Motivations for Law Student Pro Bono: Lessons Learned from the Tuscaloosa Tornado

Kelly Alison Behre
West Virginia University College of Law

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/bpilj

Part of the Legal Education Commons, and the Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/bpilj/vol31/iss1/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Buffalo Public Interest Law Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.
MOTIVATIONS FOR LAW STUDENT PRO BONO: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TUSCALOOSA TORNADO

KELLY ALISON BEHRE†

Abstract: After a tornado devastated Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on April 27, 2011, law students at the University of Alabama organized and engaged in substantial legal and nonlegal service. Narratives from these students in the midst of their volunteer efforts reveal detailed accounts of their experiences and motivations for their service. In a time in which national law student pro bono rates remain low and law students continue to lose interest in social justice issues during their time in law school, these student narratives offer insight into why law students chose to volunteer through the lens of students who rose to the occasion following a natural disaster in their backyard. This Article identifies themes in law student motivations for pro bono and suggests ways in which law schools can implement programmatic, curricular, and cultural changes in law schools to increase rates of law student pro bono.

† Visiting Associate Professor, West Virginia University College of Law. I must thank the volunteer students at The University of Alabama School of Law for sharing their stories with me and for their inspiration. I also wish to thank my colleagues at West Virginia University College of Law and The University of Alabama School of Law, as well as the participants at the 2012 Ohio Legal Scholarship Workshop for their insights, edits, and support. This work was funded in part by the West Virginia University College of Law Hodges Research Fund.
I. INTRODUCTION .............................................................3

II. LEGAL EDUCATION AND THE COMMITMENT TO ACCESS TO JUSTICE ...........................................5
    A. Access to Justice .....................................................5
    B. Law School Programming to Increase Public Interest and Pro Bono Services .....................................6
    C. Law School Shortcomings .......................................10

III. THE TUSCALOOSA TORNADO .....................................14
    A. Student Interviews ................................................16
    B. The University of Alabama School of Law on April 27, 2011 .........................................................17
    C. Student Narratives of Volunteer Activities ..................22
    D. The Tornado Relief Legal Assistance Project ..............27

IV. THEMES IN STUDENT MOTIVATIONS FOR SERVICE .................................................................28
    A. Initial Motivation ....................................................28
    B. Meaningful Experiences .........................................30
        1. Personal Contact .............................................30
        2. Organized Opportunities .....................................31
        3. Utilizing Special Skills .....................................31
        4. Developing New Skills .....................................34
    C. Membership in the Community ................................34
    D. A Shift in Individual Values ...................................38
        1. Decisions between Volunteering and Studying .......38
        2. Adjusting Individual Values .................................40
        3. Reflecting on Law School Values .........................44
    E. A Change in Law School Culture .............................46
    F. The Missing Role of Professional Responsibility .......49
    G. Lasting Impact? ....................................................50

V. SUGGESTIONS BASED ON LESSONS LEARNED ...........52
    A. Empowering Students through Meaningful Volunteer Experiences .......................................................52
B. Increasing the Value Placed on Law Student Pro Bono ................................................................. 54
C. Nurturing a Pro Bono Culture at Law Schools .......... 55
D. Infusing the Curriculum with Public Interest Narratives ................................................................. 57
E. Creating and Strengthening Community Ties .......... 58

VI. CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................... 60

I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine law students providing significant voluntary pro bono services to their community. Now imagine that most of these law students never engaged in pro bono work while in law school and most have no interest in future public interest employment. Now imagine this substantial volunteer work occurring during the period allocated for law school final exams. As a visiting clinical professor at The University of Alabama, I witnessed this tremendous outpouring of student volunteerism following a devastating tornado. Law students provided pro bono service through a newly created Tornado Relief Legal Assistance Project while taking final examinations and coping with their own personal losses.¹ Students at The University of Alabama School of Law were certainly not the first to respond to a disaster in their community,² nor will they likely be the last, but their narratives offer a window into law student volunteerism.

¹ Seventy-three students attended the training for the Disaster Relief Assistance Project and at least forty students volunteered for an intake shift within one week of the training. Although there is no official estimate of the total number of students who engaged in public service following the tornado, students interviewed believe that the vast majority of the second- and third-year students, as well as a significant portion of first-year students, provided some kind of volunteer work.

Despite the articulated commitment by law schools to both public interest careers and pro bono work by those in private sector careers, studies show students lose interest in public interest work during their time in law school\(^3\) and that most lawyers fail to provide the aspirational number of pro bono hours set by state bars and professional responsibility rules.\(^4\) Several theories describe the disconnect between the goals of legal education to provide legal services to those unable to afford them and the continuing lack of legal services available to those who need it.\(^5\) This Article adds student narratives to the literature on law school pro bono by illustrating the motivations of law students participating in pro bono activities.

Following the tornado in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, I completed twenty interviews with students who volunteered in the newly created disaster relief clinic about their motivations to volunteer. I spoke with or received e-mails from an additional twelve students about their volunteer experiences and motivations following the tornado. Though small in number and not part of a random sample, the student interviews proved rich in detail. In addressing why Alabama law students performed pro bono work in the wake of a disaster, these student narratives documented the transformation of individual values, law school culture, and service efforts of New York City law students following September 11, 2011); Melissa Gibson Swain and JoNel Newman, *Helping Haiti in the Wake of Disaster: Law Students as First Responders*, 6 INT’L HUM. RTS. REV. 133, 133–34 (2001) (describing University of Miami law student efforts in an emergency immigration clinic following the earthquake in Haiti); Matthew Wilkes, *Teaching Through Tragedy: The Aftermath of September 11—A Community Service Response*, 34 CASE W. RES. J. INT’L. L. 205, 205–06 (2002) (describing the role of New York Law School students responding to the September 11th attacks); William Quigley, *Clinic in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina*, JUSTICE JOURNAL: LOYOLA LAW CLINIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON (Fall 2005), available at http://www.aals.org/documents/2006clinical/outlines/BuchertLoyolaLawClinicNewsletter2.pdf (describing the public service work of Loyola Law School students relocated in Houston and University of Houston Law students following Hurricane Katrina).

---
\(^3\) See infra notes 24–28 and accompanying text.
\(^4\) See infra note 37 and accompanying text.
\(^5\) See infra notes 29–36 and accompanying text.
definitions of community following the tornado. This unusual set of circumstances may provide insight into motivations for student volunteerism and provide guidance on how to increase rates of participation in not only the law school setting, but throughout law students' future careers.

Part II of this Article provides an overview of the commitment by law schools to increasing access to justice through public interest and pro bono work and addresses surveys and reports that find the reality falls short of this commitment. Part III provides a description of the Tuscaloosa tornado and its impact on students, including student experiences during and immediately following the tornado. Part IV identifies themes that emerged through student interviews on the motivations for student volunteerism following a natural disaster. Part V offers some broad suggestions on ways in which lessons learned from students can be used to strengthen law school commitment to public interest and pro bono services, including programmatic, curricular, and cultural changes.

II. LEGAL EDUCATION AND THE COMMITMENT TO ACCESS TO JUSTICE

A. Access to Justice

A significant need for accessible legal services persists in the United States. The gap between the combined capacity of public interest organizations and pro bono programs and the number of low-income people who need affordable civil legal services is well documented. An estimated 80% of the legal needs of low-income people go unmet. There is one legal aid attorney

---

for every 6,415 individuals below the federal poverty line compared with a ratio of one private attorney for every 429 Americans in the general population, and less than 20% of private attorneys provide pro bono services to low-income clients. The increase in low-income families coupled with the recent funding reductions to legal aid and public interest organizations have further exacerbated the problem. Though debate persists over who should be responsible to remedy this gap, attorneys have accepted at least part of the responsibility. The legal community’s official commitment to pro bono is evidenced by the inclusion of rules regarding pro bono services by the American Bar Association (ABA). The ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct and the ABA Model Code of Professional Responsibility both explicitly encourage pro bono service by attorneys.

B. Law School Programming to Increase Public Interest and Pro Bono Services

As the bar works to address the need for pro bono services and the lack of funding for public interest positions, much focus has turned to law schools to train future lawyers on the importance by low-income people (less than one in five) are addressed with the assistance of either a private attorney (pro bono or paid) or a legal aid attorney.”).


