

### **MJF Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) Recipient: Joseph Hardgrave**

“When I first saw the job announcement for the Indian Wills Project, I knew it was exactly what I wanted to do and where I wanted to do it. Throughout law school, I had tailored my resume as best I could toward beginning a career in Indian Law. I was in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, studying for the Florida Bar, without any idea what my next move would be when I applied for the job. Thank God I did.”

Joseph Hardgrave is an Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps Legal Fellow. Joseph currently heads up Montana Legal Services Association’s (MLSA) Indian Wills Project – he’s also a recipient of the Montana Justice Foundation’s (MJF) Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP).

The MJF established its LRAP in 2006 for law school graduates dedicated to providing legal aid to low-income individuals and families in Montana. Since its inception, the MJF LRAP has assisted eighteen legal aid lawyers working for Montana legal aid organizations by reducing the burden of significant debt incurred to finance their law school education.

The LRAP program is designed to support the recruitment and retention of qualified staff attorneys working in the legal aid sector.

This is no small feat when you consider that the average legal aid attorney in Montana earns an annual salary of \$30,000. The average educational debt load for the same is \$92,000. In many instances, legal aid attorneys earn salaries that qualify them for their own services.

For legal aid lawyers, like Joseph, the MJF LRAP can mean the difference between remaining in the field that they love, and being forced to seek employment elsewhere in order to make ends meet.

“The whole reason I became a lawyer was to advocate for people in need. One of my clients was an 85-year old woman with the best sense of humor I have ever witnessed. Her will had been on-going for nearly a year, but she approached the formal execution with a patient joyfulness that surprised me. It is encounters like this that make me feel connected to a real and unique community . . . I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

The MJF thanks Joseph and the dedicated group of legal aid and pro bono attorneys who provide fundamental legal services to thousands of the most vulnerable residents in our communities. Their passion and dedication to access to justice is key to closing the justice gap in Montana.

The MJF relies on donor support to keep this vital program thriving. For more information about the MJF’s LRAP, or to learn how you can help to support this

critical program, please visit our website at:  
[http://www.mtjustice.org/loan\\_repayment\\_assistance\\_program.htm](http://www.mtjustice.org/loan_repayment_assistance_program.htm)