

CALL TO ACTION

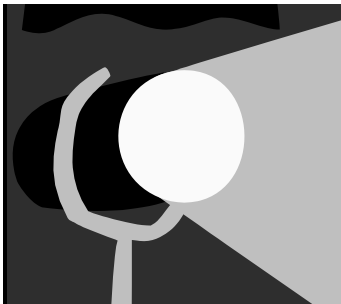
MISSISSIPPI
CENTER
FOR JUSTICE

Deep South Affiliate of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

SUMMER 2008

VOLUME 6, ISSUE 2

CONGRESS SHINES SPOTLIGHT ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING NEEDS



As the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina approaches, the Mississippi Center for Justice continues to fight to keep affordable housing at the forefront of the recovery effort.

Those efforts are gaining increasing scrutiny from federal officials who will be involved in determining future disaster response from the federal government.

Members of the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity and the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response held a joint hearing June 4 to examine the roles and responsibilities of HUD and FEMA in responding to the affordable housing needs of Gulf Coast states following emergencies and natural disasters. Reilly Morse, Mississippi Center for Justice senior attorney, provided testimony regarding Mississippi's use of Community Development Block Grant funds to restore housing.

Rental Housing Overlooked

Nearly three years after Katrina, Mississippi has paid out over \$1.2 billion to homeowners, but has not opened a single CDBG-financed rental unit. Mississippi's programs do not address half the needs of small rental, very low-income rental, or homeowners who suffered moderate to severe damage from Hurricane Katrina.

Morse testified that the prospect of improving this picture is worsened by the numerous waivers sought by Mississippi and approved by HUD, especially former HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson's authorization of Mississippi's diversion of \$600 million from housing funds into a costly and non-hurricane recovery related expansion of the State Port at Gulfport.

Congress Reponds

Members of the subcommittee responded with a June 16 letter to Rep. David Obey, chair of the House Appropriations committee. Citing the controversy surrounding the real state of housing recovering, as well as the lack of CDBG expenditures on housing programs, 12 members of Congress, including Reps. Bennie Thompson, Maxine Waters and Barney Frank, requested that language be inserted in the FY 2009 budget that would prevent the diversion.

Public Education Still Key

While the Mississippi Center for Justice awaits additional Congressional action, every opportunity is being taken to educate the public and opinion leaders about the need to increase recovery spending for low- and moderate-income housing. From meeting with editorial boards and collaborating with other advocates, to meeting with Gov. Haley Barbour and exploring litigation options, the Mississippi Center for Justice continues to press forward to ensure that the promise made to restore affordable housing is kept.

A CALL FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

In his testimony, Morse conveyed that so far, Mississippi has devoted only about \$3 billion dollars or 55 percent of CDBG funds to programs for direct housing recovery. Mississippi has obligated or disbursed \$513 million in homeowner assistance grants for persons of low and moderate income, and spent \$10 million toward public housing as of Feb. 28, 2008. According to Mississippi's latest Disaster Recovery Grant Report, for the period ending Dec. 31, 2007, Mississippi has spent only 13.2 percent of CDBG funds on low-income housing. ■

2008 CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE WEEKEND

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The Mississippi Center for Justice will honor civil rights advocate Unita Blackwell and public servant Dick Molpus as the 2008 Champions of Justice during the upcoming Justice Weekend, Sept. 12-14. The weekend will include the annual awards ceremony at the Marriott Hotel in downtown Jackson, followed by a bus trip to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

UNITA BLACKWELL

Unita Blackwell, a civil rights activist and the first black female mayor in the state of Mississippi, was born the daughter of sharecropping parents in Coahoma County, Mississippi on March 18, 1933. She worked throughout the civil rights era urging and recruiting blacks to register to vote, while holding positions in numerous organizations to fight for civil rights in the United States.

In 1976, following her decade-long activism in voter registration and other civil rights issues, Blackwell ran for and won the position of Mayor of Mayersville. As mayor, Blackwell led the effort to pave streets and install street lights and sewers in the black section of Mayersville. She also spoke out on poor housing conditions which disproportionately affected her constituents.