See MODEL RULES OF PROF’L CONDUCT R. 6.1 (1983) (“A lawyer should render public interest legal service’’); MODEL CODE OF PROF’L RESPONSIBILITY EC 2–25 (1981) (stating that the “basic responsibility for providing legal services for those unable to pay ultimately rests upon the individual lawyer . . . . Every lawyer, regardless of professional prominence or professional workload, should find time to participate in serving the disadvantaged.”); id. at EC 8-3 (“Those persons unable to pay for legal services should be provided needed services.”).
of pro bono service and to provide students with the necessary skills. In the law school accreditation standards, the ABA requires law schools provide law students with pro bono opportunities.\textsuperscript{11} Law schools have indicated their willingness to take on this challenge and demonstrated their commitment to increasing access to legal services for underserved populations in a variety of ways.\textsuperscript{12} One such strategy utilized by law schools is the removal or lessening of financial barriers that prevent students from entering full-time public interest positions or providing significant pro bono services through private practice after graduation. More than ninety law schools currently offer Loan Repayment Assistance Programs (LRAPs) to assist graduates who enter public interest positions with student debt.\textsuperscript{13} Several law schools also offer public interest scholarships and fellowships to reduce the amount of student loans future public interest attorneys borrow to fund their


\textsuperscript{12} See The Association of American Law Schools, Commission on Pro Bono and Public Service Opportunities, \textit{Pro Bono Report: Learning to Serve} (1997), \textit{available at} http://www.aals.org/probono/report.html (reporting that ninety-five percent of law school deans surveyed agreed that "an important goal of law schools was to instill in students a sense of obligation to perform pro bono work" and describing pro bono programs at law schools); \textit{See also Association of American Law Schools, Equal Justice Project Report, Pursuing Equal Justice: Law Schools and the Provisions of Legal Services} (March 2002), \textit{available at} http://www.aals.org/equaljustice/final_report.pdf (discussing the role legal education can play in the "severe maldistribution of legal resources.").

Summer fellowships at many law schools enable students to accept public interest positions during the summer and gain experience necessary to apply for those types of positions following graduation. At least fifteen schools offer public interest certificates for students who complete a specific curriculum and a required amount of pro bono service, and other schools offer certificates in specific areas of public interest law.

Law schools offer a wide variety of both public interest externships and clinics that enable students to learn new skills while providing legal services to those who would otherwise be unable to afford them. In particular, public interest oriented in-house clinics that offer free legal services to the surrounding community demonstrate law school commitment to access to justice. Law school-sponsored service learning opportunities provide additional opportunities for law school students to provide pro bono services throughout the country, often through an Alternative Spring Break.

Law schools are required to provide pro bono opportunities to students under accreditation standards, but many do more. At least twenty-one law schools currently require students to provide

---


15 See id. (listing law schools with summer fellowships available to students engaging in public service).


17 For an example of a service-learning law school course, see Laurie Morin and Susan Waysdorf, The Service-Learning Model in the Law School Curriculum, 56 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 561, 561–62 (2011/2012) (describing a hybrid course at UDC entitled “Katrina and Beyond”).

18 See American Bar Association, supra note 11.
pro bono legal services in order to graduate. An additional eighteen schools have a public service or community service graduation requirement. An additional 118 law schools have formal, voluntary pro bono programs available to students. Pro bono programming in law schools not only offers independent educational value to students by providing them with practical experience, it also teaches students about the importance of providing public service and creates a culture of commitment.

---

19 See American Bar Association Standing Committee on Pro Bono & Public Service and the Center for Pro Bono, CHART OF LAW SCHOOL PRO BONO PROGRAMS (June 24, 2011), available at http://apps.americanbar.org/legalservices/probono/lawschools/pbprogramschart.html (listing law school mandatory pro bono programs, which generally require thirty to forty hours of service prior to graduation).

20 Id. Some of these programs require public service uncompensated by money or credit, while others require students to fulfill this requirement through participation in a law school clinic or externship.

21 Id.


Through implementation of this mandate, Columbia expresses its conviction that service pro bono publico (“for the public good”) is a cornerstone of every attorney’s professional responsibilities. All students must perform at least 40 hours of law-related, uncompensated service in order to graduate. By doing pro bono legal work while in law school, students will prepare to join lawyers, in all practice areas, who provide free legal services to individuals and groups who cannot afford these services or whose needs are underrepresented.

Id. At the University of the District of Columbia Law School, where a minimum of forty hours of pro bono legal community services are required during the first year, the school advertises that “[s]tudents frequently find community service to be an enlightening experience that creates or cements a commitment to use the legal system to fight injustice.” UDC ADMISSIONS WEBSITE, available at www.law.udc.edu/?page=CommunityService.
C. Law School Shortcomings

Although law schools demonstrate impressive strides towards supporting students with public interest aspirations and encouraging pro bono services by all students, law schools continue to fall short of their articulated goals. Studies show a significant decrease between the percentage of entering law students who aspire to work in the public interest field and the percentage of graduating law students who maintain that aspiration.23 A survey of students at the University of California in 1975 found that 37% of first-year law students planned to work as “movement,” “poverty,” or “public interest” attorneys, but that by their third year, only 22% maintained the aspiration.24 A similar study at the University of Denver Law School in 1977 found that thirty-three percent of first-year students identified public interest as a preferred occupation and that only half of those students maintained that preference by the end of their third year.25 A Law School Admissions Council study conducted on a graduating class of 1994 found that 9.35% of students expressed a desire to work in the public interest and only 2.8% of graduates actually entered such employment.26 A survey of female students at the University of Pennsylvania found that 33% expected to enter public interest work during their first year compared to only 10% of third-year students.27 Even at Northeastern, a law school known for its public

27 See Guinier, Fin & Balin, Becoming Gentleman: Women’s Experiences at One Ivy League Law School, 143 U. PA. L. REV. 1, 40 (1994). In response to the survey question “What kind of law do you expect to practice?” 33% of responding female first-year students selected “public interest,” while only 10% of responding female third-year students selected “public interest.” In the same
interest commitment, 73% percent of first-years wanted non-corporate law work and less than half of them indicated the same aspirations by their third year.28 In spite of changes to the law school curriculum and priorities, public interest drift persists more than four decades after it was first noted.

Several theories emerged to explain the negative impact of law school education on the aspirations of public interest lawyers. Both Equal Justice Works and the ABA Commission on Loan Repayment and Forgiveness note the role of the increasing cost of legal education and student debt on the decreasing interest in public interest employment.29 Despite the increasing number of LRAPs available to assist students with law school debt, the higher salaries promised by private practice remain a powerful incentive. Nonetheless, money alone cannot explain the decrease in student aspirations to engage in public interest work.30

Alternative explanations for public interest drift focus on the socialization process of law schools and the higher value

---


30 There are several critiques of the theory that student loan debt is solely or primarily responsible for the decreased interest in public interest employment. See Tan N. Nguyen, An Affair to Forget: Law School’s Deleterious Effect on Students’ Public Interest Aspirations, 7 CONN. PUB. INT. L.J. 251, 256 (2008); see also Stone, supra note 26, at n.20 (discussing the role of money on public interest aspirations and summarizing studies and books on the issue); see also Duncan Kennedy, Legal Education as Training for Hierarchy, in THE POLITICS OF LAW 54–55 (David Kairys ed., 3d ed. 1998).
placed on private practice by faculty and career services. David Chambers notes that the correlation between high grades and large law firm jobs, along with the correlation between the number of on-campus interviews for large law firms, impact the decreasing student interest in public service employment. Duncan Kennedy suggests that law professors from the private sector teach students that legal services practices, “while morally respected . . . [are] boring, unchallenging, and, less prestigious financially.” In the competitive setting of law school, large firm jobs become the prize. Another proposed explanation focuses on both the explicit and implicit effects law school faculties have on their students’ commitment to public interest. Law school professors with employment history in large private law firms may portray a negative image of public interest, and students tend to gravitate towards the careers examples set by their professors’ career example.

Other critiques note the nature of the law school curriculum, with its focus on appellate case method, use of the Socratic method, emphasis on the normative value of the law, course offerings focused on corporate law topics, and failure to expose students to the skills necessary to practice public interest law. Adrienne Stone warns faculty that “law teachers should know that, though they may have much to give their students, the powerful experience of legal education can rob students of a valuable commitment to the public interest.”

32 See Kennedy, supra note 30, at 55; see also Nguyen, supra note 30, at 256.
33 See Stone, supra note 26, at n.20.
34 See Nguyen, supra note 30, at 256.
36 See Stone, supra note 26, at 551.
Even if the drift from public interest aspirations to private sector aspirations is inevitable, it remains important to nurture students’ initial commitment to public interest. Students who maintain this commitment will seek out pro bono opportunities in private practice and increase access to justice. Unfortunately, there remains a lack of private attorneys doing pro bono work. In spite of the professional aspirational requirements for pro bono work, most attorneys do not provide free legal services to those unable to afford them, and those that do tend to provide minimal hours.\(^{37}\)

The AALS Report on Pro Bono found “a wide gap persists between the law schools’ formal policies and institutional practices.”\(^{38}\) Even with the increase in pro bono programs at law schools, most students do not participate in law-related pro bono projects.\(^{39}\) If attorney commitment to pro bono begins in law school, then law schools must increase student participation in pro bono programs if they hope to increase participation in pro bono by the bar.\(^{40}\)

Law schools committed to creating a new generation of attorneys who consistently provide pro bono services to low-income clients in order to partially remedy the access to justice gap must reflect on the values they instill in law students and consider new programmatic strategies. In addition to collaborating with the bar and public interest organizations, law schools should look to their own students for guidance. It is important to consider what motivates the law students actually engaging in pro bono activities in law schools and to determine what intrinsic and extrinsic factors


\(^{38}\) Association of American Law Schools, supra note 12 (Foreword by Deborah L. Rhode).

