

Pro Bono @Cadwalader



Cadwalader's Not-for-Profit Incubator

In 2017, 15-year-old Rohan Levy lost his life to a stray bullet during a drive-by shooting near his home in Brooklyn, New York. Since then, his mother Nadine Sylvester has made it her personal mission to end gun violence by raising funds to provide educational scholarships to at-risk youth in the community. Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft has helped Nadine expand her vision by forming the Rohan Levy Foundation.

Over the past 10 years, Cadwalader's Not-for-Profit Incubator has incorporated and obtained tax exemption for nearly 400 organizations, whose missions include, among others, combating poverty and recidivism, promoting the arts in disadvantaged communities, and advocating for women's rights. The Incubator takes these organizations from concept to reality, working hand-in-hand with clients to prepare formation documents and all required legal paperwork for the IRS and state agencies. Cadwalader also foots the bill for filing fees and other expenses associated with the start-up process.

"We wanted to clear the path for these organizations to get out there and help the community," says Jason Schwartz (pictured above on the far left), a Cadwalader Tax partner based in the firm's Washington, D.C. office.

Jason supervises the Incubator with Linda Swartz, Chair of the firm's Tax department; Michael Gonzalez, an associate in the firm's Capital Markets department; and Harris Greenberg, a specialist dedicated full-time to the program. Alissa Kalinowski, an associate in the firm's Tax department, is also an active team member.

"The Incubator represents a natural union between the firm's transactional expertise and its commitment to pro bono work," Michael says.

According to Jason, much of the Incubator's value-add comes from its team members' willingness to listen.

"Each new client engagement begins with an introductory meeting so that we can hear, directly from the founders, about their larger visions," Jason says. "Understanding the big picture helps us more quickly strategize their path to achieve not-for-profit status, and all of the corresponding opportunities that it opens up."

Notwithstanding the Incubator's success to date, Jason and Michael plan to continue to grow the program.

"The next step," says Jason, "is to partner with our for-profit clients – banks, asset managers, and other financial institutions. With a larger team, we can service even more nonprofit clients."

Making a Difference

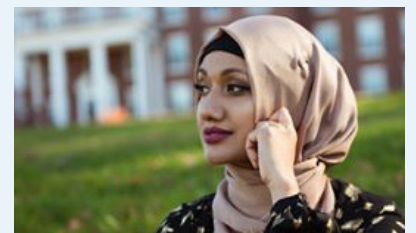


THE ROHAN LEVY FOUNDATION

Nadine Sylvester had already awarded two scholarships to students at her late son's Brooklyn, NY high school, when supporters – her sister at the forefront – convinced her it was time to establish a foundation in his name.

Nadine described the formation of both scholarships soon after his death as a way of "coping with the loss of my son."

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WORLD HIJAB DAY

Nazma Khan, founder of "World Hijab Day" (WHD), and her team of lawyers from the Incubator began working together in 2017 – but her journey began long before.

As an immigrant from Bangladesh who moved to the U.S. with her family as a child, Nazma had suffered years of bullying and bigotry for head-covering while in school and within her community. She acknowledges these still-raw memories as fueling her passion to generate greater respect and understanding of the Muslim religion.

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Making a Difference

WORLD HIJAB DAY (continued)



Women from different religious backgrounds participating in World Hijab Day on February 1st.

She had the idea for a designated day annually when women of all faiths would be encouraged to wear the hijab in solidarity with Muslim women worldwide – an opportunity for others to have the visceral experience of head-covering, if only for a day.

As an initial step, she created a simple Facebook page that introduced the concept of WHD, inviting women anywhere and everywhere to participate and setting its inaugural date for February 1, 2013.

Within one week, thousands of followers had joined the page and within two years, World Hijab Day had blossomed into a truly global platform, drawing support from thousands of women and men – including political leaders around the world – and millions of Facebook fans, representing more than 100 countries as diverse as India, Ireland, Chile, Lebanon and Nigeria.

As witness to this groundswell from around the globe, Nazma felt strongly that the organization was ready to evolve into something even greater.

“I knew WHD would have more potential if it became a non-profit,” she said. “But I knew nothing about the process.”

After one of WHD’s volunteers posted to a legal forum that the organization sought pro bono counsel, Cadwalader soon agreed to take the case.

One game-changing result of having a 501(c)(3) non-profit status, Nazma said, is being able to apply for grants to help fund forward-looking initiatives, such as its recent Corporate Anti-Islamophobia Program.

“It took Cadwalader just 10 seconds to realize my potential,” she said. “They took my hand and walked me through every step, going above and beyond to help WHD progress even further.”

