

Alumni Interview – Julian Hill

By Stephanie Charles

Julian Hill is a movement lawyer and freedom fighter from Kankakee, IL. He was an Associate at Cleary from fall 2014 to winter 2018. Julian currently serves as Supervising Attorney for the Capacity Building Practice at TakeRoot Justice, a New York nonprofit.

TakeRoot Justice uses law, policy, and participatory research to center the leadership of community members, particularly the most marginalized, and to support transformative change in fighting racial, economic, and social oppression. The organization includes seven practice areas, ranging from participatory action research to immigrants' rights to consumer rights to capacity building, all of which work in alliance with and under the direction of their partner organizations in the community.

Julian and I sat for a chat at Les Ambassades in Harlem.

Why Cleary? How did your experience as an Associate compare to expectations you had before coming in?

Cleary was the clear choice for me because of the people, the opportunity to learn from brilliant lawyers in an international practice (the LatAm group), my desire to improve my Spanish, and the sincere belief that I could find, create, and build community at the firm. The experience surpassed my expectations: from Duane supporting me in leading my first deal earlier than I could have imagined, to Juan and Adam pushing me to communicate exclusively in Spanish with one of our clients, to the sit downs with Jeff, Chantal, and Grant to discuss substance, strategy, and the context of various deals, and with much more in between. I left with an appreciation for the toolkit I was able to amass. I'm grateful that I am able to bring it with me to a relatively under-resourced organization and, ultimately, to my clients.

What was the focus of your work in the Latin America practice group? What other practice groups did you work in?

My practice focused on capital markets. By the time I left the firm, I had substantive registered and unregistered deal experience, as well as filing experience with the likes of Jorge. I felt lucky to have also worked on a few M&A and financing deals in the practice group, as well as other transactions, including a divestiture. In addition, I worked on deals with domestic capital markets folks including Helena here in New York, the FPMG, FIG, and leveraged finance teams, and even our capital markets team in Frankfurt.

You spent time in Cleary's Buenos Aires office. Why did you seek out that experience, and what was it like?

Going to Buenos Aires was an opportunity to more closely support a team with which I had already been working while

based in New York. I also wanted to gain international work experience while leveraging and improving my Spanish skills. The experience was very formative—I learned so much working alongside Andrés and Emilio. I also learned a lot about Argentina, including about the country's worker cooperative history.

Tell us about your pro bono practice at Cleary.

I worked almost exclusively on transactional pro bono matters, focusing on small business formation and nonprofit governance. With more exposure to this work, I knew that I wanted to work more closely with these types of institutions. A piece of advice here that I wish someone had given me during my time at Cleary is this: one shouldn't use pro bono experience to try to reconcile any cognitive dissonance that may come for some with working at a law firm. I would urge Associates to seek out pro bono experience because it is extremely important and valuable work, not a means to justify any work that results in negative outcomes for communities, particularly those that they may identify with.

What was one of the most memorable projects you worked on while at Cleary?

I worked with Chantal and a mid-level associate on an intense M&A transaction, where we were representing a buyer in one jurisdiction seeking to purchase a privately-held business in another jurisdiction. The hours were long. I was, however, constantly reminded of how important it is to show appreciation, to extend grace and patience, and to be intentional about associate development. I grew a lot. I wrestled with insecurities throughout that time, but I was able to catch on to things relatively quickly. More importantly, I felt ownership over various aspects of the work as a valued team member. To this day, that experience shapes how I try to create team culture when I mentor and support my colleagues in their work.

Where have you worked since you left Cleary, and in what capacity?

I left Cleary to join the Community Development Project (CDP) at the Urban Justice Center (UJC) as a Staff Attorney. I was there for a little over a year. CDP then spun off from UJC to form a separate nonprofit, TakeRoot Justice, where I now serve as Supervising Attorney.

What first drew you to the Community Development Project?

CDP was the only nonprofit I knew of in New York City with a dedicated worker cooperative practice. I remember reading Jessica Gordon Nembhard's *Collective Courage*, a book on the history of cooperative economics among African Americans. I knew that the work of building (relatively) non-exploitative, worker-centered and cooperatively run

institutions was my calling. After talking to one of the Staff Attorneys at CDP, I was sold.

Tell us more about your current position at TakeRoot Justice. What might a typical day entail?

I supervise a three-person team of attorneys who provide legal support to worker cooperatives, nonprofits, and collectives engaging in organizing, and to small businesses negotiating leases. I also support our team in providing technical policy and coalition support.

On any given day, I try to have no more than four hours of meetings or calls. A typical day is split between supervision-related tasks and my own case work. It might involve a mix of revising governance documents, contracts, leases, memos, and the like, developing systems that support my team, working on grant applications, engaging in a range of tasks related to team contract deliverables, building stronger relationships with partners, assessing our progress on team goals and strategy, and helping manage the organization.

What is on your agenda for this glorious Wednesday?

Today, I'll be (i) finishing up a presentation on membership manuals for worker cooperatives that I'm delivering tonight (in English and Spanish—thanks Cleary!), (ii) reviewing materials for one of our funders, (iii) working on a grant application, (iii) discussing a commercial lease with opposing counsel, (iv) drafting a few retainers and a tool for tracking progress on our team's 2020 goals, and (v) taking inventory of the resources that we have on worker cooperatives to discuss with a few comrades in the solidarity economy ecosystem.

What are key skills or substantive areas of law you focused on at Cleary that you bring to TakeRoot Justice? Describe an experience you had at Cleary that has been particularly valuable to you since you left.

While at TakeRoot Justice, I have been able to leverage a number of skills that I acquired and honed at Cleary: contract drafting, critical analysis, a holistic approach to client services that considers legal and non-legal client concerns, and team/project management skills. Substantively, my experience in securities law, corporate governance, finance, and M&A has been useful. I'd say that my work with Chantal on an M&A deal and with Andres and Emilio on an IPO were particularly valuable. In each case, I was collaboratively managing several moving parts, drafting and redrafting various documents, and coordinating several relationships (e.g., specialists, clients, co-counsel, etc.).

What could collaborative work between TakeRoot Justice and Cleary look like in your view?

There are several opportunities for collaboration, including workshops or CLEs on worker cooperatives and the solidarity economy, co-counseling on worker cooperative matters, and facilitating events and discussions with us and

Other organizations working in this field. I'd also love to see us host Cleary externs interested in worker cooperatives, nonprofits, and small businesses at TakeRoot Justice.

What advice would you have for an Associate interested in pursuing a career path similar to yours?

I encourage anyone who is interested in this work to join the New York City Network of Worker Cooperatives as "sustainers," which gives them access to a listserv, among other things. By the time I interviewed at CDP, I knew four of the five interviewers across the table because I'd sought out opportunities to learn, connect, and become involved. Come to workshops. Come to events. Get to know others working in the field. Reach out to me.

How can interested readers learn more about TakeRoot Justice, and stay informed about the work of the organization?

We share updates on our work on our website at www.takerootjustice.org, on Facebook (TakeRoot Justice), and on Twitter (TakeRootNYC).