

ROBINS KAPLAN LLP COMMUNITY GIVING AND *PRO BONO* REPORT

# RISE UP

WE BELIEVE IN  
**MAKING A DIFFERENCE.**



At Robins Kaplan, we believe everyone deserves equal access to the legal system. That's why we work every day to provide legal representation to those who cannot afford it. Whether working for a paying or *pro bono* client, our attorneys bring their reputation as tenacious champions to the courtroom. When life, liberty, or the basic need for shelter is on the line, we help our clients win what matters most.

In 2021, our firm had the privilege of representing many remarkable *pro bono* clients; you will read some of their stories here. As you will see in this year's Community Giving and *Pro Bono* Report, our attorneys are dedicated to fighting for our *pro bono* clients in the courtroom, and all of our firm members are committed to giving back to the community.



**“Poverty is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom.”**

**- NELSON MANDELA**

# RISE UP

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# SECURING FREEDOM

## FOR A MOTHER WRONGFULLY CONVICTED OF MURDERING HER NEWBORN

*Please be advised that this article contains a description of infant loss.*

In 2021, Robins Kaplan, along with the Georgia Public Defenders Council and Wisconsin Innocence Project, secured long-awaited justice for parents who were wrongfully convicted of murdering their newborn over 12 years ago.

In the early morning hours of June 1, 2008, Ashley and Albert Debelbot noticed a small bump on their three-day-old daughter's forehead. They rushed her to the emergency room, where she died a few hours later. The state medical examiner ruled the death a homicide, opining that she had died as a result of intentional blunt force trauma to her head, and Ashley and Albert were arrested. At their trial, the medical examiner's testimony was the only medical testimony the jury heard and was the sole evidence that a crime had occurred. Both parents were sentenced to life in prison without parole.

In 2014, a Robins Kaplan team joined with attorneys from the Georgia Public Defenders Council to represent Ashley Debelbot *pro bono* in post-conviction proceedings. Together with the Wisconsin Innocence Project, which represented Albert Debelbot, the combined legal teams presented evidence that the jury had never heard, including that the newborn's head grew at 10 times the normal rate, she suffered a stroke-like event in utero that caused her brain to swell, and the autopsy findings didn't match those of blunt force trauma.

Despite all the medical evidence, the post-conviction court denied the defendants' motion for a new trial. The case was then brought before the Georgia Supreme Court, and the court unanimously granted Ashley and Albert a new trial. In April of 2021, all charges against Ashley and Albert were dismissed.







In 2021, Robins  
Kaplan provided  
624 hours of *pro  
bono* service to the  
Innocence Project.

**624 hours**





# ADVOCATES FOR INDIAN COUNTRY



## TREATY RIGHTS VICTORY AT THE 8TH CIRCUIT COURT OF APPEALS

In a *pro bono* case that has drawn national attention, Robins Kaplan sued the federal government on behalf of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe after the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services closed the only emergency room on the Rosebud Reservation. The closure required tribal members to travel to emergency rooms 50 miles away to receive life-saving emergency treatments, placing them in serious danger. On behalf of the Tribe, Robins Kaplan attorneys argued that the closure of the emergency room violated the federal government's treaty duty to provide the Tribe with adequate health care services. Following our victory in the District Court, the government appealed to the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals. The 8th Circuit affirmed our victory in the lower court, proclaiming that "the Government must do better," and declaring that the federal government's treaty with the Tribe requires it to provide competent physician-led health care to the Tribe's members.

**ATTORNEYS:** Tim Purdon, Brendan Johnson, Bruce Finzen, Tim Billion, Erica Ramsey, Casey Matthiesen, Ena Kovacevic, Matthew Leighton, Eric Magnuson, Denise Rahne, and Kate Jaycox.

## ENFORCING STATE CONSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS TO PROVIDE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION ABOUT AMERICAN INDIAN TRIBES

As co-counsel with the American Civil Liberties Union ("ACLU") and Native American Rights Fund ("NARF"), Robins Kaplan attorneys Tim Purdon and Casey Matthiesen recently filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of American Indian Tribes in Montana and individual Montana students against the State of Montana's Office of Public Instruction and the Montana Board of Public Education. The plaintiffs in the case are challenging Montana's failure to comply with requirements in the Montana Constitution and the Montana Indian Education for All Act ("IEFA"), which requires the state to teach all students about the cultural heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner. Despite this requirement, the plaintiffs allege that the state has failed to create sufficient standards - and has failed to monitor and enforce standards - to ensure compliance with the law.

