The Tenant Assistance Project offers help to panicking tenants on the verge of losing their apartments. One of these tenants is Tomasini, a small neighborhood downtown volunteer who, before she received her legal training, used an alias when she signed her lease more than twenty years ago. Today, an U.S. citizen, she must face this community in a legal setting. "The past three months I have fought on my own for safe, affordable housing," she says. "For people in the neighborhood, including a hand full of the 400 people who stage a six month renter's strike to get critical repairs to their apartments to no avail, Tomasini has given them hope in an otherwise hopeless situation.

Tomasini free of charge to low-rent expert of public interest attorney Tenant Assistance Project offers the legal assistance to low-rent tenants living between 100th to 110th Street and Broadway to Central Park West. The Tenant Assistance Program was founded to balance the effects of building development and to help protect the integrity of a neighborhood. This program is designed to address community fears about what some see as an inescapable tide of gentrification in this neighborhood," said Executive Vice President for Administration, Emily Lloyd, whose office teamed with Columbia Law School Dean Ellen Chopnick, coordinator of the Law School's housing program and Bill Scott, deputy vice president for Institutional Real Estate to realize the project. "With a new residential building going up at 110th Street and Broadway, we understand our contribution to such change. But it is our intention to do what we can to help existing residents stay in this diverse and dynamic neighborhood," Lloyd said. "Helping to protect the renter's rights of current Manhattan Valley residents is an important step toward addressing the issues that face this community." Whether they are low-income tenants who speak little English, recent college graduates trying to make it on their own, or an U.S. citizen who, before she received her legal training, used an alias when she signed her lease more than twenty years ago, Today, an U.S. citizen, she must face this community in a legal setting. "The past three months I have fought on my own for safe, affordable housing," she says. "For people in the neighborhood, including a hand full of the 400 people who stage a six month renter's strike to get critical repairs to their apartments to no avail, Tomasini has given them hope in an otherwise hopeless situation.

"Denise knows the law and she is totally on our side," said one tenant at 106th Street. "We feel taken care of.

For Tomasini, who graduated from Columbia Law School (LS '98) and Columbia School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), '99 to practice international human rights law, working with renter tenants is natural extension of her interests. "I actually went to law school to do this kind of public interest work," said Tomasini, who previously worked with legal services for New York providing legal assistance to the mental ill. "The past three months I have seen this little piece of community actually empowered to do something about the conditions they are faced with. That is why I am here."

The program also provides an opportunity for Law School students to perform part of the required 40 hours of public service to the communitie immediately surrounding the campus. Up to 12 Columbia Law School students in their first and second years will assist Tomasini with her cases as she does her part to help keep the area a good place to live for its residents over the next two years. "I always wondered what kind of neighborhood Columbia University was. Now here is something tangible," said Jorge, a resident at 106th Street who is battling his landlord for apartment repairs. "It is good that the University is doing this sort of thing."

The program was prompted by the establishment of a Columbia Riverside Tenant Assistance Project, which will be funded for two years, is one of several programs that bring services to Manhattan Valley. Others include ESL training and job fairs that have linked area residents with Columbia projects.