Despite beginning her adult life with an eighth grade education, in 1983, Blackwell received a master's degree in regional planning from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Blackwell was also a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Fellowship in 1992.



"We had no idea that we were changing the whole political future of America," said Unita Blackwell, looking back on the passionate civil rights marches of the early 1960s. "We were going because we didn't have shoes for our children and decent houses to stay in and just the everyday life that we wanted."

Excerpt from Black Biography.

2008 CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE WEEKEND

In 2003, the Center launched Champions of Justice, a dinner event designed to celebrate the Center's creation and to honor individuals whose work has advanced economic and social justice in Mississippi. Honorees are chosen based on their contribution to advancing justice work in Mississippi, either through their profession or in a community activist capacity. Past honorees include former Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Reuben Anderson, Professor Deborah Bell, Dr. Helen Barnes, Rims Barber, Dr. Aaron Shirley and John McCullouch, to name a few.

DICK MOLPUS



"40 years from now I want our children and grandchildren to look back on us and what we did and say that we had the courage, the wisdom and the strength to rise up, to take the responsibility to right historical wrongs... that we pledged to build a future together — we moved on — yes, we moved on as one people".

Excerpt from the Jackson Free Press, June 2004.

Dick Molpus, President of The Molpus Woodlands Group, LLC (MWG), is being honored for his public service as Secretary of State and his dedication to improving public education in Mississippi and around the nation.

Molpus was among several younger staff members known as the "Boys of Spring" who helped guide Gov. William Winter's historic Education Reform Act of 1982 to passage. In 1983, he was elected Secretary of State of Mississippi, revamping an agency that was a tax drain of \$200,000 to a profit maker of more than \$2,000,000 per year. As Secretary of State, he also served as Lands Commissioner of Mississippi and, in that capacity, supervised over 600,000 acres of 16th Section commercial, residential and timber property that had been set aside in the early 1800's to raise money for public schools. By forcing renegotiation of some 5,000 below market leases, he increased, by more than \$24,000,000, the amount of revenue to the public schools from those properties during his tenure.

Molpus and his wife, Sally, were the founders of Parents for Public Schools, which now has chapters in 25 cities in 15 states across the United States. ■

Dedicated to informing friends of Mississippi about the advancement of racial and economic justice, *Call To Action* is a publication of the Mississippi Center for Justice.

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NEW REPORT DETAILS NEED FOR FORECLOSURE PREVENTION

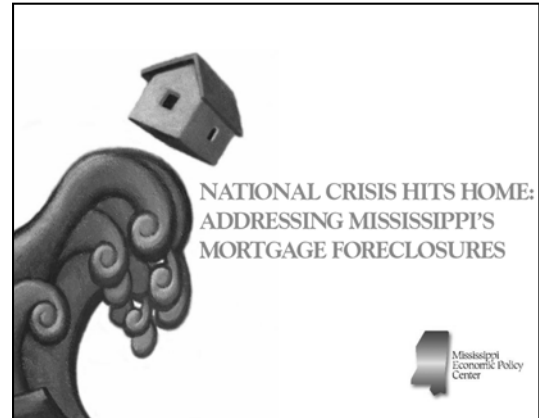
A newly released report from the Mississippi Economic Policy Center shows that Mississippi has the eighth highest foreclosure rate and the highest percentage of borrowers with past due home loan payments in the country. The high rate of delinquency coupled with a very high rate of subprime, or high cost, lending suggests that Mississippi is likely to experience increasing rates of foreclosures in the months to come. "National Crisis Hits Home" examines the issue and offers policy recommendations to address mortgage foreclosures in Mississippi.

The Mississippi Center for Justice is working in collaboration with MEPC, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Mississippi Center for Legal Services, Mississippi Home Corporation, the Mississippi Attorney General's Office and others to raise the level of awareness about the need for homeowners to seek counseling before they reach the foreclosure mark. A foreclosure handbook has been developed to educate citizens about various terms, their rights and services available to help them hold on to their homes.