\(^{39}\) Id.

law schools can influence to increase pro bono participation by
students and graduates.

III. THE TUSCALOOSA TORNADO

The largest tornado outbreak recorded in the United States occurred in April 2011. In Alabama alone, sixty-two confirmed
storms moved across the state on April 27, 2011, causing at least
248 fatalities statewide.41 The long-track tornado that targeted
Tuscaloosa was more than one mile wide and left a 5.9 mile path of destruction, effectively destroying 12% of the city. 42 The Tuscaloosa hospital system reported treating more than 1,200 people during the initial twelve hours following the tornado, and there were forty-three confirmed fatalities in Tuscaloosa alone,43 including seven college students and nine children.44 7,371 residential homes in Tuscaloosa County were damaged, including
2,375 homes which were completely destroyed.45 Of the thousands of homes destroyed, 61% were rented by families with a median

42 Id. at 23.
44 Jason Morton, 52nd Fatality Added to Storms Death Toll, TUSCALOOSA NEWS, Sept. 30, 2011, http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110930/NEWS/110929702 (reporting that forty-three people died in Tuscaloosa from injuries directly caused by the tornado and an additional nine victims died from conditions related to the tornado); Chris Pow, Family, Friends Remember Students Killed in Tuscaloosa Tornado, AL.COM (Oct. 27, 2011, 11:17 AM), http://blog.al.com/tuscaloosa/2011/10/family_friends_remember_studen.html (reporting that fatalities from the tornado included six students enrolled at the University of Alabama and one student enrolled at Shelton State.) In addition, there were 11 confirmed fatalities in neighboring rural counties: Bibb, Fayette, and Hale. See Jones, supra note 43.
income of less than $28,000, including a large, public housing complex.\textsuperscript{46}

In a city with a pre-tornado population of 90,000,\textsuperscript{47} more than 10,000 residents were displaced\textsuperscript{48} and more than 7,000 people became unemployed in less than six minutes.\textsuperscript{49} Officials estimated that more than one million cubic yards of debris was generated in Tuscaloosa County,\textsuperscript{50} and residents in other parts of Alabama and in neighboring states reported finding mail and photographs that traveled hundreds of miles on debris clouds from Tuscaloosa.\textsuperscript{51} Among the destroyed buildings were the Tuscaloosa Emergency Management Agency, the local Red Cross office, the Salvation Army shelter, the Environmental Service Department, fire departments, police stations, schools, and churches.\textsuperscript{52} This contributed to a situation the mayor described as “taking on a disaster with two hands tied behind our back.”\textsuperscript{53} Further complicating the relief efforts was the fact that most of the city lacked potable water, electricity, phone lines, and cell phone

\begin{footnotesize}


\textsuperscript{48} See Maddox, supra note 46.

\textsuperscript{49} See TORNADO RECOVERY, supra note 41, at 23.

\textsuperscript{50} See Jones, supra note 43, at 1.

\textsuperscript{51} Id.

\textsuperscript{52} Morton, supra note 44.

\textsuperscript{53} Id.
\end{footnotesize}
A. Student Interviews

The impetus for this paper began one week after the tornado when several students informally visited my office to share how their volunteer experiences following the tornado had transformed their entire law school experience. Their sentiments echoed those of another group of law students I unexpectedly ran into days earlier as I was distributing water to residents and volunteers in the Holt community. I wondered what it was about their personal volunteer experiences that had created such a profound impact on their personal narrative of law school education and whether there were any aspects of disaster-related volunteerism that could be replicated to create pro bono programs at law schools with similar results.

One of my roles in the newly-created Tornado Relief Legal Assistance Project (“Legal Project”) was to schedule student volunteers for each intake location and assist in supervision. I generally supervised students at the Soma church location in Holt, an outdoor location with a portable tent and table established for walk-up clients, and the Belk Community Center which served as the official Red Cross Shelter. These were not formal interviews with a consistent set of questions or a recorder, but rather informal conversations recorded by hand. They occurred during lulls between client intakes, and they focused around my central question of “why are you here?” The students with whom I spoke were eager to share their stories and those of their friends, painting a detailed, if incomplete, picture of the public service activities provided by Alabama law students following the tornado and the motivations for that service. I interviewed a total of twenty

students\textsuperscript{56} during the initial two weeks of the Legal Project, through individual and group interviews. Following these interviews, I spoke with an additional twelve students\textsuperscript{57} for shorter amounts of time in my office or by e-mail. This project was not intended to be an empirical study, but rather an impromptu collection of narratives focused on student motivations for public service in the midst of that service.\textsuperscript{58}

Interviewed students utilized a narrative format to explain their motivations to volunteer, describing how one volunteer activity led to another and the fluid nature of their decisions about where and how to volunteer. Students included their experiences during and immediately following the tornado as part of their individual narratives. When specifically asked to explain their motivation to provide pro bono legal services in the Legal Project, students indicated that their motivations to provide general volunteer work differed little from their motivations to participate in the Legal Project. Because student narratives did not distinguish between various forms of volunteer activities, this section summarizes student experiences between the tornado (April 27, 2011) and the date of the interview (May 5, 2011 through May 13, 2011).

\textbf{B. The University of Alabama School of Law on April 27, 2011}

Wednesday, April 27, 2011, was the first day of finals for the Spring 2011 semester at The University of Alabama School of Law. Many students reported waking up early when a loud series

\textsuperscript{56} The twenty students interviewed included nine third-year students, ten second-year students, and one first-year student.

\textsuperscript{57} Additional information was provided by twelve students, including nine third-year students and three second-year students.

\textsuperscript{58} The University of Alabama Office of Research Compliance, Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that the interviews contained within this project did not constitute human subjects research and that the project did not require IRB approval and was therefore excluded from review by IRB.
of severe storms, including one small tornado, rolled through the county, blowing down trees and knocking out power to several neighborhoods and downtown streets. The morning storms proved to be an ominous warning of the day to come. Both city and county schools were dismissed because of the threat of severe weather and the likelihood that another tornado would form. The National Weather Bureau issued tornado warnings for most of the state and forecasters indicated that deadly tornados were almost a certainty, warning local citizens to take precautions. Students heard reports throughout the day about tornados touching down across Mississippi and Alabama, and several students mentioned watching videos on the Internet of a tornado in downtown Cullman, Alabama, and another moving directly towards the small towns of Hackleburg and Phil Campbell in northeast Alabama.

Students at the law school were studying, taking finals, writing papers, and completing clinic work. The sirens at the law school and across the city began ringing around 4:10 p.m. and continued with updates until the tornado arrived an hour later. Students initially moved into the student lobby area where they could watch the weather report on television and walk outside the glass doors to get a better glimpse of the sky. After several weeks of tornado warnings, many students admitted they were not initially concerned. As the tornado approached Tuscaloosa, students were instructed to move to the first floor of the older part of the building. Students sat in a hallway surrounded by lockers watching updates on their laptops or on computers in the law review office. One student sat in the stairwell with a friend “clutching her Con Law notes” wondering if she was going to die when power went out and her ears began to pop from the pressure. Later that evening, a video posted by Crimson Tide Productions on the website Vimeo showed the tornado closely passing the law school building.

60 Id.
Only a few blocks from the law school, “less than a football field away from the path of the tornado,” one law student hid in her closet. Although her apartment was relatively untouched by the storm, her complex sustained damage. She and a neighboring law student tried to walk to the law school through an area they described as “zombie land” and narrowly missed being hit by a car speeding toward the hospital. Nearby, a student watched the live news coverage with her roommate before moving into the bathtub with their dog where she “truly believed we would die but couldn’t process the situation enough to be scared.” When the tornado passed, the glass from the windows was gone, as were pieces of the roof, but the walls were still standing. Another student living in one of the few homes with a basement hid there with her roommate, praying. They emerged to find the entire second floor of the house gone and the first floor severely damaged. A few miles from campus, one student stood in her kitchen with her bike helmet on, hugging sofa cushions, watching the weather report on a stray Internet signal announcing a massive tornado was heading directly to her neighborhood. Afterwards, relieved to be alive, she confessed that she began to cry. Across the river, two students stocked their apartment closet with water, a laptop, and their cats, before they hid in it watching the news. Initially, they were tremendously relieved when the tornado slightly turned directions and was no longer headed toward their apartment. The relief was short-lived once they realized the tornado was heading directly toward the law school where they knew many of their friends had taken cover. South of Tuscaloosa in Taylorville, a student stood in her friend’s backyard and watched in disbelief as the tornado moved through Tuscaloosa, wondering who would survive.

