

Trio opens Community Justice Center

Voice for veterans, disabled

By **Linda Stein**

Melissa A. Gertz has always wanted to help people. Now, with the recent opening of the Community Justice Center in Trenton, she'll have that chance.

In addition to Gertz, C. Patterson McKenna, her Rutgers Law School-Newark friend, and Lisa A. Turowsky are partners in the new firm focused on helping veterans and the low-income disabled.

Since opening its doors Feb. 1, the center has taken on 15 clients.

Gertz, who was in a life-threatening car accident in her third year of law school, has limited vision. McKenna, blind since he was five years old, uses Braille and a guide dog.

"There is no other legal nonprofit (in New Jersey) that addresses veterans issues," Gertz said. "Until a couple of years ago you couldn't collect fees in veterans cases due to a statute dating from the Civil War. There's no one else doing it."

And veterans need help. A 2008 Rand Corporation study found that 20 percent of the 1.6 million soldiers who served in the Iraq war since 2001 have experienced psychological impairments that impede their ability to function in civilian life.

Gertz noted that many more injured veterans are surviving due to improved medical care. And many of those veterans face problems accessing the Veterans Administration and Social Security services to receive payments and health care.

The VA has a backlog of about 750,000 cases, Gertz said.

"We've been very fortunate," said McKenna, as his guide dog Garcia, a yellow Labrador, waited patiently. "A lot of volunteers have helped us."



C. Patterson McKenna, Melissa A. Gertz and Lisa Turowsky

Photos by Linda Stein



Justice Virginia A. Long said, "If anybody can make a go of something like this, Melissa can."

He noted that Rutgers Dean Andrew J. Rothman was instrumental in aiding them with the center. While they took out a bank loan to get started, they hope to apply for various grants once their nonprofit status is approved.

"It's a wonderful project," Rothman said. Rothman has been teaching students about non-

profit law firms for 12 years but this is the first time any of his students have put his lessons into practice.

"We've realized a dream," Rothman said. "I am delighted. I'm very excited to see what's growing. They were impressive students, impressive people. They're really outstanding lawyers."

New Jersey Supreme Court Justice Virginia A. Long stopped by the new center's open house last week to offer her support. She knows Gertz through Rutgers and noted the two became friends after she also suffered a serious car accident.