Outreach—A Priority

Paheadra Robinson, Mississippi Center for Justice staff attorney, has attended several meetings where foreclosure prevention outreach is a main topic on the agenda. Joe Rich, attorney with the Lawyers' Committee, is guiding the effort in Mississippi to make foreclosure prevention a priority for the state. Fran Yeatts of Mississippi Legal Services is the project manager on site in Gulfport, Miss.

"Foreclosures will have a negative impact on entire communities, so we must find ways to help homeowners connect with counselors who can help them reach acceptable arrangements with their lenders," Rich said. "Our outreach efforts, coupled with legislation that is happening on the national level and with the support of statewide elected officials in Mississippi bring about powerful results for homeowners, and that will benefit the entire state's economy." ■

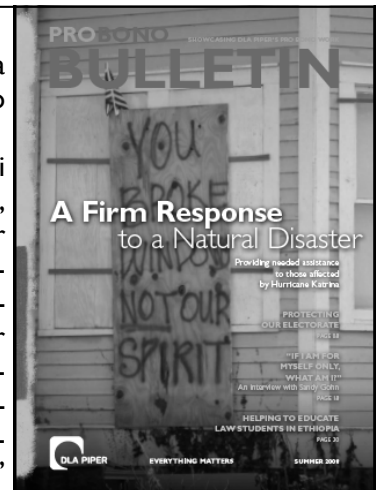


DLA Piper, a pro bono partner with the Mississippi Center for Justice, recently featured their Rebuilding Foundations of Home Ownership project in their 2008 ProBono Bulletin. The signature project, which also involves the Lawyers' Committee for Civil

Rights Under Law, is DLA Piper's response to the need for legal assistance in New Orleans and throughout the Mississippi Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina.

The article features DLA Piper's work on heirs' property, a condition not created by Hurricane Katrina, but one that was exacerbated by it and that stood in the way of homeowners receiving grants and other rebuilding assistance. The needs of the owners of heirs' property and the skills of DLA Piper's US Real Estate Group were a natural fit.

Visit www.mscenterforjustice.org to read the entire feature, as well as other articles related to DLA Piper's pro bono work. ■



POTOMAC EVENT HONORS CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS, HIGHLIGHTS SUCCESSES

The Mississippi Center for Justice shared the story of its own Mississippi Miracle during the annual Mississippi on the Potomac reception, June 3 in Washington, DC. The gathering attracted a crowd of more than 200 people, including Mississippi Congressmen Bennie Thompson and Travis Childers.

Congressman Thompson introduced the event's honoree, Congressman Barney Frank, who chairs the Financial Services Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives. Rep. Frank was chosen as honoree for his work to curb predatory lending practices and to implement accountability for the

more than \$5 billion sent to Mississippi for hurricane recovery. A central point of contention is the diversion of \$600 million in Community Development Block Grant funds from affordable housing programs to an expansion project for the State Port at Gulfport, Miss.

Mississippi Center for Justice's own Monica Gallo-way and John Jopling narrated a slide show featuring challenges overcome, obstacles that still exist and the resiliency of Mississippians whom the Center is helping in areas such as affordable housing, contractor fraud, foreclosure prevention, affordable childcare and access to healthcare. Helped along by more than 16,000 pro

bono hours from law firms and law students from 32 law schools across the country, the Center continues to create miracles in the lives of hardworking Mississippians.



“There are hundreds of stories that demonstrate the amazing progress that can be made when we work together to give a voice to those who would otherwise be invisible,” said Martha Bergmark,

ABOVE (Pictured from left to right): Board Vice Chair Rob McDuff, President Martha Bergmark, Board Treasurer Issac Byrd, Congressman Barney Frank and Congressman Bennie Thompson.

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WELCOME TO MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE



Bonnie Allen has joined the Center as Director of Training and Foundation Development. She began her affiliation with the Center as a volunteer immediately after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 2005. Allen also serves on the clinical law faculty at the University of Maryland School of Law. She previously served as President of the Center for Law & Renewal, based at the Fetzer Institute. ■



Kiya Jones has joined the Center as a legal assistant in the Biloxi office. Jones was previously an intern at DLA Piper, where she worked with the pro bono and anti trust departments. She is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin.

