

'I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.'

— Edward Everett Hale

Dream team partners



Melissa Negrin-Wiener, left, Moriah Farrell and Jennifer Cona, of elder law firm Genser Dubow Genser & Cona, prepare lunch at the Mary Brennan INN soup kitchen in Hempstead.

Elder law firm Genser Dubow Genser & Cona helps needy seniors' wishes come true

VOLUNTEER NATION

A MONTHLY SERIES

BY MERLE ENGLISH
Special to Newsday

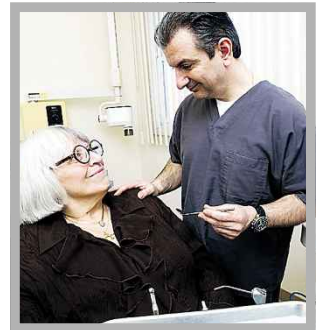
In the 1990s, Anna Castoro had a small business making religious dolls. To boost her family's earnings and raise money for charities, she hired low-income elderly women to help produce the 'Jesus and Guardian Angel' dolls, which she sold through advertisements in a Catholic magazine and local newspapers.

Donating a percentage of the proceeds was part of a tradition of giving that Castoro, 68, shared with her husband, James, before he died in 2003.

"When he was alive, we had a good life," said Castoro, who lives in Riverhead. "We tried to help others. We used to concentrate on helping children's charities, like Little Flower Children's Services."

It was the sort of voluntary giving that GDGC Charitable Events — a nonprofit subsidiary of elder law firm Genser Dubow Genser & Cona — looks for when considering candidates for its Senior Dreams Come True program. Genser Dubow is a leading elder law, estate planning and litigation firm based in Melville.

Castoro is one of six people whose dreams have been granted since Jennifer Cona, the firm's managing partner and the founder of Charitable Events,



ON THE COVER Anna Castoro meets with Dr. Harry Boutis who is doing pro bono dental work for her as part of the Senior Dreams Come True program.

launched the initiative about four years ago. It is the firm's signature program and is intended to grant wishes for low-income seniors that in most cases fulfill basic needs. In Castoro's case, it was dental care.

"Our attorneys work with many low-income clients who cannot afford to get some basic things they need for themselves," said Cona, 44. "It was hearing stories from clients or their adult children about difficulties they were having with some basic problems that prompted us" to start the Dreams program.

"We were joining other groups in doing some fundraising, and we realized we wanted flexibility to do things on our own."

HEATHER WALSH

Joining the cause

Volunteers signed up as of Feb. 19 as part of a Long Island Volunteer Center initiative

Goal: 153,000

150,000

125,000

110,095

75,000

50,000

25,000

0

Find volunteer opportunities at longislandvolunteercenter.org



A wheelchair ramp was a dream come true for Claire Coleman, left, with her son Dan at her Massapequa Park home; joining them is Genser Dubow Genser & Cona's Melissa Negrin-Wiener. ■ Video, photo gallery at newsday.com/lilife



Joseph Massaro of Affordable Portable Ramps installed the ramp at a reduced cost as part of the Senior Dreams Come True program.

Wishes granted include a new mattress for Catherine Mercadante of Ronkonkoma, who needed to relieve back pain; limousine service to reunite Patchogue resident Jean Mannheim with a disabled daughter living hours

away; and a wheelchair ramp for Claire Coleman of Massapequa Park that allowed her to stay out of a nursing home.

Making dreams come true for seniors is among a wide array of programs through which Genser Dubow's 30 employees —

including its support staff, 11 paralegals, five associate attorneys and seven partners — volunteer their time, money and talents.

At the Long Island Cares Harry Chapin Food Bank warehouse in Hauppauge, staff members sort goods and organize boxes and baskets for home delivery. On some weekends, most of the staff participates in a Midnight Run "relief mission" to benefit Manhattan's homeless. The effort, begun in 1984, is sponsored by a coalition of churches, synagogues, schools and civic groups in the metropolitan area, and Genser Dubow staffers buy food, clothing and personal care items that they distribute to the homeless.

Genser Dubow volunteers can also be found in Multiple Sclerosis and American Heart Association walks. Last September, staffers participated in the heart association walk at Jones Beach in honor of client Jean Schur. In addition, they make donations to the Long

Island Alzheimer's Foundation, among others, and assisted those affected by superstorm Sandy in October 2012.