THE ROHAN LEVY FOUNDATION (continued)

Driven by a deep need to continue investing in the future potential of young men within her community, Nadine envisioned a permanent platform to honor Rohan by “encouraging young men of color to continue to aspire to educational goals” through a multifaceted outreach program.

She soon shared these plans with a close friend who is employed by Cadwalader, and was promptly introduced to the Not-for-Profit Incubator program.

“I already had the mental blueprint for what I wanted to do,” she said. “I asked myself, ‘how do I build a program around these young men so that they do really well in college, and come back to the community?’”

Nadine and her team of Cadwalader lawyers first met in January 2018 – the Rohan Levy Foundation was incorporated the very next month and achieved tax exemption later that spring.

Since then, the foundation has fought to end gun violence by awarding scholarships, establishing a youth leadership academy and increasing local political advocacy for greater future impact.

“The Foundation is a way of giving back; it’s a vehicle for getting the resources that are missing from the community into the community,” she said.



“Youth Over Guns” March across the Brooklyn Bridge (NY) in 2018

Making a Difference



High school freshmen holding their school vouchers in the community of Alligator Pond, Jamaica

ANGELS OVER ALLIGATOR POND

Simmonie Swaby emigrated to New York after high school from Alligator Pond, a small rural fishing village along the southwest coast of Jamaica, but always retained a strong connection to her childhood community. One summer, as word spread that a beloved and long-time local pastor had lost her home in a fire, Simmonie and a group of her fellow expats quickly pulled their resources to provide much-needed assistance. Prompted by this event, and their shared deep commitment and desire to give back to their hometown, the group took what she called the “next natural step” of planning to form a charitable organization to address and meet the community’s broader financial and other needs.

As an employee of Cadwalader, Simmonie approached the Incubator team and, with their support, “Angels Over Alligator Pond” was formed as a non-profit, providing a formal structure within which to fundraise, plan events and projects and more. After the COVID-19 pandemic scuttled its initial agenda, the group pivoted to launch a “Student Voucher Program” that raised funds to provide 25 students – all the district’s high school first-years – with financial assistance to buy textbooks and other school supplies.

“The local economy has been hit hard by the pandemic,” Simmonie explains. “While the need is so overwhelmingly great, we felt that offering this kind of help would be a great relief to parents, and the children wouldn’t have to go without.”

Looking ahead, the non-profit has many plans for future impact, with a focus on education, sports development, poverty relief and environmental and economic sustainability. As Simmonie points out, “We are very committed and focused on what we need to do.”

THERAPY AID COALITION

As Boulder-based therapist Jennifer Silacci observed a growing fear and anxiety about the spread of COVID-19, she became increasingly concerned about the mental health needs of frontline workers who were taking personal risks to assist their local communities and the country at-large. To support these individuals, Jennifer began asking some peers if they would help by providing free and low-cost online therapy to such clients.

This small effort soon led to a nationwide response, and Jennifer quickly launched “Coronavirus Online Therapy” as an online portal to match therapists with clients. Within weeks, more than 3000 therapists around the country had signed on to support the effort.

For its part, the Incubator incorporated the project’s umbrella organization, named Therapy Aid Coalition (TAC), just a month after Jennifer and her organizing team articulated it. TAC’s mission is to be an ever-ready crisis therapist network that can quickly mobilize to support frontline workers in local communities during any national crisis, such as for natural disasters and other collective traumas. Less than two months later, the Incubator had secured tax-exempt status for TAC, which immediately led to new opportunities, including partnerships with other organizations.

“All of this was made possible because the Not-For-Profit Incubator swiftly responded to our need, and assisted us to gain 501(c)(3) status,” Jennifer said. “In just five months, we had made rapid progress towards becoming the Red Cross of mental health.”

As a public charity, TAC received its first grant within a few months and will continue fundraising to improve the experience for all its participants, including offering training for its therapists and scholarships to cover the costs of sessions for those in need.

“We are excited to see what the future brings, and are forever grateful to Cadwalader,” she said.

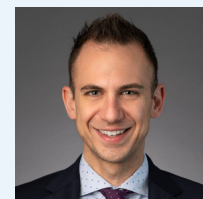


Jennifer Silacci, Founder & President, Executive Director, Therapy Aid Coalition

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The Not-for-Profit Incubator is a part of Cadwalader’s larger pro bono and public service initiatives that commit to using the resources of the firm to make a difference in local communities and in the lives of people who could not otherwise afford legal representation. To view its annual pro bono report, “Making a Mark on Our Communities,” please visit: www.cadwalader.com/about/pro-bono-public-service

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