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# A Calling to Justice

*Cliff Nellis '97 created and leads a legal center that is changing the lives of young people in one of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods.*

Story by **AMELIA BENNER '09**

North Lawndale, the Chicago neighborhood where attorney Cliff Nellis lives and works, regularly makes headlines for all the wrong reasons. Gang violence. Shootings. Urban decay.

But Nellis, a 1997 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan, sees those issues as symptoms of something bigger: a cycle of poverty that's difficult for young people to escape, and a criminal justice system that offers few solutions for freeing people from that cycle.

His organization, Lawndale Christian Legal Center (LCLC), reaches out to teenagers and young adults facing serious criminal charges,

from dealing drugs to residential burglary to attempted murder. It's an offshoot of Lawndale Christian Community Church, which has done outreach in the Chicago neighborhood of North Lawndale for nearly four decades.

In a place like North Lawndale, a lifetime spent drifting in and out of the correctional system can seem inevitable. And when young people's first brush with the law can happen as young as 10 or 11 years old, that lifetime can be very long indeed.

"Once you're in the system, it tends to be pretty hard to get out of it," Nellis says.

A felony conviction at a young age becomes a permanent barrier that stands in the way of future opportunities. "There actually is no end to their sentence," says Nellis.

LCLC takes a holistic approach to helping young people, integrating social services and mentoring with legal aid. Those services continue for as long as clients remain in the justice system, an average of three years.

"We walk these kids through the system, away from the system, never to return to the system again," Nellis says.



**In addition to providing full legal representation for clients, Nellis (above center) and his team create a customized intervention "Game Plan" for success that includes mentoring and job skills training.**

It's a system that can be can be "daunting and frustrating," says Jennifer Gill, a 1997 classmate of Nellis' whose own interest in social justice led her to become a Cook County public defender — a post she's held for over 14 years.

Gill and Nellis had lost touch after graduation. "Then, one day in November 2011, I saw Cliff walking out of the courthouse at 26th and California," Gill recalls. "He told me about what he was doing and about the legal center he had just opened. I was very interested and asked how I could help."

Soon, the pair were partnering in creation of a Young Professionals' Council to raise money for LCLC. Today, the group has 10 members and holds two fundraisers a year.

Over the years, Nellis has gained experience that serves him well as an advocate for youth, says Gill. "Cliff has learned how things work and how to best help his clients in the framework of that system." But the true key to his success, she adds, comes from his all-in commitment to his clients.

"He worries about them, counsels them, gets involved in their families, welcomes them into his and finds opportunities for them," she says. "He also stands beside them when they fall. He's a strong and faithful supporter of all his clients."

### **Lost and found**

North Lawndale, which lies on the southwest side of the city of Chicago, has a history of reinventing itself.

Initially settled by Italian and Irish immigrants, in the late 19th century it became a popular destination for Czech and Bohemian families seeking a new life in the New World. By the 1920s, it was home to the world's third-largest Jewish community.

It was transformed once more in the mid-20th century, as the Great Migration brought waves of black Americans from the south into the teeming cities of the north. But the next few decades brought an economic downturn that sparked an increase in poverty and crime.

Today, Nellis says, 97 percent of the community's over 35,000 residents are African-American. Unemployment is high, and even a job is no guarantee of security: the average annual salary among Lawndale residents is between \$15,000 and \$18,000. The high-school graduation rate is around 40 percent.

One of the biggest factors behind these numbers, according to Nellis, is the "huge number of felony convictions." Fifty percent of the population has been convicted of a felony. Among men, that figure rises to 70 percent.

"You've got a community that's basically been marginalized by the criminal justice system," Nellis says.

Nellis, his wife, and their two children live in Lawndale. So do 11 of LCLC's 13 staff members, some of whom grew up in the neighborhood.

That gives them credibility with local kids, he says. "I'm just another guy," he says. "I'm their neighbor."

What pulled Nellis to Lawndale was a firm belief in the power of redemption, a power he has experienced firsthand.

He grew up in Lake Zurich, Ill., a serene northern suburb of Chicago that is consistently ranked among the best places in America to raise a family. He played varsity football at Lake Zurich High School before arriving at IWU in 1993. Majoring in philosophy and English, with a minor in political science, he says he "loved his days at Wesleyan," where he also played football and was a member of Sigma Chi.

Intending to pursue a career in law, he studied at the University of Chicago, where he received his J.D. in 2000. Two years later, he wrapped up a clerkship with a federal judge in Denver. With job offers from some of the largest law firms in the country, Nellis realized he was on the cusp of achieving everything he had thought he desired — and yet he felt lost. Wanting to get in touch with feelings of pain, fear and loneliness that had

followed him since early adolescence, he decided to take time off to do a cross-country bicycle trip he hoped would give his life a new focus.