Earlier this month, 15 staff members got ready to prepare and serve lunch at an Interfaith Nutrition Network soup kitchen in Hempstead. In 2011, instead of giving each other Christmas gifts, the staff used that money to support Little Shelter Animal Rescue & Adoption Center, a no-kill facility in Huntington.

A history of giving back

Genser Dubow Genser & Cona was founded in 1968. As a leader among Long Island's elder law firms, it handles Medicaid applications, estate planning and administration, guardianships and home care recovery.

"I feel incredibly proud to be part of a law firm that has as one of its tenets this type of community outreach and giveback as part of its fabric

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Dream team delivers



Genser Dubow Genser & Cona staff participates in fundraising walks. In September 2013, some joined the American Heart Association walk at Jones Beach in honor of client Jean Schur, seated. Kneeling next to Schur are Genser partners Jennifer Cona and Jack Genser.



GDGC Charitable Events donated a car trip to Jean Mannheimer of Patchogue, center, so she could visit a disabled daughter upstate. With Mannheimer is her other daughter, left, and Melissa Negrin-Wiener.



Catherine Mercadante of Ronkonkoma got her wish for a new mattress fulfilled. Negrin-Wiener presents her with certificate from Sleepy's.

COVER STORY from G4

and makeup," said Jack Genser, 46, of Cold Spring Harbor, a founding partner of the firm.

"Senior Dreams Come True has exemplified our firm's commitment to this kind of outreach, especially as it benefits the senior community, a community that is oftentimes either completely forgotten about or marginalized."

Giving comes naturally to Cona, a Rochester native who joined the firm in 1996 and who lives in Cold Spring Harbor. "I've always given back to my community; that's how I was raised, she said. "I'm proud of what we do. It makes me feel good. I see people doing more, businesses doing more, and I love that. We all should. Hurricane Sandy woke people to the fact that there were people in need right here in our backyard; it's not somebody else's problem. Awareness is also what we aim for, to let people know not everyone is as fortunate as you may be."

For the staff, giving back is a team effort.

"It's a very special kind of person that works here; everybody gives their whole heart to it," said Melissa Negrin-Wiener, a partner who heads the firm's Medicaid department. "I feel seniors are kind of the forgotten population on Long Island." Negrin-Wiener, 37, a Smithtown resident, has done the Midnight Run six times.

To pay for the goods and services they provide, Genser Dubow's employees dig into their own pockets and reach out to their colleagues, professional groups in other industries, family members and friends. They also accept donations from the public.

A silent auction and a performance by a psychic medium have been put on as fundraisers, and three of the firm's lawyers — male and female — have entered the ring in the annual Long Island Fight for Charity boxing fundraiser featuring local business professionals.

Senior Dreams Come True has received about 40 requests since its inception. The program is publicized through news releases and email. Family members and social workers

Volunteer spotlight

Cristina Barcia

Giving up a weekend night to bring food, toiletries and clothing to homeless people on the streets of Manhattan is a favorite volunteer activity for Cristina Barcia.

Barcia, 42, of Westbury, is a senior paralegal at Genser Dubow Genser & Cona in Melville, one of Long Island's foremost elder law firms.

She and nearly all of the firm's 30-member staff, including attorneys and partners, have participated in the Midnight Run, a late-night relief effort coordinated by a coalition of churches, synagogues, schools and civic organizations in the metropolitan area.

"The Midnight Run organization assigns to us an evening and provides us with a route and a guide and a commercial vehicle to assist us in getting products to the city to pass out," Barcia said. "It could be coats and sweatshirts, or something as simple as clean socks, bottled water and a toothbrush. To a homeless person, they're gold. And they just want to have a conversation, sometimes. These are older adults, appreciative of what you give them but [also] because you're just there."

The runs are done in the evening, usually from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. "I have been in it three times," Barcia said.

The products they distribute are obtained in mass quantities from donations or employees' contributions. "We prepare for this one night for months," Barcia said. "We coordinate with local businesses to donate a hot meal."

Participation in the Midnight Run is all part of the firm's Charitable Events program, with a mission, Barcia said, "to provide an assurance in some shape or form that the elderly's needs are addressed."

"My favorite just happens to be that," she said of the Midnight Run. "I didn't find the cause, the cause found me. I support, I engage, I embrace."

— MERLE ENGLISH



SIGN ME UP

The staff at **Genser Dubow Genser & Cona** welcomes the public to join their volunteer efforts by making donations or helping out at events sponsored by the firm's charitable arm, GDGC Charitable Events.

