



HAWAI'I APPLESEED

CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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HAWAI'I APPLESEED ANNOUNCES VICTOR GEMINIANI'S RETIREMENT

The 50-year advocate for the low-income community and founder of Hawai'i Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice will retire on August 31, 2019.

HONOLULU, Hawai'i — In 1969, Victor Geminiani graduated from Villanova Law School, became a National Service VISTA volunteer lawyer, and joined three other young lawyers in an office of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society. In his first week, he helped organize a rent strike against a private landlord in a 200-unit housing complex to protest the substandard conditions in the complex. This launched a legal career—indeed a life—devoted to securing the rights of the poor and the vulnerable, including as executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i from 1994–2005, and of Hawai'i Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice from 2007–present.

After 50 years of extraordinary service to communities throughout the country, Geminiani has announced his retirement from Hawai'i Appleseed, effective at the end of August 2019. Geminiani's long-time colleague and co-executive director of Hawai'i Appleseed for the last two years, Gavin Thornton, succeeds him as executive director.

“Victor has never hesitated simply because something has not been tried

before,” said Thornton. “His courage and convictions have propelled him to wage worthy battles for equity and justice in Hawai'i and throughout the nation, and to find creative solutions to complex poverty issues.”

Since beginning his public interest career, Geminiani served in a variety of legal aid programs on the continent, including as an executive director of programs in Georgia, New York, Massachusetts, California and finally Hawai'i. During the administration of President Carter he served as the Regional Director for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), overseeing the 75 legal aid programs in the 10 southern states. He relocated to Hawai'i in 1994 to direct the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i.

As a young attorney, Geminiani filed one of the first federal class action jail closure cases in Georgia and secured permanent injunctions against two jails on the grounds that their inhumane conditions resulted in cruel and unusual punishment. Later in his career, while with the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i, Geminiani became the key individual driving the landmark lawsuit captioned *Legal Aid*

Society of Hawai'i v. Legal Services Corporation. Geminiani assembled co-plaintiffs and arranged for pro bono representation by prominent national law firms and the national American Civil Liberties Union, while also actively participating in its prosecution.

The resulting injunction by the U.S. District Court for the District of Hawai'i voided federal prohibitions against Legal Services Corporation (LSC)-funded organizations bringing class actions, undertaking lobbying efforts, or engaging in other activities. The suit led LSC to change its regulations to permit organizations affiliated with LSC funded organizations, but not themselves receiving LSC funding, to engage in LSC-restricted activities, including class actions and lobbying. These changes led Geminiani to found [Lawyers for Equal Justice](#), which then became Hawai'i Appleseed in 2011.

During his years with Hawai'i Appleseed, Geminiani led the nonprofit, public interest law firm and policy organization through a series of victories for low-income Hawai'i residents. These include:

- Successfully petitioning a federal court to enjoin the state from [eliminating essential medical services to indigent Micronesians](#) residing in Hawai'i, saving many lives;
- Achieving several settlements totaling more than \$3 million on behalf of tenants whose [rents had been unfairly inflated](#) by failing to make federally-mandated adjustments for increased electricity charges;
- Successfully bringing suit against the state under the McKinney-Vento Act for [failing to permit homeless children to attend their home schools](#) and requiring the state to pay related transportation costs;
- Compelling the state to satisfy federal requirements for [timely processing of food stamp \(SNAP\) applications](#), resulting in the state improving from the worst in the country in processing such applications to one of the best;
- Requiring the state to significantly [raise the rates paid to volunteer parents](#) raising our foster children; and
- Bringing lawsuits to compel the state to [correct deplorable living conditions](#) in some of Hawai'i's oldest and largest public housing projects.

The public housing suits did what many thought impossible: move the state to commence or accelerate much needed repairs, such as restoring hot water and repairing elevators, which was especially important to the many elderly and severely disabled tenants who reside in public housing.

In one of these cases, Hawai'i

Appleseed's efforts resulted in a \$150 million redevelopment of one housing project, and also resulted in substantial increases in annual legislative appropriations to maintain public housing generally.

It was Geminiani's recognition of a need to promote better laws and policies to truly give all of Hawai'i's residents an opportunity to thrive—rather than simply enforcing existing policies through class actions—that led him to transform Lawyers for Equal Justice into Hawai'i Appleseed. With this change came a greater emphasis on research, policy analysis, community education, coalition building and legislative and administrative advocacy.

Since 2011, Geminiani has led Hawai'i Appleseed and its coalition partners in a wide range of advocacy efforts aimed at [increasing the minimum wage, lowering the state tax burden on low- and moderate-income residents](#), increasing affordable housing, improving access to school meals for low-income children and limiting the proliferation of illegal vacation rentals.