Summer Intern Spotlight



Kathryn (Katy) Dyer, a student at **Georgetown Law** and an Ohio native, spent time in the Biloxi office as an intern on loan from the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

"It feels really good to be surrounded by such committed, determined, and flexible people," Dyer commented of her experience in Mississippi. "I am also pleasantly surprised to find so many people fighting to keep their homes and neighborhoods intact when so many odds are against them in terms of the government and developers."

Ruthie Craig, an incoming senior at **Wellesley College**, served as a communications intern in the Jackson office. A Jackson, Miss. native, her comments show us how much has been accomplished, yet how far we still have to go.

"I've enjoyed working with the other interns, traveling to the coast, and working with other non-profits on the coast to aid in Katrina recovery media work," Craig said. "As a Mississippi native, I was also surprised by how little I knew about the current situation on the Gulf Coast."



Sarah Courtney Reese, a native of Ocean Springs, Miss., spent part of her summer in the Jackson office. Even though she attends **Mississippi College School of Law**, Reese says she learned much about her home state this summer.

"Meeting great people who have a true passion for what they do has been one of my favorite things this summer," Reese said. "The most surprising thing was learning how little I knew about Mississippi's politics and government and learning how much help our State needs."

David Creasey, an Iowa native and a student at the **University of Chicago Law School**, volunteered his time in the Jackson office.

"I've enjoyed finally putting the skills I've been learning in law school to good use," Creasey said. "I've also enjoyed working with the Mississippi Center for Justice's talented staff, as well as with my fellow interns."



Summer 2008 brought a wealth of talent and enthusiasm from an incredible class of interns who volunteered with the Mississippi Center for Justice. From empowering residents in public housing and combating contractor fraud, to strengthening the foundation for payday lending advocacy and collaborating with community organizations to raise awareness about Gulf Coast recovery needs, these interns provided invaluable work that inspired the entire Center staff. The wealth of talent displayed is proof positive that the future of community lawyering is indeed bright for Mississippi.



A native of Las Vegas, Nev., **Brad Kerwin** grew up in an Air Force family and has lived all over the world. He is a student at **Mississippi College** School of Law, and spent his summer working as an intern in the Biloxi office.

"I have without a doubt enjoyed the people at the Mississippi Center for Justice most of all. Their dedication is inspiring," Kerwin said.

Veronica Allen, a law student at **Duke University**, put her skills to work in the Jackson office.

"My idea of what it means to be a community lawyer was completely turned around once I began working here," Allen said. "I was initially of the mindset that community lawyers would go to the community to learn of the problem and then try to find a solution for the community. I've learned that lasting change is best brought about by pulling resources, ideas, and manpower from within all parts of the community."



Sean Weathersby, a Starkville, Miss. native, is a student at **Bowdoin College**. Sean spent his summer working in the Biloxi office.

"I really enjoy knowing that my work is actually helping someone in need," Weathersby said. "It was also great to get some mechanical skills," he added jokingly, after assembling an office desk. "Putting those things together is harder than the directions make it seem."

Chris Davis, a student at **Vermont Law School**, calls Long Beach, Miss. home. Davis served as an intern in the Biloxi office.

"I've enjoyed witnessing and participating in the ways that public interest lawyers have to network, gather resources, and use the law to advocate for people who possess the spirit, but not always the tools, to see justice done on their behalf," Davis said. "[Reilly] Morse gave me valuable insight into what it means to do work for social justice and the public interest. I feel much better prepared to pursue that kind of law career."



KATRINA RECOVERY AND DEMOCRACY-BUILDING: A LEARNING LABORATORY FOR LAW STUDENTS

Defining the role of lawyers in community recovery from disaster is at the heart of an initiative that attracted five University of Maryland law students and two faculty members to Mississippi this summer. Nationally recognized for its outstanding Clinical Law Program, Maryland operates more than 20 clinics in Baltimore, and students participate in a clinic as a graduation requirement.

The Maryland team is participating in a Cross-Cultural Recovering Communities Initiative that sends students and faculty to different sites where they compare experiences of democracy-building in communities recovering from natural disaster (Mississippi Gulf Coast), chronic disaster resulting from economic disinvestment (Baltimore), and the cultural and economic disaster impacting populations that are left out of international development and new markets (a yet to be determined international site in Latin America or Africa).