**ATTORNEYS:** Tim Purdon, Casey Matthiesen

**PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS:** Native American Rights Fund, American Civil Liberties Union

## AMICI IN U.S. SUPREME COURT WIN FOR TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY AND PUBLIC SAFETY IN INDIAN COUNTRY

The firm filed an *amicus* brief at the United States Supreme Court in *United States v. Cooley*, a case concerning the scope of tribal law enforcement's search and seizure authority over non-Native Americans within reservation boundaries. Tim Purdon and Brendan Johnson, both former U.S. attorneys who co-chair the firm's American Indian Law and Policy Group, were both *amici* in the brief along with a bipartisan group of former U.S. attorneys. The Supreme Court ultimately held 9-0 that tribal police have jurisdiction to stop and detain non-Natives suspected of violating state or federal law on roads running through reservations, twice referencing the *amicus* brief submitted by the group of U.S. attorneys.

**ATTORNEYS:** Tim Purdon, Brendan Johnson, Eric Magnuson, Kaitlin Ek



# REUNITING FAMILIES

## SEPARATED BY PERSECUTION ABROAD



In partnership with the Advocates for Human Rights, in 2010 Robins Kaplan attorneys began representing a Somali journalist who fled to the United States to escape persecution from rebel groups and the Somali government. Our client was persecuted for his reporting and support of peace building, democracy, rule of law, women's rights, and freedom of the press. He was detained by the government, received death threats, and knew friends and fellow journalists who were wounded and murdered in rebel attacks. In 2012, Robins Kaplan obtained asylum for our client, ensuring that he could remain in the United States.

Our attorneys then helped the client obtain travel documents and a green card and petitioned for his seven-year-old daughter to join him in the United States. Because his daughter was born out of wedlock, the petition was denied despite the fact that DNA testing conclusively established parentage, our client regularly communicated with his daughter, provided financial support, and arranged for her to be cared for by family members. Robins Kaplan attorneys successfully appealed the unfavorable decision and obtained approval of the client's relative petition for his daughter, clearing the way for her to join him in the United States.

**ATTORNEYS:** Austin Miller, Ellen Levisch

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:** The Advocates for Human Rights

## REMOVING BARRIERS

### FOR A CLIENT EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

When one of our nonprofit partner organizations reached out looking for help for a client experiencing homelessness, our attorneys volunteered their time to help the client vacate a default judgment that was creating a barrier to finding employment and housing. A default judgment had been entered against the client in a personal injury case despite the fact that the client had not been properly served and was unaware of the case until he learned his driver's license was suspended because of the judgment against him. Without a driver's license, the client had a difficult time finding employment and housing. Robins Kaplan took the case *pro bono* and prepared, filed, and argued a successful motion to set aside the default judgment. Our firm then prepared to represent the client at trial and demanded dismissal of the action, ultimately getting opposing counsel to agree to dismissal, eliminating the judgment against the client, and clearing the way for him to renew his driver's license.

**ATTORNEY:** Jason Fair

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:** Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County



# REMOVING BARRIERS





# 600 hours

Robins Kaplan provided more than 600 hours of *pro bono* services to victim-survivors of sexual violence and domestic violence in 2021.

# STANDING WITH VICTIM-SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

*Please be advised that these articles contains descriptions of sexual violence.*

## **FIGHTING A RAPIST'S FRIVOLOUS LAWSUIT**

The firm secured dismissal of a defamation suit brought against our client, a victim-survivor of rape, by her rapist. The plaintiff repeatedly filed court cases against his perceived enemies and harassed them online. The plaintiff also spent almost a year in prison for violations of a Harrassment Restraining Order not involving our client. In addition to winning dismissal, our *pro bono* case team obtained an order designating the plaintiff as a vexatious litigant, strictly limiting his ability to file future lawsuits against our client, as well as an injunction against further web-based harassment of our client, and an award of attorneys' fees in an amount to be determined. This victory was affirmed by the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals.

**ATTORNEYS:** Charlie Gokey, Anne Lockner, Ena Kovacevic, Haynes Hansen, Randy Teitjen, Eric Magnuson.

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:** Standpoint

## **MINNESOTA COURT OF APPEALS VICTORY FOR *PRO BONO* CLIENT SEEKING PROTECTION FROM DOMESTIC ABUSE**

Our *pro bono* team obtained an Order for Protection for the firm's client, an immigrant from Guinea who had traveled to the U.S. to marry and live with her husband but was subjected to severe domestic abuse. From the very first day of their marriage, the client's husband repeatedly and almost daily raped her. The client's husband also engaged in other abusive and controlling behaviors such as physically grabbing her arms, pushing her to the ground, locking her outside of their home in the Minnesota winter, refusing to give the client a key to their home, hiding her personal documents so she could not get a job, refusing to allow her to learn English, and placing a recording device in their home.