"They can help, they can donate," said Jennifer Cona, the firm's managing partner. "If people donate, we can do that many more wishes," she said of the firm's Senior Dreams Come True program, which fulfills basic wishes of low-income and underprivileged seniors.

Contact: Moriah Farrell, 631-390-5000; genserlaw.com

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program's

mission is to provide diverse volunteer opportunities for people 55 and older. RSVP supports older Americans who wish to remain active and make a difference in their communities.

Contact: 631-979-9490; rsvpsuffolk.org

Rebuilding Together Long

Island helps low-income residents, the disabled and veterans stay in their homes by providing critical repairs and renovations. The group builds wheelchair ramps, repairs kitchens and installs safety bars in baths and showers, among other projects.

Contact: Bob Ellis, 631-777-7894

For more volunteer information and opportunities, contact the **LONG ISLAND VOLUNTEER CENTER** at 516-564-5482; longislandvolunteercenter.org

nominate some of the candidates, who can get help paying for prescription drugs not covered by the gap in Medicare coverage known as the doughnut hole; experimental treatments not covered by insurance; or an outfit to attend a dinner, show or special event.

Veterans get free legal consultation and other assistance, and seniors and caregivers can talk to an attorney about elder-care issues at free seminars and at Genser Dubow's caregiver resource center.

To have a wish granted, applicants must be at least 65 and earn no more than \$1,500 a month if single, and \$2,000

if they are married. Applicants must also write a letter of no more than 750 words describing their need and submit it with a Wish Request form and application available at the firm's website, genserlaw.com.

Applicants also must indicate how they've given to others and contributed to society in some way, Cona said. She, Negrin-Wiener and Moriah Farrell, the firm's community outreach coordinator, select which wishes will be granted.

Submissions may be made by email or mailed to the firm, or by calling Farrell at 631-390-5000.

Dreams come true

After he was contacted by Genser Dubow, Harry Boutis welcomed Castoro at his Mount Sinai dental office in early February to begin repairing chipped and loose front teeth, plus one that had broken at the gum line that supports her dentures. Law firm staff brought Castoro to and from the dentist's office because her car is "hanging on by a thread," she said.

Boutis is doing the work, which he said costs about \$3,000, pro bono. It will take several sessions to complete.

"She'll have a nice smile and

See COVER STORY on G8



Paul Hyl, a lawyer at Genser Dubow Genser & Cona, arranges blankets and clothes before a "Midnight Run."



SECURING YOUR RETIREMENT

Transforming Social Security into a Winning Retirement Strategy

Find out ways to help maximize your Social Security Retirement Benefits to help you live the life you want in retirement

COMPLIMENTARY WORKSHOP:

Thursday, March 6th at 6:00pm

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Refreshments will be served

Come to our workshop and ...

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Presented By: BlackRock

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coverstory



HEATHER WALSH



Volunteers from Genser Dubow Genser & Cona prepare to lend a hand at the Mary Brennan Interfaith Nutrition Network soup kitchen in Hempstead.

HEATHER WALSH

Making dreams come true a wish at a time

COVER STORY from G6

be able to eat better, too," he said.

Castoro knows it will make a difference. "It will help me to be more relaxed with smiling and be more confident when I speak to people," she said.

Cona said professionals "have been more than willing to donate or reduce their rates." She said Sleepy's donated the mattress for Mercadante. Coleman, 86, has a new ramp thanks to Joseph Massaro, founder and president of Affordable Portable Ramps in Bohemia. Massaro built her a 30-foot wooden ramp for \$3,000, \$2,000 less than the usual cost. He praised the Dreams program. "I think it's a great thing they're doing."

Castoro, who learned about the program two years ago on the Internet, would agree with that. "It's amazing!" she said. "When I first heard about it, I didn't believe people did this. I didn't think it was for real."

In an event called "Mother's Day Blossoms," elementary school stu-

dents spread out across Long Island bringing corsages to women in nursing homes and assisted-living facilities. An Elder Advocacy Scholarship Award recognizes high school students who enrich the lives of seniors through humanitarian efforts and volunteerism.

Cona's commitment to the community has won her numerous awards, including a Leadership in Law award from Long Island Business News, which also honored her in 2008 as one of the top 50 Most Influential Women in Business. In 2006, she received the Outstanding Pro Bono Attorney Award from Touro Law School for free legal services she provided to a severely disabled woman.

"It makes me feel really good that I don't just run and manage a law firm," Cona said. "I'm also doing some good in my community, and that's as important or more important. We just do a little bit, but if everybody does a little bit it can change our community for the better."