Cultivating Young Leaders

The shared values and synergy is what drew the two organizations together as part of a Leadership, Ethics and Democracy Initiative based at the School of Law, led by Professor Michael Millemann and funded by the Fetzer Institute through a \$1.63 million investment. Mississippi Cen-

ter for Justice attorneys Bonnie Allen and John Jopling taught the summer clinic that offered the students opportunities to provide direct legal services to clients. The summer clinic included a weekly classroom component where students read articles and heard guest speakers on recovery-related topics such as the severe shortage of affordable housing, the role of the media, the history of the Vietnamese community in Biloxi, and civil rights history specific to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. "This is merely the beginning of a long-term partnership between two extraordinary institutions – both known for the highest standards of legal excellence and a deep commitment to racial and economic justice," Allen said.



Real Cases, Real Change

The students hit the ground running during the first week of the clinic when they took on 35 contractor fraud cases that the Center had accepted for placement with volunteer attorneys. Astounded by the unthinkable callousness and shameless greed of unscrupulous contractors that have exploited mostly retired homeowners, the students were hungry for the opportunity to put their classroom learning to work in ways that helped real people in need. For most of them, the clinic was the first opportunity to actually practice law.

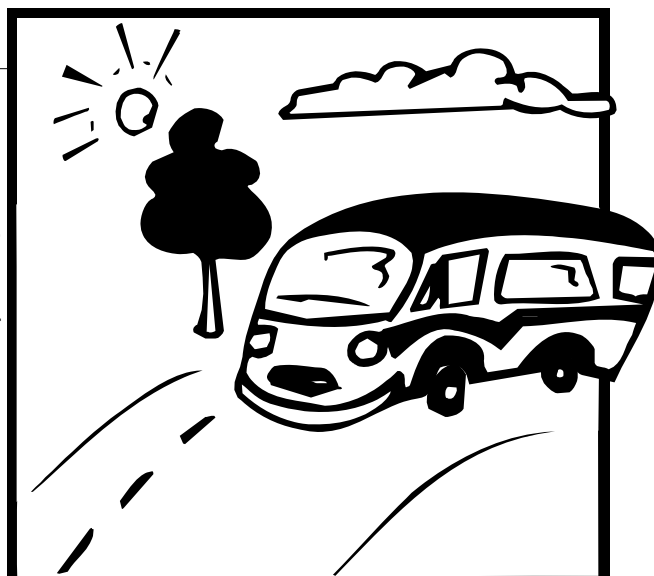
In addition to working contractor fraud cases, the students kept journals about their experiences and organized several community meetings with residents of public housing to identify major problems, including mold and other health hazards.

Student Joanne Spilich wrote in her journal, "What makes this Mississippi experience so valuable and rewarding is that I get the opportunity to build a real personal bond with clients and help a client who really needs assistance. I am learning so much. I wake up every morning excited about what I am going to do that day, and thinking that I will get

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THE GREAT MISSISSIPPI ROAD TRIP

With trips to the Mississippi Delta in 2004 and 2005, and post-Katrina journeys to the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 2006 and 2007, the Great Mississippi Road Trip has become an established feature of the Champions of Justice Weekend. This year, just two weeks following the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the bus trip will return to the Gulf Coast to focus on how much has been accomplished through rebuilding efforts, yet how much remains to be done to fully restore safe, affordable housing for all citizens.



Road trip participants will meet local community leaders, residents and advocates to learn more about the rebuilding efforts. A cultural highlight will be a tour of H.C. Porter's Katrina-related art exhibit "Backyards & Beyond" at the University of Southern Mississippi's Katrina Library in Long Beach. Following a tour of the Gulf Coast, participants will attend a reception and dinner in Ocean Springs.

The entire Champions of Justice weekend is an opportunity to showcase the work that is underway at the Mississippi Center for Justice, and to engage the many partners, advocates and supporters to renew and strengthen their commitment to helping Mississippi become a model social justice state.