After we helped our client obtain an Order for Protection, the client's husband appealed. Our *pro bono* team of attorneys briefed and argued the appeal before the Minnesota Court of Appeals. The court affirmed our victory at the trial court level, ensuring that our client remains protected from domestic abuse.

**ATTORNEYS:** Deanna Thompson, Jessica Gutierrez, Cyrus Morton, Eric Magnuson, and Caroline Moos

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:** Tubman



# REWRITING THE ODDS

## FOR LOW-INCOME TENANTS

In response to the pandemic-related housing crisis, Robins Kaplan committed to regular volunteer shifts at a mass court calendar for first appearances in eviction cases and at a housing advice phone consultation clinic. Our attorneys also represented numerous low-income tenants in housing cases and provided support to legal aid housing programs.

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The firm stepped in to represent a newly 18-year-old client in a public housing eviction action, successfully securing a stipulation for dismissal and a new lease for the client that allowed him to remain in his home. The client, a high school senior, lived in his apartment with his grandmother. It was the only place he had called home since moving to the area as a young child. Shortly before our client's 18th birthday, his grandmother was moved out of the home because of her failing health. The housing authority refused to provide a new lease to our client and instead sought to evict him despite federal regulations, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development guidance, and housing authority policies, all of which indicated that the client was entitled to a new lease. Our client can now focus on resuming his education and transitioning into adulthood without the threat of homelessness looming over him.

**ATTORNEYS:** Spencer Davis-VanNess and Chris Larus

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:** Volunteer Lawyers Network

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When a landlord became aggressive with his tenant who sought to enforce her right to repairs, our attorney picked up the case shortly before trial and helped the client, a low-income single mother, negotiate a favorable settlement. Our attorney secured repairs to the client's rental home, a return of previously paid rent, and an agreement that the tenant could terminate her lease at any time with 14 days' notice.

**ATTORNEY:** Greta Wiessner

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:** Volunteer Lawyers Network

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Our attorneys have represented numerous tenants in successful motions to expunge the record of Minnesota eviction cases. Tenants with an eviction on their record often have their rental applications denied, are charged double security deposits, or are forced to pay a high rental rate for substandard housing. In one such case, we secured expungement - over the landlord's objection - for our client who had withheld her January rent to try to secure repairs to a broken furnace and to get the landlord to address a significant rat infestation at the property. The landlord in the case also sought illegal late fees and alleged that the client owed thousands of dollars in back rent that the client had direct deposited into his account as required by the parties' lease. The expungement of this eviction record removed a barrier to finding safe, stable, affordable housing for our client and her grandchildren who were in her care.

A child wearing a helmet and a grey hoodie is riding a bicycle away from the camera on a paved residential street. In the background, there is a two-story house with a gabled roof and a street lamp. The scene is captured in a soft, slightly desaturated light.

## 945 hours

In 2021, Robins Kaplan provided 945 hours of *pro bono* services to help low-income tenants during the eviction crisis.

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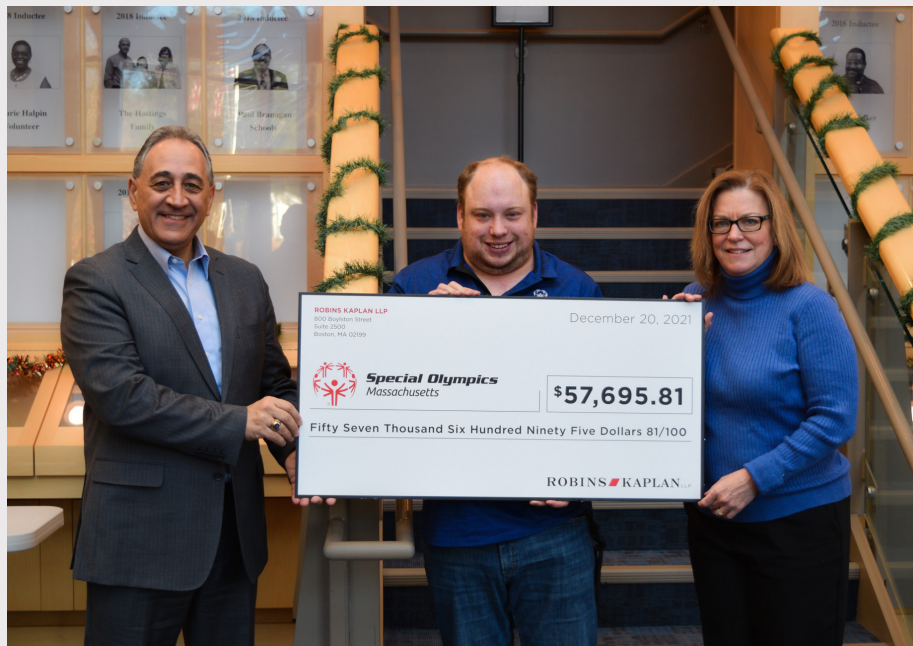
### **HOUSING JUSTICE IS RACIAL JUSTICE.**

