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**ADRIENNE WHEELER, 35**

**CO-FOUNDERS, JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY CENTER OF LOUISIANA**

PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER

Loyola University Law School graduates Ameca Reali and Adrienne Wheeler founded the Justice and Accountability Center (JAC) of Louisiana, whose most recent project was an "Expungement Day" in September, when more than 500 people came to Christian Unity Baptist Church in Tremé to seek help in getting their criminal records expunged. Reali and Wheeler now are sorting through those files.

"When our criminal justice system is as active as it is with arrests and two federal consent decrees, expungements become a vehicle for sustainability," Wheeler says, adding that background checks that turn up criminal records can prevent employment, housing and other services.

"Outside of jobs, it really can affect one's ability to engage in a community, volunteer, have custody of kids, volunteer at your kids' school, walk in a parade with them — it's not just jobs, which is huge, but it also reconnects with the things that help you stay grounded," Reali says.

Expungements typically take a year, though the process isn't uniform statewide and varies from parish to parish. In Orleans Parish, Wheeler says, one must get the records, wait for a hearing date, pay \$250 for the expungement, and wait for a certificate of compliance from the state police — which can deny the request or ask for more information before it is processed.

JAC also serves as ground zero for addressing Louisiana's criminal justice anomalies. It works with community partners, from Mary Queen of Vietnam Church to Resurrection After Exoneration, to offer legal clinics and clinics for lawyers to help spread knowledge of how to perform expungements, among other services, such as post-conviction relief, that don't have other organizations promoting them. JAC's goal is to be a model for developing a legal service within the community that would make JAC obsolete.

"We pick one, work the model, hopefully fix it, share it, spread it and pick another piece," Reali says. — ALEX WOODWARD