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Quitting the day jobs, organizing to fight violence

Karla M. Altmayer and Sheerine Alemzadeh look to end workplace gender-based violence

BY EMILY DONOVAN
Law Bulletin staff writer

Two Chicago public-interest attorneys have branched off to organize a worker-led movement to end gender-based violence.

Karla M. Altmayer and Sheerine Alemzadeh are co-founders of Healing to Action. The organization plans to create events and spaces for workers to discuss and recover from their experiences with gender-based violence and will train workers on how to talk to media and lobby public officials.

As to exactly what they and others will be lobbying for, Altmayer and Alemzadeh will have to wait and see.

"I think it is a little bit of a radical thing, to say we're going to let the workers decide," Altmayer said.

Both of the co-founders' passions for this line of work came from personal experience.

Altmayer grew up with a single mom who was an immigrant and a survivor of gender-based violence. She raised Altmayer and her two siblings on a domestic worker's salary and always talked about education as a tool to do something more.

"I saw the law as a tool for possibly changing communities," she said.

Altmayer, whose mother had recently died, had no money to fund her graduate studies. She said her acceptance into the Northern Illinois University College of Law with full tuition covered and a stipend was "a miracle."

During an internship with LAF, she was frustrated to see how

widespread and tolerated sexual harassment and gender-based violence were among migrant farmers.

For an Equal Justice Works Fellowship funded by Kirkland & Ellis LLP and the Medtronic Foundation, Altmayer returned to LAF to work with immigrant women working as farmers, including those who were sexual-violence survivors.

She said her clients didn't have much of an opportunity to talk about and detail how they were being sexually harassed by a boss, for example. And few were ready to litigate.

"Luckily, I had met Sheerine," Altmayer said.

Alemzadeh started her career interested in combating sexual assault as opposed to an interest in the law. Her interest in working to rectify sexual assault also stemmed from her background. Her parents emigrated from Iran and avoided talking about sexual assault.

"There was a sense that silence was the most protective and safest way to deal with it in Iranian culture," she said. "That keeping it quiet and under wraps was an act of love, actually."

That ethos didn't mesh with how she had learned people discuss injustice openly. As a result, in college, she studied how sexual violence differs in marginalized communities.

She worked as a paralegal at Tahirih Justice Center, a nonprofit with offices in Washington, D.C., Baltimore and Houston that helps immigrant women and children fleeing gender-based violence. Af-



Karla M. Altmayer



Sheerine Alemzadeh

ter seeing how much of a difference an attorney can make, she went to the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

Alemzadeh got a Skadden Fellowship after graduation, which was funded by the Skadden Foundation affiliated with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP. Altmayer pointed out that both her and Alemzadeh's public interest careers launched thanks to funding from big firms.

As a Skadden Fellow, Alemzadeh was a staff attorney at the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE), representing low-wage workers, including food service, construction and health-care employees. She invited Altmayer to a Coalition Against Workplace Sexual Violence meeting where rape crisis organizations throughout the city and surrounding area meet and collaborate.

After her fellowship, Altmayer represented undocumented people

realize that survivors of workplace sexual assault needed not only curriculum training on their rights but also a space and time to process and heal.

Altmayer and Alemzadeh came up with the idea of an organization that would fill that hole in 2015.

"It was after a coalition meeting and we were both feeling really inspired," Altmayer said.

Sept. 15 of this year, they both left their previous full-time positions to launch Healing to Action.

Miguel C. Keberlein, director of the immigrants and workers rights practice group at LAF Chicago who oversaw Altmayer's work at LAF as an intern and as a staff attorney, said he admires Altmayer and Alemzadeh's commitment.

"They both gave up very stable and enriching positions that they were in to try to make this happen," he said.

He said Healing to Action absolutely could become a model for future organizations.

"It really defines what it means to be grassroots: It comes from workers identifying their own needs and being able to respond to those needs," Keberlein said. "That's something that

many people talk about but have a difficult time putting into action."

Lynne Johnson, a Healing to Action board member and CAASE policy director who worked with Alemzadeh during her fellowship, said that having survivors of workplace sexual assault and harassment lobby for their own needs may make Healing to Action more effective.

"Legislators are most impacted by people who are most impacted by the legislation itself," she said.

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accused of deportable crimes through the National Immigrant Justice Center. Many of those undocumented women had experienced gender-based violence in the workplace, in their homes, as children, crossing the border and in their own countries, but some had never talked about being raped until they were in a detention facility with 20 other women, where they had to deal with their legal issues rather than getting to see a therapist.

The experience made Altmayer