In the Twin Cities, racial covenants were commonplace from 1910 to the mid-1950s despite the fact that U.S. Supreme Court made them unenforceable in 1948. These covenants prohibited the sale of property to individuals of specified races, steering such people to certain areas and segregating housing, and determining who could buy property and how much that property would be worth. Today, the Twin Cities has one of the lowest Black homeownership rates in the country and one of the largest income gaps between white and Black families. This history is integral to understanding why 79% of the tenants represented through the Minnesota nonprofit legal services providers we partner with are tenants of color or tenants from mixed-race families, and why more than half are Black tenants.



Robins Kaplan has regularly advised clients at legal clinics at the Jeremiah Program's Minneapolis campus since 2012 and continued to do so virtually in 2021 as part of a partnership with the Volunteer Lawyers Network.

To help families overcome poverty, the Jeremiah Program provides holistic services - including early childhood education, housing, and life skills training - to single mothers pursuing a career-track college education.



**Special Olympics  
Massachusetts**

In 2021, the firm hosted its 19th Annual Golf Tournament and online auction for the benefit of Special Olympics Massachusetts.

**We had nearly 100 golfers in this year's event and raised \$57,695.81 for a total of over \$950,000.00 in 19 years.**

**Robins Kaplan employs two full-time attorneys at the Legal Rights Center and a full-time attorney at Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid.**

The Legal Rights Center is a nonprofit public defense corporation that provides free legal representation to low-income juvenile and adult clients. The mission of the Legal Rights Center is to work with community to seek justice and promote racial equity for those to whom it has been historically denied. The firm has employed one Legal Rights Center fellow since 2005 and two fellows since 2014.

Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid provides free legal representation to low-income clients. Our attorney at Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid represents low-income survivors of domestic violence in family law cases.

**60**

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS WE PARTNERED WITH IN 2021 TO PROVIDE *PRO BONO* LEGAL SERVICES.

**700**

In 2021, Robins Kaplan provided more than **700 hours** of *pro bono* services to transgender clients seeking to enforce their rights. This *pro bono* work ranged from litigating against prisons to enforce our clients' access to gender-affirming medical care, to helping transgender clients obtain name changes.

**THE ROBINS  
KAPLAN PRIVATE  
FOUNDATION**

**2021**

Alliance for Children's Rights

American Bar Foundation

American Constitution Society for Law  
and Policy

Asian Americans Advancing Justice

Bet Tzedek

Books for Africa

Boston Bar Association

Boys & Girls Club of Venice

Breakthrough Greater Boston

Breakthrough Twin Cities

California Lawyers Foundation

California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.

Can Do Canines

Children's Law Center of Minnesota

Children's Theater Company

Citizens League

Cornerstone Advocacy Services

CPR Institute

East River Legal Services Corporation

Economic Club of Minnesota

Epilepsy Foundation of Minnesota

Equal Justice Works

Firefighters for Healing

Foundation of the FBA

Georgia Innocence Project

Gigi's Playhouse, Inc.

Global Rights for Women

Greater Boston Legal Services

Greater Twin Cities United Way

Guthrie Theater

Haiti Outreach, Inc.

Hennepin County Bar Foundation

Her Justice

Human Rights First

Illusion Theater

Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota

Interfaith Outreach & Community  
Partners

JDRF

Jeremiah Program

JFCS

Joyce Preschool

Jumpstart For Young Children

JWT & Associates

Law Firm Antiracism Alliance, Inc.

Lawyers for Good Government, Inc.

Legal Aid at Word

LeGal Foundation

Legal Rights Center

Loan Repayment Assistance Program  
of Minnesota

Massachusetts Bar Association

Massachusetts Women's Political  
Caucus

Minneapolis Jewish Federation

Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts

Minnesota Assistance Council for  
Veterans

Minnesota Association for Black  
Lawyers Foundation

Minnesota Justice Foundation

Minnesota Justice Research Center

Minnesota Orchestral Association

Minnesota State Bar Association

Minnesota Supreme Court Historical  
Society

Minnesotans' Military Appreciation  
Fund

Mitchell Hamline School of Law

Myopia Hunt Club

National LGBT Bar Foundation

Neighborhood Legal Services of Los  
Angeles County

New York Legal Assistance Group

Norway House

Pacer Center, Inc.