For sponsorship and registration information, see the information in this newsletter, or visit www.mscenterforjustice.org. ■

GET ON THE BUS!

POTOMAC EVENT Continued from Page 5

Mississippi Center for Justice president. “With the incredibly generous support of our partners, law firms and law students, we will continue to improve the justice environment in Mississippi.”

While in the nation’s Capital, employees also took advantage of opportunities to meet with members of Mississippi’s Congressional delegation to discuss the scope of the Center’s work more in-depth. Reilly Morse, senior attorney with the Center, also provided testimony before a joint U.S. Congressional committee regarding Mississippi’s experience with FEMA and HUD during Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts (see related cover story). ■

ADVOCACY RECOGNIZED



Jason Pollan, staff attorney, was recently recognized by the Mississippi Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities for his advocacy work to remove barriers that prohibit qualified Mississippians from enrolling in Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

The Advocate of the Year Award is presented to individuals who have made outstanding contributions on behalf of citizens with disabilities in Mississippi.

KATRINA RECOVERY & DEMOCRACY BUILDING

Continued from Page 8

one step closer to righting a wrong out there in the world – but not only that, this type of on-the-ground learning is teaching me more than I could possibly learn in a classroom.”

Another student, Dan Zhu, wrote in his journal about his experiences with both individual clients and groups. “My client, a victim of contractor fraud, is a single mother of two and a high school teacher. Her contractor failed to finish the job and simply left. Just to be able to hold an actual case file and read through personal information about real people with unresolved problems was an experience that to this point was only a dream. It is so easy to get lost in learning theory and living in academia...

...Today we spent the majority of time visiting a public housing project. Our job was to go door to door asking residents to identify mold in their houses that could have been left there by the storm and any related health issues. Growing up in a public housing situation in New York City, my expectations of response from the residents was minimum at best. It has been my experience that the poor and disenfranchised often keep to themselves and almost never talk to strangers. However, this was not the case in Mississippi. From the first house we knocked on, the reception was anything but hostile. A young white family welcomed us into their home immediately and was more than willing to talk to us about the mold found in the home and the sickness of their children. This welcoming demeanor was prevalent in every house we visited; an almost unbelievable warmth, openness and trust for people who they have never met before. I can only chalk this up to what people commonly refer to as Southern Hospitality.”

Building on the tremendous success of the inaugural clinic, Maryland is already making plans to return students and faculty to the Mississippi Gulf Coast next summer. ■

2008 Champions of Justice Dinner

Honoring

Unita Blackwell, *Legendary Civil Rights Activist*
and

Dick Molpus, *Visionary Public Servant*

Friday, September 12, 2008

Reception with Cash Bar 6 p.m. • Dinner 7:30 p.m.

Marriott • Downtown Jackson

RSVP by September 3 • Business attire

2008 CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE WEEKEND

SPONSORSHIP LEVELS

- Underwriter** — \$25,000 donors will receive two tables (20 reservations); recognition in the program, on event signage and from the podium; photographs with the honorees and acknowledgement throughout the year.
- Champion of Justice** — \$10,000 donors will receive one table (10 reservations); recognition in the program, on event signage and from the podium; photographs with the honorees and acknowledgement throughout the year.
- Guardian of Justice** — \$5,000 donors will receive one table (10 reservations); recognition in the program and on event signage.
- Benefactor** — \$2,500 donors will receive one table (8 reservations), recognition in the program and on event signage.
- Patron** — \$1,000 donors will receive four reservations and recognition in the program.
- Supporter** — \$500 donors will receive two reservations and recognition in the program.
- I cannot attend**, but please accept my tax-deductible donation of \$_____ to support the work of the Mississippi Center for Justice.

TICKET PRICES

Full Price Dinner Ticket:

Qty. _____ x \$100 = _____

Public Interest Rate Dinner Ticket:

Qty. _____ x \$50 = _____

Champions of Justice Road Trip:

Qty. _____ x \$200 = _____

I/We have enclosed a tax-deductible contribution of _____

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2008 CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE WEEKEND

September 12-14, 2008 • Visit www.mscenterforjustice.org for more information.

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