Immediately following the tornado, students at the law school walked around the law school building, surveying downed trees and noting the power outage across campus. Initially unaware of the extent of devastation in Tuscaloosa and across the state, they stood outside—on what quickly became a beautiful evening—
trying to get cell phone signals to call family and friends. Though the Internet at the school was inaccessible, students with smartphones began receiving Facebook and Twitter updates around 6:00 p.m. about significant damage behind the law school on Fifteenth Street. Students walked to survey the damage and to see how they could help. Police officers in the area warned students that another tornado could be coming and advised them to return to the school. Students at the law school continued to worry about other students, friends, and family in Tuscaloosa and across the state as the list of devastated neighborhoods grew and as students arrived with first-hand accounts of the destruction. As students attempted to return home, many were forced to return to the law school after discovering they were unable to access their homes or apartments on foot because of police roadblocks, downed wires, and search and rescue efforts. They did not know if they were homeless or merely displaced, nor did they know whether their pets had survived.

Students who were in apartments and homes during the tornado were also frantically trying to reach others. Some tried to walk to the law school to confirm that everyone was alright or to escape destroyed neighborhoods. Those who attempted to drive to the law school spent hours trying to travel a few miles, commenting that the destruction was both horrifying and disorienting. Others who walked toward Fifteenth Street to locate friends and to see how they could help were told by firefighters to

62 Those who managed a call or text shared phones with those who could not, but after a few minutes, no one could access cell service.
63 One student, a veteran, ventured into neighboring destroyed communities with a survival pack.
64 Students began to trickle in from the Forest Lake neighborhood and homes around Hackberry Road with terrifying stories of destruction and pulling neighbors out of rubble and from beneath chimneys. One student arrived at the law school after surviving the tornado in his destroyed apartment and digging through the rubble looking for another law student who lived in the same complex. It was only after arriving at the school that he discovered his friend had been at the law school the entire time.
Students located outside of the destroyed communities prepared for long-term guests and tried to get word to other students that they could stay with them.

Students at the law school also began to plan for the needs of the law school student body by locating food and water for everyone staying at the school. They began the process of contacting all law students, and estimated that they had accounted for all but four or five students by the end of the night. The Student Body Association organized lists of places where homeless and displaced law students could stay, and by midnight, every displaced student had a place to stay. Student leaders also tried to coordinate with the law school administration to confirm that finals would be canceled the next day.

Students all reported having gone to sleep Wednesday night with at least a few unanswered questions, many of which would remain unanswered throughout the week. Were all of their friends and family alive and uninjured? Were their apartments and homes still standing? Where were they going to live? How were they going to replace all of their belongings? How were they going to write class papers without books or notes? When were they going to take finals? When would power return? Would graduation still be held in a week? How extensive was the damage to the city? How many people were dead? Why did they survive? What could they do to help?

Students reported that on Wednesday night they were unable to predict how Tuscaloosa would change in the following

---

65 One student whose apartment had mostly survived in the destroyed community of Forrest Lake became fearful as she encountered flipped cars and the smell of gasoline and decided to evacuate and stay with friends. She described the initial scene as so quiet that she thought everyone must be dead. Other students drove through the city to try to find friends they couldn’t reach. One spent an hour trying to drive a few miles into the Alberta City community to locate a friend she couldn’t contact. The friend was uninjured, but had watched the tornado destroy her neighborhood from her bedroom window before hiding in the closet.
weeks, but they soon learned. The physical landscape of the city was transformed by the loss of buildings and trees. Communication changed as electricity and grounded phone lines became a luxury, and cell service remained spotty at best. Traveling changed as residents learned how to navigate around inaccessible neighborhoods and police roadblocks. Roads filled with cars without glass, large convoys of electric trucks, and pickup trucks filled with donations. Planes and helicopters regularly flew overhead. The National Guard, volunteers, and members of the media flooded the city. Curfews were enacted and rumors of looting and violence spread. Makeshift donation centers appeared on street corners, parking lots, and church lawns. People began to mark time as before and after the tornado.

C. Student Narratives of Volunteer Activities

The Tornado Relief Legal Assistance Project was not the first post-tornado volunteer activity for any of the interviewed law students. To the contrary, every student had engaged in varied volunteer work throughout the week between the tornado and the Legal Project training. The pro bono work provided through the Legal Project was only one piece of a greater pattern of volunteerism in the community.

Though a few law students began their volunteer work in the hours immediately following the tornado—walking to neighboring communities or assisting at the hospital\textsuperscript{66}—the

\textsuperscript{66} A student who had been in her apartment during the tornado walked to her church on campus to see how she could help. From there, she took an elderly man covered in blood to the hospital whose arm had been slashed by a lamp. She described the scene outside the hospital as a “zombie film—people all over parking lot in muddy clothes and bright red injuries illuminated by lights from cars and police vehicles.” The entire hospital functioned as one large emergency room, with nurses and medics handing out color-coded plastic cards to patients labeled with names for those whose identity could be determined and code names for those who were unconscious. The hospital had emergency lighting provided by a generator, but without air conditioning, the condensation built on walks and hallways. The student tried to help people who were alone by talking to them or bringing them water and was surprised by the number or people she recognized from local restaurants and stores who were among the injured.
A majority began the following morning. Students initially focused on assessing their own needs and the needs of their friends and fellow students. Those with apartments or homes outside of the tornado’s area of destruction hosted other students who had either lost their homes or were unable to gain access to their homes. The number of students taking refuge at other students’ homes created natural groups that lent themselves to the organizing that would occur throughout the week and assisted with communication challenges. During the first two days following the tornado, law school group volunteer efforts focused on assisting other law students negatively impacted by the storm. Students next assisted friends of friends and neighbors of law students.

---

67 One student and his roommate initially hosted ten students, two dogs, and four cats in their apartment. Even students whose homes were undamaged and accessible reported moving in with others because of the lack of power, fear of looters, or an emotional need to be around others during such a traumatic time. Several students reported finding creative ways around law enforcement roadblocks to enter their neighborhoods and those of their friends to assess property damage, rescue pets, and gather belongings. These stories were often relayed as humorous tales of success coming only after a series of failed efforts. Most concluded with the happy ending of reaching an apartment or home mostly intact, while other students’ stories then transitioned into painful narratives of digging through rubble to salvage personal items that survived the storm.

68 Students not only provided support for each other in the tedious process of salvaging through debris, but also in replacing their belongings and finding a permanent place to live. Students organized efforts to meet the specialized needs of law students through sharing class outlines, locating replacements for textbooks, and organizing a business clothing drive. In addition, students set up an ad hoc call center to assess all law student needs and pass along updates regarding finals and graduation. They used this information to let the administration know which students needed help and to organize trips from the law school to help students salvage and move. Students rented a U-Haul to help move belongings of several law students from a damaged apartment complex off Fifteenth Street and a destroyed home near Forrest Lake. One student commented that a single request for assistance at any given time resulted in more than thirty law students arriving to help.

69 Once law school student needs were met, students sought to identify new individuals they could assist. When they finished placing tarps on several student homes in Forrest Park, many students moved to the Forest Lake Baptist
Students who initially attempted to engage in volunteer activities through official routes were generally unsuccessful and frustrated by the process.\(^7\) Undeterred, students quickly spread the word to each other that the city of Tuscaloosa was turning away volunteers and that they would have to find other, unofficial ways to help. The students' experiences provided a foundation for creative thinking in navigating impacted neighborhoods and coordinating volunteer efforts. Narratives of successful efforts included themes of flexibility and a willingness to help in any way.\(^7\) Students worked to remedy some of the lack of

---

\(^7\) Church to assist with a makeshift distribution center. One student joked that only days ago she had planned to wake early Friday morning to watch the royal wedding but instead “woke early from a sleeping bag on my friend’s floor to hunt for belongings in a neighborhood resembling a landfill.” Another joked about the boosting law students up on a roof to help nail down a tarp after another volunteer organization said the task was too dangerous and removed the ladder. Students actively sought out individuals in neighborhoods near the school who needed assistance removing trees and putting tarps on homes.

\(^7\) Most students attempted unsuccessfully to donate blood throughout the week, finding the only donation sites overwhelmed by volunteers or out of supplies. Most students also reported attempting to attend the official volunteer meeting at St. Mathias Church, only to be told that there were too many volunteers and they were only using individuals with specific skills (medical and language) or equipment (chainsaws, heavy trucks). Others tried unsuccessfully to volunteer at the Community Soup Bowl and the Veterans’ Affairs Hospital, where some tornado victims received shelter. In another example, a small group of students went to the Belk Center, a community center serving as the primary emergency Red Cross shelter in Tuscaloosa with more than 500 residents on Friday. They planned to help unload a truck of donations organized by a law student, but stood outside for more than an hour waiting on official confirmation to begin unloading the truck. Several students commented on their frustration at the lack of organization when they tried to volunteer at the Belk Center. Students explained that though they understood the reasons for the lack of organization, they were frustrated because help was so badly needed by so many people.

\(^7\) One law student coordinated with his church from home to send a truck of donations and other students went to the Belk Center to help unload. Several students who went to help reported frustration with the lack of organization at the emergency shelter and the amount of time they stood outside waiting for official confirmation to begin unloading the truck.