A few months before his trip began, his brother had become a Christian — and was anxious to share his new faith. "I flat out told him it wasn't for me. God and religion just didn't make sense to me. But he just could not let go of it," he recalls.

But Nellis found that soon he, too, couldn't let go of it. He remembered that his late grandmother, who he deeply admired, "also believed in Jesus Christ — and I couldn't believe that my whole life I had overlooked this fact about my grandmother."

On the first leg of his bicycle trek from Denver to San Diego, Nellis prayed, wrote in his journal, and went to church services in the towns he passed through. He also began reading the Bible he had brought with him in his backpack cover-to-cover. "I began to rethink everything I thought about my life, about everything."



**After earning a law degree at the University of Chicago, Nellis eschewed a lucrative legal career to attend divinity school. He opened Lawndale Christian Legal Center in 2010.**

During the first week of his journey, he decided to stop at a lake he'd seen on the map near the New Mexico town of Springer. After losing his way in the rural landscape, he stopped at a guard shack at a boys' correctional facility to ask for directions — and got more than he bargained for.

The guard told him about the boys housed in the Springer Correctional Center, which was founded in the early 1900s. Again and again, he told Nellis that the teens — most of whom ended up in prison as adults — had “no hope.”

“In my new, probably innocent faith, I was troubled,” Nellis says. He felt, even at the time, that it was a defining moment.

As he rode on, he developed a new plan for the future, picturing himself as a chaplain for young people in correctional facilities. And when his trip ended three months later in Miami, he returned home to the Chicago suburbs where he'd grown up and enrolled at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

He continued to practice law on the side as he attended seminary and pursued his goal of becoming a youth pastor. It was during this time that he first came to Lawndale.

Lawndale Christian Community Church Pastor Wayne Gordon had written a book, *Real Hope in Chicago*, about the church's success in reaching out to people in need in North Lawndale. In 2005, Nellis decided to see for himself.

“I'd never really met a church like that,” he says. Nellis was inspired by the way leaders worked within the community, fostering transformation from the inside out.

Four years later, Nellis, in cooperation with church leaders, was formulating plans for a legal aid center focused on the community's young people. In 2010, LCLC opened its doors.

### **Steps toward progress**

Once a young adult is charged with a crime, how do you put him on a better path?

That's the question that Nellis and his 13-member staff consider every day. The best answer that he's come up with is “Give him a job.”

But finding employment for young people who've been charged with serious crimes is a difficult prospect. LCLC has a three-tier program to help its clients gain workplace skills. In the first step, clients work for the center itself, doing janitorial work, tending the community garden, and helping with the after-school program.

This initial step helps his clients gain on-the-job skills, Nellis says.

In the second tier, those who've shown promise at LCLC are given the opportunity to work for one of 12 "employer partners." LCLC foots the bill for their salary for a month or two as the workers get a taste of life on the job.

The third tier consists of young people who've parlayed that opportunity into formal employment, giving them a chance to become breadwinners and steering them away from the bad influences that led them into trouble in the first place.

Nellis says that the teens he meets have faced the challenges that come with poverty: homelessness, abuse, drug addiction and a lack of education.

"Life is harder here," he says. "There's no getting around that."

With that in mind, Nellis added, success can be a moving target. Some emerge from the justice system and finish high school. Some go on to college. Some find employment. For others, it's enough simply to take smaller steps, like choosing not to hang out with their old friends anymore.



**"You've got a community that's basically been marginalized by the criminal justice system," says Nellis says, shown above speaking with a client's friend.**

Gill says that LCLC and programs like it help by treating teens and young adults in trouble as more than just a case. "The attorneys and staff walk alongside the kids to treat the client's mental, emotional and educational needs in addition to their legal needs," she says. "The goal is to make the client a productive member of society so they don't find themselves in that position again."

Nellis cited the story of one young Lawndale man who had a rough start in life. His mom and her abusive boyfriend were addicted to heroin. He joined a gang and ended up charged with assault and attempted murder. While in jail, his older brother was shot and killed.

With Nellis' help, he was found not guilty in a jury trial. Upon his release from jail, the youth started talking to other kids in the neighborhood, urging them to make better choices than he had. When Nellis saw that the young man's peers were listening, he offered him a job in the LCLC after-school program. Now — having become the first in his family to graduate from high school — he is a sophomore at a four-year university.

No matter what the outcome, repairing the damage is “a long process,” Nellis says. It’s a journey of redemption that requires both patience and faith.

The Lawndale Christian Legal Center is the only program of its kind in Chicago. But Nellis says its success is replicable in cities across the country.

If he could tell Chicago and the nation one thing about the youth in his neighborhood, the message would be simple.

“Our kids are really no different than any kids in any community,” he says.

[Go here to read more about the Lawndale Christian Legal Center.](#)