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Fighting for Justice

On Monday morning the week of Thanksgiving 2013, Marie, a client of Primerus member firm Lewis Johs Avallone Aviles, arrived at the firm's New York City office with her 17-year-old son, Alex, carrying tubs filled with food. One by one, they presented dishes in a traditional Haitian Thanksgiving feast – four kinds of pasta, salmon, turkey, rice, fish, pie and much more.

It was the only payment this mother could offer to the firm, whose Special Education Group had worked tirelessly to gain her son access to a state funded



school for students with Autism – a right afforded to him under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

According to Eileen Libutti, managing partner of the firm's New York City office, every member of the firm's Manhattan office sat around the table feasting. "This one woman who didn't have much money managed to bring us all together as a community in a way we don't often get to. For every lunch

that week, we were eating leftovers. On Wednesday, you were eating things that you hadn't gotten to on Monday," Libutti said. "We were able to assist a very motivated single mom to effect lasting change on her son's education, self-esteem and transition to adulthood. She also left a lasting impression on us and taught us to take a moment to be thankful and experience joy."

The Lewis Johs Special Education Group has helped many families of students with disabilities obtain the free and appropriate public education that they are entitled to under IDEA. Libutti, a founding member of the group, and her colleague Maggie Cowley, said that often language barriers and financial need put families at a disadvantage in dealing with the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to secure a proper education for children with learning and developmental disabilities.

"Lewis Johs has been very supportive of us taking these cases that scream out for justice," Libutti said.

Marie came to them seeking a state-approved school for her son, Alex, who Libutti and Cowley described as a non-verbal gentle giant who likes to cook and loves animals. In January 2014, Libutti and her team prevailed in a hearing, securing Alex a placement at the Westchester Exceptional Children's School, Libutti said.

Libutti and Cowley bring to Alex's case, and others, not only deep

knowledge and experience, but also personal passion. As a child, after seeing "Children of a Lesser God," Libutti dreamed of being a lawyer for the hearing impaired. Now, as a mother of 8-year-old twins, she draws fulfillment not only from helping the students, but also their parents. "We have seen some extraordinary mommies and daddies and all they want is what's appropriate for their child to learn," she said. "To help them avoid that feeling of desperation is pretty rewarding."

Cowley went to law school, forever changed by a childhood memory. As a teenager, she was diagnosed with a hip deformity which required multiple surgeries and confined her to a wheelchair for about six months. "That feeling of how badly you want to do things for yourself stuck with me," Cowley said. "I wrote on my application to law school about how I wanted to fight for people with disabilities."

Another founding member of the group, Jennifer Frankola, was a former full time public school teacher, and therefore understands and appreciates the needs of students and their families, as well as the complexities of the education system.

Now, Libutti, Frankola and Cowley dedicate their talents to representing families in need as much as possible. **P**

Lewis Johs Avallone Aviles, LLP

Counsellors at Law