\(^7\) For example, one student explained that after she was turned away from the Belk Center, she located an impromptu donation center set up in the parking lot.
coordination they witnessed in Tuscaloosa\textsuperscript{72} and to coordinate with communities outside of Tuscaloosa to provide needed help.\textsuperscript{73} Throughout the week following the tornado, students continued to expand their search for places to volunteer both in Tuscaloosa City\textsuperscript{74} and further away in the county.\textsuperscript{75} By the time the official

She helped people there break down large boxes of donations into more manageable care packages and sort out the food that would not survive the heat. She then jumped on the back of another volunteer’s truck and helped transport the supplies to the Leland Center parking lot in Alberta City, another area serving as a local distribution center. There, they grabbed a second load then drove slowly through damaged areas in Holt, handing out water and care packages to residents and rescue workers. Another student helped a friend at a local restaurant to distribute food to people near Brookwood.

\textsuperscript{72} Two student leaders commented on their realization that they could use the coordination of the law students to help coordinate various donation centers. For example, one group of law students asked volunteers distributing supplies at the Leland Center for a list of donation needs, then worked with a donation collection site at First Wesleyan Church to fill those requests and transport them to the Leland Center. Another group of law students volunteering in Holt asked volunteer leaders at Soma Church for a list of volunteer needs. They utilized law students to find or purchase most of the items on the list, including walkie talkies, roofing nails, hornet spray, sunscreen, batteries, and spot lights.

\textsuperscript{73} For example, one student returned from visiting family in Mississippi with a carload of donations from a church, and another returned from signing a summer lease in New Orleans with a carload of donations from friends. One student who remained in Tuscaloosa throughout the relief effort coordinated with his hometown church to fill a truck load of donations for survivors seeking shelter from the Belk Center.

\textsuperscript{74} During the weekend following the tornado, students continued to find new opportunities for public service across the city and county. Students worked at the law school to organize donations stacked in the student lobby and break them down into care packages to distribute at various locations. One student went with her visiting family to several nonprofits before finding volunteer opportunities at the Soup Bowl and the Alabama Food Bank, where she found her place organizing donations. Another student found herself at St. Mathias volunteer center utilizing her laptop to create a database of volunteer names and information. One student responded to a request for Spanish interpreters at Holy Spirit Catholic Church, a church serving many Latino families affected by the tornado. Two students volunteered at the metro Animal Shelter, where they said more than 1000 additional animals were sheltered following the tornado. Others
Tornado Relief Legal Assistance Project held its orientation at the law school, all of the students I interviewed had provided varied volunteer services in many of the hardest-hit neighborhoods in Tuscaloosa County.\textsuperscript{76}

worked to organize care packages from donations at a local church with friends. One student attended an early volunteer meeting at the Department of Transportation before being sent out on a team with a marked map and chainsaws to assist homeowners in a neighborhood between Alberta City and Holt. A small group of students heard that undocumented immigrants living in Alberta City in Tuscaloosa were hiding from law enforcement and fearful of obtaining help. They spent hours walking around Alberta City shouting Spanish phrases hoping to find undocumented families too nervous to ask for assistance.\textsuperscript{75} During the weekend following the tornado, law students also expanded their volunteer efforts further away from the law school. Many students found their way to the Holt community in Tuscaloosa County, where they used chainsaws to clear roads, climbed roofs to secure tarp, and assisted strangers in sifting through rubble to salvage for belongings. Others brought supplies into Holt and jumped on pickup trucks to distribute care packages to residents. Students reported that as many as forty law students, along with several staff and faculty, volunteered in the Holt community on Sunday after students who volunteered in Holt on Saturday spread the word that more help was needed. Students there helped sort through donations at Soma Church in Holt, where the community created a temporary distribution center under tents on the front lawn surrounded by destroyed homes and trailers. Another student helped distribute meals cooked at a local restaurant to Soma Church, before reloading the truck with MREs and water and driving west of Holt on dirt roads towards Brookwood, a small community in Tuscaloosa County. She described the scene as “mountainsides speckled with turned trailers and unnatural tree stumps; garbage dumps with pink insulation that looked like cotton candy sprinkled on top,” and expressed her surprise at the number of families she found camping on their land and insisting on self-sufficiency. A different group of students drove directly to Brookwood and the surrounding country to take requests from rural residents which they would then fill at a local community center distributing supplies. They also mentioned their surprise at the number of families with children camping next to destroyed homes because they did not want to move into a shelter.

\textsuperscript{76} As the new week began, students continued to respond to specific requests and tried to refocus on their studies or catch up on sleep. Nailing tarp to roofs was the most common activity on Monday as forecasters called for rain, and most students spent Tuesday helping outdoor donation centers cover or transfer donations inside. Others continued to move donations from collection sites to distribution centers. Students also helped clean law school student apartments...
D. The Tornado Relief Legal Assistance Project

Clinic faculty and staff at the University of Alabama School of Law coordinated with the local and state bars to create a new legal clinic and pro bono project to assist people impacted by the tornado. We were fortunate to receive offers of assistance from faculty and attorneys from across the country. Clinicians with experience creating legal clinics following Hurricane Katrina were especially helpful. The new clinic was created in less than a week and client intakes began on May 5, 2011. The initial student training was held on May 4, 2011, with seventy-three students in attendance. This two-hour training focused on housing law, insurance claims and processes, FEMA applications and appeals, public benefits, project policies and procedures, interviewing people in trauma, and self-care.

Students signed up for shifts performing walk-up intakes at the Belk Center (a community center temporarily serving as the main Red Cross Shelter), the Leland Center parking lot in Alberta City, the Soma Church lawn in Holt, Holy Spirit Catholic Church, and The University of Alabama School of Law. An additional location was established near the Druid City Hospital to assist hospital staff too overwhelmed with helping others to see to their own legal needs. Pro bono attorneys from the local bar also staffed the intake sights, along with clinic staff. Clinic staff brought completed intakes back to the law school clinic, where they were assigned to clinic staff, student volunteers, or pro bono attorneys. After the initial week, the law school provided some funding to pay several students for their work with the Legal Project. After a few weeks, the Civil Law Clinic Director and Staff Attorney created a summer class clinic focused on disaster relief and

covered in glass and debris and gathered boxes to assist with moves. On Wednesday, students volunteered at the Public Library assisting people filling out their online FEMA forms, hosted out-of-town volunteers, and planned a community candlelight vigil. One student began the long process of planning a city candlelight vigil.

77 Students attending the Project training signed an attendance sheet.
enrolled students continued with client intakes at the law school. None of the students were receiving financial compensation or academic credit at the time of the interviews, nor did they know that this would become an option in the future.

IV. THEMES IN STUDENT MOTIVATIONS FOR SERVICE

Several themes developed through the student narratives presented during interviews. Students focused on their initial need to help, the role of meaningful experiences in leading to the desire to find more meaningful experiences, the expanding definition of community, transitions in personal values, and the transformation of law school culture. Student narratives provided some insight into why students chose to provide volunteer services during such a challenging personal and academic time.

A. Initial Motivation

Initial motivations for volunteer efforts in Tuscaloosa were specific to the circumstances following a natural disaster in their community. The most prevalent theme that emerged from the student interviews was how the students’ “need to help” was the primary initial motivation for their volunteerism. Students explained that they “had no choice” and that “circumstances mandated doing something.” One student rejected my broad question about why she decided to volunteer when she stated: “I didn’t make a decision to help—I had to help.” Another rejected the description of his activities as volunteer work by explaining, “I didn’t think of it as volunteering. It’s hard to articulate, but it’s just what you do.” Several students described feelings of helplessness following the tornado and described how a compulsion to help immediately followed.

Other students described their initial volunteer efforts as a natural response to the shock of witnessing the tornado’s destruction. “The damage is in your face every day. The pictures don’t really do any of it justice. Seeing it firsthand makes you want to do something.” One student explained the shock and exhaustion that resulted from “seeing new neighborhoods every day that were
totally destroyed when there just wasn’t enough help to go around.” Another explained that he “couldn’t just stay home—I would have gone crazy just looking at the destruction on TV. I did that for one day and it was hard enough.”

Students disclosed that survivor guilt was another strong motivation for initial volunteer activities. One student explained that he helped because “if the tornado had moved twenty yards west, it would have been me.” Another mentioned that she believed “survivor’s guilt is a pretty normal feeling among law students right now.” Several others explained that they felt lucky to be alive or to still have a place to live with so many personal belongings: “I still have everything and so many others have nothing.” One student summed it up by stating: “There but for the grace of God go I. The tornado could have turned in any direction, hit anywhere or anyone.”

