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## Wilmette lawyer opens educational advocacy law firm



*Lawyers Lara Cleary (left) and Jennifer Hansen opened their new law firm in late June in Northbrook. Photo Submitted*

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Helping a child with a learning disability, social and emotional issue or behavior challenge, can leave parents with the overwhelming task of finding solutions. Navigating Individual Education Plans, finding knowledgeable doctors and understanding caregivers can become all-consuming, not to mention confusing, expensive and frustrating.

Lawyers Lara Cleary of Wilmette, and her business partner Jennifer Hansen, are experts in special education law, mental health law and school law. Together, they founded Hansen & Clearly, LLC in Northbrook, where they use their combined education, experience and compassion to help families find the support they need. The firm officially opened June 26 at 555 Skokie Blvd., Suite 250.

For Cleary, the passion to advocate for individuals with different abilities began in her own childhood.

“As a kid, I had a speech impediment,” she explained. “Back then, any child perceived as different from the rest of the student body were sent to a special room to receive services. Fortunately, I excelled and developed a strong desire to help my peers who

Not surprisingly, Cleary became a special education teacher, and later went to law school, learning how to help others from a legal perspective.

“My law school experience was amazing. I took courses in mental health, juvenile law, special education advocacy — I loved it all,” she said. “Then, applying all that I learned to real life situations and cases, assured me that I was living my life’s mission.”

Hansen’s career path can also be traced back to her childhood. She recalled sitting at the kitchen table with her mother, a speech pathologist, as she wrote IEPs. Her father, also trained as a speech pathologist and audiologist had a profound impact on Hansen, though she didn’t realize this until years later.

“My mother wanted me to become a speech pathologist, but I just didn’t see this for myself,” Hansen said. “I took a legal path instead, and eventually became a public defender. I defended a lot of people who struggled with learning disorders and mental illness and thought ‘if only they received the help they needed during their school years, their outcome could have been different.’ Today, I feel grateful knowing that I can help families before the situation gets out of hand.”

Together, Cleary & Hansen work to advocate for the needs of various youth, helping families find solutions, even when they seem hard to come by.

“Parents are overwhelmed,” Hansen explained. “They know something is wrong, but they are often told that their child is fine or not eligible for services. Many parents opt for external evaluation, but this comes with a price tag. Then, parents find themselves constantly battling with the schools, fighting for what their child needs — a confusing and daunting challenge.”

When approached with a new case, Hansen & Cleary take over where an overwhelmed parent left off. They meet with the school to establish an IEP, when appropriate, creating a personalized plan for the student. If services outside of the school seem to be a better fit for the student, they help families find other cost-efficient avenues, such as therapeutic day school placement.

Hansen recalled a recent case where a young woman, near to graduate high school, was identified with severe learning disabilities. She was barely able to read, but her school officials initially rejected her as a candidate for services. Hansen & Cleary worked with the family and the school district, seeking additional testing to strengthen their case. Their work ultimately resulted in the girl receiving school-funded services, halting graduation and giving her a true opportunity to succeed.

“Her transformation was so remarkable. She is doing very well,” Hansen said. “Knowing we helped this young woman and other students in similar situations, is very rewarding. There is nothing better than helping families find the hope, answers and solutions that turn a young life around.”

For more information on Hansen & Cleary visit [www.hansencleary.com](http://www.hansencleary.com).