Under Geminiani's leadership, Hawai'i Appleseed continued to broaden its scope and deepen its impact. In 2018, the organization launched the [Hawai'i Budget & Policy Center](#) (HBPC) to conduct data-driven research on Hawai'i's state and county budgets and tax policy. This work built upon earlier tax-policy efforts of Hawai'i Appleseed, such as spearheading the successful adoption of a state Earned Income Tax Credit in 2017 after several years of advocacy. Led by Beth Giesting, HBPC is part of a national network known as the State Priorities Partnership consisting of 43 state budget centers—just one in each participating state—coordinated by

the national Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

At the beginning of 2019, Hawai'i Appleseed revived the Lawyers for Equal Justice (LEJ) name, creating a litigation-focused project within Hawai'i Appleseed under Geminiani's leadership. LEJ hired Thomas Helper as the project's first Director of Litigation, and he will take over leadership of the project upon Geminiani's departure. LEJ is currently litigating a case to preserve the affordability of 142 units in the Front Street Apartments complex on Maui, as well as a case aimed at ensuring Hawai'i's youth receive appropriate mental health services. The revival of LEJ is a fitting end to Geminiani's long, distinguished career—a return to his roots of zealous legal advocacy and the vigorous pursuit of equity and justice for low-income and marginalized people.

"I was fortunate early in my career to find a meaningful way to use my law degree to support my passion for fair treatment and equality of opportunity for all along with freedom to exercise your rights to access some part of the American Dream," said Geminiani. "I have been especially fortunate to have worked together with so many special people to help make a difference in this place we all love."

"Victor is an incredibly talented and passionate advocate for the vulnerable, particularly those in poverty and under-privileged children," said David Reber, a partner at the Hawai'i law firm Goodsill, Anderson, Quinn & Stifel. Reber served as volunteer president of the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i during the last five years that Geminiani was its executive director and, with Geminiani, was a founder of Hawai'i



Geminiani in his office in downtown Honolulu, in 2012 during the Mayor Wright Housing case // Elyse Butler

Appleseed where he also served as volunteer president from its inception through June of this year.

Reber continued, “Victor has been unrelenting in giving voice to the plight of Hawai'i's underserved and disadvantaged, and has been brilliant in developing and pursuing multiple strategies to improve their conditions and opportunities. It has been one of my life's greatest personal and professional privileges to have been able to work with Victor over all of these years and to support his efforts to advance social justice in Hawai'i.

“It is impossible to capture Victor's full contributions and accomplishments. But, in my mind, he is a national treasure and Hawai'i has been blessed to have him here for so many years of his professional life. I hope that Hawai'i Appleseed will continue to benefit from his wisdom and experience, but he has certainly earned a retirement in which he can pursue his other interests. Victor leaves Hawai'i Appleseed at a time when it has never been stronger and

has great potential for advancing the public good.”

Paul Alston, a partner in the Denton's firm (until recently known as Alston, Hunt, Floyd and Ing), along with others in his firm, has co-counseled with Lawyers for Equal Justice on most, if not all, of Hawai'i Appleseed's lawsuits. Alston observed that, “In 1968, Martin Luther King delivered a sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. He asked to be remembered as ‘a drum major for justice . . . a drum major for peace, and a drum major for righteousness.’ If he was, ‘all of the other shallow things will not matter.’ For his entire career, Victor has been more than a drum major; he has been a tireless one man band for social justice, peace and righteousness. For the people of Hawai'i, he has rallied others to work for justice and righteousness. For that, we should all be grateful. He will be missed; there is no one who can match his energy, drive and dedication.”

Gavin Thornton, Geminiani's successor, joined Hawai'i Appleseed in 2012 and became co-executive director in 2016 as part of a succession plan as Geminiani moved toward retirement. Like Geminiani, Thornton began his career in the AmeriCorps VISTA program, working in Kona, Hawai'i, in 2002 with the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i. Since that time, Thornton's work has focused on trying to ensure that low-income people have the basic resources they need to build a safe, stable foundation for a successful life.

Thornton serves on the boards of the Hawai'i Medical Service Association Foundation, Protecting Hawai'i's 'Ohana, Children, Under-Served, Elderly, and Disabled ([PHOCUSED](#)), and homeless service-provider network Partners in Care, where he chairs the advocacy committee. He has previously served on the board of directors of the Young Lawyers Division of the Hawai'i State Bar Association, the Hawai'i District Court Rules Committee, and the Board of TeamChild, an organization that assists youth at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system. For his work in subsidized housing, Gavin was awarded the National Housing Law Project's annual Housing Justice Award. He is a 2002 graduate of the University Of Virginia School Of Law.

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The Hawai'i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice is committed to a more socially just Hawai'i, where everyone has genuine opportunities to achieve economic security and fulfill their potential. We change systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice through policy development, advocacy and coalition building.