Students whose homes sustained damage from the tornado explained their need to give back to the community after receiving so much assistance from friends and strangers. “Every time we went to my house, there were people in the neighborhood offering help. We figured we should be doing the same. If we were able to, we should go do what we could for people who also needed help.” Another student explained, “I felt very blessed to have been mostly spared by the tornado even though we were in the thick of it.” She described how she and her husband only lost belongings and were already preparing to move following graduation, while neighbors lost family members and permanent homes. “I felt that being spared was a gift that I needed to return to others who were less fortunate. We had random people coming along all the time helping us out with our house and yard and we needed to do the same.” Students uniformly described their initial motivation for helping as a direct response to witnessing a natural disaster.
B. Meaningful Experiences

1. Personal Contact

Students most often explained their decision to volunteer in the Legal Project by referencing previous volunteer efforts during the week following the tornado. These narratives of past volunteer experiences provided explanations for continued volunteer efforts, including the Legal Project. Students often cited specific, meaningful volunteer experiences as the reason they signed up for the Legal Project. They shared stories about individuals they had enjoyed meeting and assisting in some way. Almost all of the interviewed students referenced at least one person who “inspired” them or made them feel “humbled.” One student explained how thankful one family was for his help clearing trees off their home: “I found out a few hours can make a huge difference to someone else.” Another student explained how inspired she was when she discovered that several of the most tireless volunteers she had worked with at a relief center had actually lost their homes as well. One student shared: “It makes you a lot more thankful for what you’ve got and drives you to do more. You see how much you can help someone with something so little. There was one woman in Holt—I only had a bag of ice to give her, but she hugged me for like five minutes and kept saying ‘Thank you, Jesus.’”

Students emphasized the importance of listening to strangers when they told their stories; “I’m here because it’s nice to talk to people and to provide someone for them to talk to. Even if we can’t answer many questions here, we can do the intakes and show we care.” One student explained, “Through intakes, I still get to talk to people and hear stories and provide an ear for them to vent.” Another stated that he was “still giving them someone to talk to—through law clinics or walking around Brookwood. Once you’re there, you meet all of these people who all have amazing stories. It just makes you a better person to be a part of it—better all the way around.” Student volunteer experiences that included personal, meaningful interaction with strangers proved to be the most powerful motivation for continued volunteer efforts.
2. Organized Opportunities

The organized nature of the Legal Project training and volunteer scheduling was also cited by students as the reason for their participation. Several students reported feeling frustration throughout the week in their efforts to volunteer through official channels. They were regularly turned away from the Belk Center, St. Mathias, and the blood bank because city officials were overwhelmed by volunteers. One student explained that though she was hesitant to criticize anyone trying to help, she was disappointed in the disorganization at all of the official shelters. Another explained that it was hard to learn “patience in volunteering” at a time in which he was so anxious and willing to help. “It would have been one thing if they didn’t need us—that would have been great, really—but they were still pulling survivors out days after the tornado and we were the first ones getting water to people in some cases, so we learned we were needed. We just had to figure out what to do and how to get there.”

Most of the opportunities students found were unorganized and largely self-motivated. While some students reported feeling empowered by their ability to locate volunteer opportunities through creative thinking and community organization skills, others reported finding the process exhausting and counterproductive. Students explained that by the end of the week, Tuscaloosa was flooded with volunteers and the same disaster relief centers that had been desperate for help days earlier were now trying to figure out how to utilize all of the fresh reinforcements. “After a week, even the worst neighborhoods were overwhelmed by volunteers with chainsaws,” a student explained. Organization became increasingly important to students in their selection of volunteer activities.

3. Utilizing Special Skills

Student narratives revealed that students often moved from initial volunteer roles that allowed them to help in any way they could to roles more defined by their skills or talents. Within a few
days of the tornado, several students moved into leadership or organizational roles. Students were often unable to explain these shifts, frequently stating that they simply responded to community needs in a fluid manner. Interviews revealed several students shifted from sorting donations at donation collection sites to organizing donation collections in home communities or assessing needs in destroyed neighborhoods and coordinating the movement of needed donations from collection centers to distribution centers. Other students assessed volunteer needs at different locations and organized the students into volunteer groups. Students also filled leadership roles at specific disaster relief locations in Holt and Alberta City as they learned to work with existing coordinators and took over specific coordinating needs. One such student commented on this experience: “I had no expertise in anything, but suddenly people were asking me questions. I realized none of us really knew what we were doing and it was more about people stepping up, you know? And once I found myself in that role, I learned the role. It was a little surreal, but in a good way.”

The new Legal Project was identified as a meaningful volunteer opportunity by many students because it utilized their talents and skills. When asked why they specifically signed up for the Legal Project, students often made references to their personal limitations in previous volunteer roles. Several commented that the Legal Project was a preferable alternative or break to their previous labor. One student explained that she believed she was more adept at conducting client interviews than using a chainsaw or moving tree limbs, and that after a week, she was ready for an opportunity that did not require “heavy lifting.” Another commented that the invincibility she felt immediately following the tornado was starting to wane and that she now realized she had “no business holding a chainsaw or climbing a roof.” One student admitted that though he had been happy to help in any way he could, “he was really sore and exhausted from physical labor” and knew that he was “more capable of providing legal services than working on more trees.” Another joked that it would be nice to have a day where he didn’t “step on nails” and regret not getting a tetanus update.
Several students acknowledged a growing frustration throughout the week at themselves for their lack of disaster-related skills. One told a story about sitting with other law students a few days after the tornado commenting on the uselessness of their education and skills during a disaster. They joked that after two years of law school “we can’t lift heavy things, we can’t sew up wounds, but we can discuss.” Two students who signed up to volunteer for the city through the official process at St. Matthias explained that they were disappointed to learn that the only skill organizers checked off on their applications based on their education and experience was data entry.

As word of the new Legal Project spread, students explained that they were excited to volunteer in a manner that was more specialized. One student explained that it was “finally an opportunity to use some skill that I had that not everyone else had.” Another said she was relieved to learn that “at least there’s something I can do that’s a little special. At least I can try.” Another explained that it was nice to know that my education “actually qualified me for something. This was a good way to help. I’m going to be a lawyer anyway—might as well use those skills to help.” Another student explained that though he enjoyed his work outdoors, “this seemed like a better use of resources. There are college kids who can continue to lift trees and move rubble, but I can help with the law.” Other students mentioned that as the week progressed, there was a shift to using professionals for tree and debris removal, shelter coordination, and medical care. One student explained that “it was time to find my niche.”

Students commented on their gradual understanding that victims of the tornado were going to need free legal advice. “I knew from my own experience in the community and from my time in the clinic last semester that people were going to need lawyers.” Another explained that she had already been asked a lot of questions about FEMA by other volunteers and was excited to learn that she “could be trained in an afternoon and could be doing something very beneficial.” The Legal Project provided
opportunities for students to use their professional training and find their niche.

4. Developing New Skills

A surprisingly few students explained that their willingness to volunteer in the Legal Project was influenced by their interest in gaining new legal knowledge and skills. One commented on the training, stating that “it was truly helpful and interesting—kind of like a mini-class of useful legal information.” Another developed a specific interest in disaster relief legal work since she hopes to practice law in New Orleans. One student directly affected by the tornado explained “the new clinic was an opportunity to actually learn about the legal issues surrounding disasters, and disasters have always been around and will continue to occur. So the learning experience will always be relevant.” Only two students commented on a curricular interest or a connection to law school classes, both of whom were enrolled in insurance law. One stated, “I just took insurance and realized how hard it is to understand—even for a law student—so it must be that much harder for anyone else.” The other said “insurance law now seems more interesting and relevant, especially after the mini-training yesterday and hearing a few of the questions presented by the intakes at Holt.” Students in general were more concerned about how they could help people and less concerned about how the experience would benefit them.

C. Membership in the Community

Students explained that their membership in the community was another specific reason for both general volunteering and participation in the Legal Project. One student explained that “it’s part of living in a community—if something bad happens, you help.” Another explained that from the time she had seen inside the hospital on the night of the tornado, “it became this weight on my

---

78 Several students commented that the most useful information they gained from the new legal clinic training was permission to acknowledge their own trauma and take care of themselves.
chest. This is my community. This is where I live.” One student who also attended the University of Alabama as an undergraduate student stated, “I’ve been in Tuscaloosa for seven years and this is my community. When it hurts, I hurt, and I have to find a way to help.” Another student described the experience as unique because “the need was at home and so immediate.”

Through most of the student narratives, the definition of community changed. Students initially spoke about their community in terms of other law school students. They described how the strong ties between them predated the tornado, but were strengthened by the shared experience of surviving the tornado, temporary living conditions, and volunteering together. They spoke about how much they empathized with students directly impacted by the tornado and how committed they were to helping. Following the tornado, students quickly organized to shelter and feed other students affected by the disaster. They then moved beyond immediate needs of classmates to think of other needs and donated business suits for summer jobs, set up notes and outline banks for students preparing for finals, and contacted publishers to request free casebook replacements.

When asked how students decided to volunteer in Alberta City, Holt, and Brookwood, students described that within a few days of the tornado there were law students anxious to continue to volunteer and not enough law students left who still needed assistance:

79 For example, one student commented that out of an entire apartment in Alberta City, only the law casebooks, pots, and pans seemed to survive. She explained how surreal it was to see law books in the rubble and the deep empathy she felt for the law student whose apartment she was in. Another discussed how hard it was to salvage belongings at a friend’s home where she had visited only days earlier for a child’s birthday party. A third student described the helplessness of digging through the rubble of a two-story apartment building for a student’s belongings when residents’ property was all mixed together, and the horror of knowing that her friends had been trapped in the bathroom there talking through the wall to trapped neighbors while waiting for rescue.
We helped law students first because you see an immediate need in your community and it’s easy to help people who you know need it, but then there was so much help available for law students and so many other law students showing up to help. When we heard on the news that Holt needed help, we went there.

