, employer-related penalties, released tax returns and waived, tax-related penalties.

Jayro Rivera Pizano ’12 interviews an Immigration client at the the Alexander Community Law Center.