Page Education Foundation

Public Counsel

Public Justice Foundation

Ramsey County Bar Association

Regents of the University of California,  
Berkeley

RIA House, Inc.

St. Paul Chamber Orchestra Society

Science Museum of Minnesota

Southern Minnesota Regional Legal  
Services, Inc.

Special Olympics of Massachusetts

Stages Theater Company

Standpoint

Take Charge Minnesota

Tee It Up For The Troops

The Advocates for Human Rights

The Arc Minnesota

The Fund for Legal Aid

The Great North Innocence Project

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society

The Redemption Project

The Sanneh Foundation

The Sedona Conference

Transgender Legal Defense &  
Education Fund, Inc.

Tubman

UC Berkeley Foundation

University of Minnesota Mock Trial  
Association

University of St. Thomas

Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts

Volunteer Lawyers Network

Volunteer Lawyers Project of the  
Boston Bar Association, Inc.

Walhalla Ambulance Service

Walker Art Center

Working Wonders for Tufts Medical  
Center

Young Center for Immigrant Children's  
Rights

Young Voices

YWCA Minneapolis



# CONTRIBUTIONS

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In 2021, Robins Kaplan provided **19,143 HOURS** of *pro bono* services to clients who cannot afford legal presentation, nonprofit organizations, and clients in civil rights and public interest cases.



# 2021 BOARD MEMBERSHIPS

Jeremiah Program  
Mitchell Hamline School of Law  
Public Counsel  
International Academy of Trial Lawyers  
Civil Justice Research Initiative  
Edina Soccer Club  
Children's Theater Company  
The Advocates for Human Rights  
Minnesota Women Lawyers  
Concord Youth Theater  
Danny's Place  
Public Justice  
Collective Liberty  
Massachusetts Women's Political  
Caucus  
Center for Women in Public Policy and  
Politics  
Friends of the Boundary Waters  
Wilderness  
Infinity Project  
Prevent Child Abuse North Dakota  
House of Charity  
Gunflint Trail Historical Society  
Mandarin Academy  
RIA, Inc.  
Friends of Big Bear Valley  
Public Justice Foundation  
California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.

Sieff Family Foundation  
Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid  
Minnesota Association for Justice  
Mount Alvernia Academy  
San Carlos Rotary Club Endowment  
Rotary Club of San Carlos  
Topanga Coalition for Emergency  
Preparedness  
Women Lawyers Association  
of Los Angeles  
The Fund for Legal Aid  
American Boards of Trial Advocates  
Winona State University Foundation  
Chester Valley Little League  
Minnesota American Indian Bar  
Association  
Hennepin County Bar Association  
The Sanneh Foundation  
Legal Aid at Work  
Women's Bar Association of  
Massachusetts  
Epilepsy Foundation of Minnesota  
The Isthmus Foundation  
Twin Cities Chapter of ChIPs  
Haiti Outreach, Inc.  
Books for Africa  
Children's Law Center  
Twin Cities Diversity in Practice





Minnesota Asian Pacific American Bar Association

Cornerstone

Eighth Circuit Bar Association

New Stage Theatre

Holy Cross Varsity Club

Boston Bar Association Law Firm  
Leadership Forum

Tufts Medical Center

Town of Shrewsbury

Volunteer Lawyers Network

St. Paul Area Chamber

St. Paul Chamber Orchestra

Don't Throw Us Away, Inc.

Minnesota Justice Foundation

Young Center for Immigrant Children's  
Rights

Tee It Up For The Troops

University of St. Thomas Law School

The Center of the American  
Experiment

Allston Brighton Youth Hockey  
Association

Hellenic Bar Association of New  
England

Diverse Attorney Pipeline Program

American Muslim Bar Association

Jumpstart

Loyola Institute for Competition

Norway House

Children's Theatre Company

Minnesota State Bar Association

Leukemia & Lymphoma Society

Minnesota Business Partnership

TearRestore LLC

University of Minnesota Foundation

University of St. Thomas Journal of  
Law & Public Policy

California Lawyers Association

National Judicial College

Twin Cities Cardozo Society

Children's HeartLink

Naples Senior Center

Guthrie Theatre

Great North Innocence Project

Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation

Legal Rights Center

Massachusetts Bar Foundation

New England Bar Association

Holy Cross Lawyers Association

Venice Boys and Girls Club

Minnesota Technology Association

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