The efforts to help fellow students grew into coordinated efforts to help strangers in the greater community. Though students referred to Tuscaloosa as their community in terms of how hard it was to view the physical damage to the city, the broadened definition of community generally emerged after they described working with people in different neighborhoods.

Several students newer to the area admitted that they had not thought of Tuscaloosa as home until the tornado struck. They explained that as law students their lives were solely focused on the law school at the exclusion of everything else. They described receiving advice from faculty and administrators during orientation to plan to give all of their time during the following three years to the law school. One student stated: “it’s sad I’m about to graduate and move away and I’m only now getting to know Tuscaloosa. There were so many places I’d never even heard of before the tornado and there are so many amazing people living here. Who knew?” Students expressed regret that their status as law students had limited their participation in Tuscaloosa before the tornado.

The other noticeable theme in how students described their experiences in new neighborhoods was their positive impression of the people living there. Several students shared their surprise at the positive nature of their interactions with specific communities in light of their previously held negative impressions of people living in those neighborhoods.\(^8\) Student narratives revealed solidarity

---

\(^8\) Though pre-existing negative impressions of Alberta City and Holt were present in several narratives, it was unclear how long students had held these impressions before their volunteer work. A few students specifically mentioned how stories of looting and increased violence in these neighborhoods following the tornado caused them some initial wariness before volunteering. Everyone who worked in Holt mentioned how humbled they were by the residents and
with people in the community they met through volunteering caused in part by the random nature of the tornado. Students emphasized the fact that the tornado could have hit anyone in the area and that no one had done anything to deserve the destruction. Implicit in a few of the narratives was the idea that other homeless people or people in poverty, unlike survivors of a tornado, contributed to their own situation. The belief that survivors of a natural disaster were blameless allowed students of all political persuasions to enter new neighborhoods and meet strangers with a sense of solidarity. They felt as though they were all targets and that they had done nothing to earn or deserve their escape from physical or economic harm. The variances of the social economic status and race within the group of tornado victims was noted and commented on by several students. Though it’s not clear whether

how they were surprised to find Holt an integrated community where neighbors all helped one another. Most had never been to this community and the ones who had heard about it only heard about poverty or violence. Students also shared positive experiences in Alberta City. Similarly, several students mentioned how impressed they were with residents who lived near Brookwood who they believed exhibited self-sufficiency, sending students to help neighbors rather than accepting help for themselves.

The tornado actually destroyed a disproportionate number of low-income housing in Tuscaloosa County, because its path veered through several poor communities (and not just because the low-income housing was less able to withstand the tornado.) Nonetheless, students recognized that the path could have moved in any direction.

For example, two students shared a story about helping an elderly woman salvage property in Holt. They found the experience both challenging and sad: they were working so hard to save old encyclopedias and shoes, which the students admitted they would have preferred to throw away. They commented that assisting the woman’s salvage through her belongings was a very different experience than when they had assisted other law students, because she had little to begin with and was unable to part with anything that could be saved, while the law students threw away destroyed property and planned to replace it. Another student talked about how moved he was after helping a woman in a low-income neighborhood break into her shed to find her family Christmas ornaments, apparently one of the few things that survived the tornado and were most important to her.
the bond to the community emerged from the connections with community members or vice versa, the narratives revealed that students valued the experiences they had connecting to people from diverse backgrounds.

D. A Shift in Individual Values

Interviewed law students all commented on how their personal convictions and values impacted their decisions following the tornado, and many shared stories about the ways in which their personal values shifted during their volunteer experiences. Several student narratives also included student reflections on the ways in which their values shifted during their time in law school.

1. Decisions between Volunteering and Studying

Law schools demand time and commitment from students, and students learn quickly to prioritize how they utilize their time. Though pro bono work performed by law students generally requires a decision to volunteer time that could be used for studying, the timing of the Tuscaloosa tornado during the finals period made the decision of where to allocate time more pronounced. On one side of the choice, students witnessed the immediate need for volunteers in their community; on the other side, students understood the possible long-ranging ramifications of time lost studying for finals or writing papers.\(^8^3\)

Immediately following the tornado, students contacted the administration to confirm that finals would be cancelled for the following day. Those who chose to volunteer immediately did so not knowing whether or not finals would resume the day after. All interviewed students discussed their struggle in making the decision about how much time to volunteer in light of their academic requirements. Some rejected the premise of the initial choice and worked to change the options. They contacted

\(^8^3\) Students frequently mentioned the lack of available jobs and many believed that poor grades from the spring 2011 semester could ultimately cause unemployment following graduation.
administrators, faculty, and alumni to ask for a more flexible approach to finals in light of the tornado.\textsuperscript{84} Students utilized narratives of their experiences to explain why they felt as though they shouldn’t have to choose between helping others and becoming lawyers. One student shared cell phone photographs of destroyed communities to demonstrate to professors the magnitude of the destruction. The finals policy ultimately changed to allow students to take exams Pass/D/Fail,\textsuperscript{85} take exams remotely, and enjoy a greater flexibility as to the scheduling of exam and paper due dates. As the policy on finals evolved to meet student needs, students continued to evaluate their choices and ponder the ramifications of their decisions.

During the time period in which I interviewed student volunteers, all had at least one paper or final to complete; most had three or more finals remaining. One example of this tension between volunteering and studying came from two student leaders who realized they would not be able to maintain their long volunteer days and study sufficiently to maintain their grades. They initially made a pact to split half-days, with one leading a morning student volunteer group while the other studied before switching roles in the afternoon. The plan never made it to fruition as they both instead decided to take the majority of their exams Pass/D/Fail and continue in their volunteer efforts.

\textsuperscript{84} Initial e-mails from the administration following the tornado emphasized that the school would make all possible efforts to help students who directly experienced property loss or were dislocated from the tornado. The students advocating greater flexibility for all students did so because they believed all students, regardless of their level of loss, needed to be able to volunteer or cope with the trauma experienced by many students following the tornado.

\textsuperscript{85} This option allowed students to select the “Pass/D/Fail” option for any class in which they had not yet completed the final examination or seminar paper. Students were not allowed to disclose their grading choice to professors so the mandatory grading curve could remain in effect.
2. Adjusting Individual Values

As students described their decision-making processes regarding how to utilize their time in the weeks following the tornado, many described a shift in their individual values. Some students agonized over the decision of how to use their time, while others explained that they never really thought about it and just reacted. One student explained making his decision before the administration announced that finals would be further postponed and that students would have the choice to take them Pass/D/Fail:

Since they postponed finals, most of us aren’t too concerned anymore. When they initially pushed [finals] to Monday, I would have had them both on Monday and Tuesday and I decided to just write them off as a C-. There was more important stuff to do. I can explain away a bad grade, but it will be hard to live with myself if I hide in the library instead of helping friends salvage their home. There was actually a pretty big group of us who decided, ‘screw it, this is more important,’ and went to Holt instead of studying even before we knew about finals being postponed.

Several students initially decided to focus on finals before changing their minds. One student described trying to study on Thursday and feeling increasingly guilty before she talked to her roommates and decided to volunteer instead: “All these people are out there hurting and need help. Why am I even going to bother studying? If there is an employer who doesn’t understand that I have to choose helping people over studying, then I don’t want to work for them anyway.” She stated that once the decision was made, she had “absolutely no regret at any point.” Another student described her sense of guilt the first time she tried to write an outline after the tornado: “There was this overwhelming feeling of wrongness. There were too many people in the law school and in the broader community who needed help. It felt selfish to try to study for exams.” One explained that there was just too much going on in the community to focus on studying law.
I absolutely can’t concentrate to even take the exam, let alone study for it. You can’t get into the exam mindset if you’ve been out helping people or if you just lost everything. You just can’t be 100% there. I can’t imagine any student could concentrate—it’s just too hard.86

Another explained that though she is at peace with her decision, she still worries about the consequences. “It’s really, 

86 In addition to a shift in personal values, student interviews revealed other reasons for the decision to volunteer rather than study. Every student commented on the difficulty of concentrating on studies and finals and almost every student repeated the phrase “I can’t focus.” For some students, this lack of focus came from the conflict between using their time to study and using their time to volunteer. The students who suffered personal losses from the tornado also commented that studying for finals did not feel like a priority and did not serve as a sufficient distraction. “As long as I was out in the community helping others, I wasn’t feeling sorry for myself because I knew how lucky I was comparatively. Once I tried to study, I was flooded with the realization that almost everything I own is gone.” Other students suggested that the difficulty in studying was compounded by the belief that the topics were not relevant. One explained that “it was also really hard to study because you just got used to doing something that matters. Secured Transactions and Antitrust seem so far away and unimportant.” One stated: “I can’t make myself study Bus Orgs right now and I barely made it through my Crim Pro exam.” One student joked that it was “so hard to think about Capital Litigation when something that big happens. Of all things . . . you can’t exactly execute the tornado.” She continued to state that “none of my classes seem useful right now.”

Aside from guilt and a disconnection to topics, students explained that they also found it difficult to think about anything other than the tornado. One student explained that even when he thought he had helped as much as he could, he could not concentrate on finals. “I tried to get back in exam mode . . . . Spent two days staring at the screen, completely unable to focus. My concentration was just gone. The view from my apartment was like Hiroshima and I’m looking at where Milos and Taco Casa [fast food restaurants] are gone.” One student joked that it was really challenging to study for finals when you have nine people staying at your place. Another student explained that even when she no longer felt guilty and needed a break from volunteering, she couldn’t study. “I honestly couldn’t think about anything but the tornado. I needed to talk about it and process it.”
really intimidating to be in law school without this type of stress. I would not have made the best grades even if I had been studying with full concentration all week, so I know I needed to study, but I’m here instead.”

One student said she struggled briefly with her decision before finals were postponed by a week, then decided the decision was actually an easy one: “Why am I having a moral dilemma about whether to study or help—I should just go help.” She admitted that even after she decided what she had to do, she was relieved when the administration further postponed finals and created the Pass/D/Fail option. Other students said they never struggled to make the decision between volunteering and studying because it was an obvious one. “I knew I could help and I knew this was more important than writing a paper or studying for an exam. They literally pulled survivors out of rubble days after the tornado. Of course I couldn’t hide and study.” Several students described their growing belief after the tornado that law school finals weren’t as important as they previously believed. “This is more important. Finals didn’t turn out to be all that important in life. The ball just kept getting bigger.” Another student said, “When your community is destroyed, the community becomes the number one priority and exams seem really unimportant.” Another student also commented:

I didn’t care about finals because they didn’t seem as important. I was waiting to see if the exam schedules were changed. When it was extended, I just put it off. I volunteered in the community or worked for the disaster clinic every day the first two weeks. After that, I’ll start taking finals. Normally, I would stress out about finals and spend a lot of time preparing, but it made it seem so unimportant. Seems silly right now to stress out about a test. I’ll take them all pass-fail just so I won’t waste any stress on them.
Following the tornado, students indicated that they no longer valued grades the same way in which they had prior to the tornado.

Along with a shift in individual values came the challenge of how to address those whose values did not shift, particularly when a mandatory curve in all classes meant their decisions to focus on school could negatively impact other students who chose to volunteer. Most students with whom I spoke were very careful not to criticize students who chose to leave Tuscaloosa to study rather than volunteer, but a few commented on how those decisions also impacted them. One student explained, “Some students evacuated the city and have done nothing but study and others have done nothing but help others. I understand that this is a personal choice, but I also feel a little bit cheated. Hopefully, the satisfaction from helping others will compensate for not doing as well on finals and dropping in the rankings.” Another student explained that she thought it was really important not to judge anyone else. “Different people were affected in different ways. Just because a student left Tuscaloosa does not mean they are studying. Some people just had to go.” A third-year student commented on the displaced students staying at his home who tried to study. “I didn’t begrudge them—especially the first-years who had more to prepare for and less of a head start. They [the administration] never had the option to postpone finals indefinitely. The Board of Examiners needs our transcripts and we need to take the bar this summer. So it is what it is.” Another student mentioned her belief that some of the students directly impacted by the tornado might find peace or normalcy in writing papers or studying for finals. As students’ individual values changed to prioritize volunteering, they found different ways to explain the actions of those whose values did not similarly change.
3. Reflecting on Law School Values

Interviewed students discussed how their personal values had shifted from competition and grades to collaboration and helping:

I used to feel good about myself when I got high grades and bad about myself when I didn’t; now it doesn’t seem to matter as much. I feel really good about the little bit of help I’ve been able to provide people who need it and I’m learning to let go of everything else.

Students commented that grades and class rankings seemed less important than they previously had:

I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t pull my GPA up after all of this anyway; I might very well pull it down. I’m not feeling particularly competitive. Guess I’m not too worried about my GPA anymore. I would love for it to be higher, but the tornado made it all seem very unimportant . . . . Grades mattered throughout the year to me, but it’s really hard to care anymore. I’m just not feeling competitive anymore.

Another student explained that after seeing the devastation, he refused to worry about finals or papers:

There are bigger things to worry about. This really put it back in perspective for me. Law school is not the end all and be all. There are just some things more important. I don’t need to be beholden to law school. Grades can wait and papers can wait. After the tornado, my questions were: “Is everyone OK?” “Who needs a place to stay?” “How can I help?” and “Where are my steel-toed boots?”

Several students reflected on how law school had changed them and how the tornado had brought them in touch with their pre-law school selves. Their narratives demonstrate the cognitive dissonance they experienced after the tornado. One stated:
It’s like my eyes were opened again. I’ve allowed school to dictate everything in my life and even redefine what was important in my life, but now I feel like I’m me again. I’m doing the right thing again and I will live with the consequences because that’s who I was raised to be. Ironically, that was why I went to law school in the first place.

Another student explained:

Law school seemed so all-encompassing before—especially first year. When you think of what is really relevant in life there are only a few things you’ll remember and studying for exams is not one of those things—especially when balanced against destruction and helping. In the grand scheme in life, assisting your community and helping others to heal is incomparable to a semester’s grades.

Though she said her decision was an easy one, she commented that she thought it was “cruel to have to choose between replacing your belongings, helping your community, or getting a decent grade. There are more important things in life at this moment than grades—even law school grades—even in this job market.” Half of the students I interviewed believed their post-tornado shift in values was permanent. 87

---

87 The other half of the interviewed students indicated that though the experience of living through the tornado and volunteering in the community was important, they did not believe it changed their personal values beyond the specific set of circumstances. For example, one student stated:

I have absolutely no intention of joining the Peace Corps or running a homeless shelter or even becoming a public interest attorney. I still plan to work for a corporate law firm, but I do know that the next time there is a natural disaster like this, I will drop everything and do everything I
E. A Change in Law School Culture

One theme developed through interviews was a new culture of volunteerism at the law school. Students explained that the school transformed from a place in which students took care of one another in a difficult time to one in which volunteerism in the greater community was valued and expected. Students uniformly indicated that volunteerism was not a cultural norm at the law school prior to the tornado. None of the students with whom I interviewed had volunteered at any point during their law school career prior to the tornado, though a few had worked for compensation for public interest organizations during the summer following their first year and a few had participated in law school clinics for academic credit. Their history of volunteerism prior to law school varied. All students stated that they had volunteered in high school through mandatory school programs or church youth programs. They also explained that a demonstrated commitment to volunteerism was an important component of their college applications. Half of the students reported at least some volunteer history during college, though it was primarily limited to projects organized through sorority and fraternity groups or honors programs. One student participated in the Peace Corps prior to beginning law school.

Students shared different explanations for the change in their volunteer habits once they entered law school. They all indicated that they did not remember making a deliberate decision not to volunteer, but that they lacked time and opportunities once they entered law school. One student mentioned that she learned to volunteer from her mother and that helping others was a value instilled in her from a young age. Yet, she had not volunteered

---

88 The University of Alabama School of Law has a Public Interest Institute that regularly advertises volunteer opportunities, many of which are organized by students. Nonetheless, interviewed students repeatedly cited both the lack of time and opportunities as the reasons for the lack of volunteerism. One student acknowledged that he read about students cooking at the soup kitchen twice a year, but always thought such an activity was a waste of his time.
since entering law school and said she always hoped to have more time available in the future. One student explained that law school was not really focused on volunteerism the way in which his high school and college were. Another student mentioned that though he liked to help people, he volunteered in high school to get into college and volunteered in college to help get into law school and that it no longer helped with anything. He explained that law firms rarely look for a history of pro bono work on resumes and that other law school activities increase employment opportunities. Even the two students who expressed a desire to work in public interest admitted that that they did not feel as though volunteerism was a priority for them as law students before the tornado.\(^8^9\)

The tornado transformed the law school student culture. As one student explained, “helping has become the norm.” All of the students with whom I spoke made at least one reference to their pride in fellow students and emphasized how their volunteer efforts prior to the new Legal Project were all student-led. One student explained that “this was all really started by students. It started on Thursday with the first law student we moved, then students wanted to know where to go next.” Another explained that “our law school has a close community and most of us are still here. We’ve seen a lot of people hurt and we intend to help.” Another student explained that students were uniquely qualified to help because they were “plugged-in in a way in which many others were not and could effectively coordinate.” Even with the loss of electricity, cell service, and stable internet access, students were

\(^8^9\) Several students were aware of the Public Interest Certificate offered by The University of Alabama School of Law, which requires completion of specific coursework, participation in a clinic, and a specific number of volunteer hours. Though a few students thought they might try to obtain the certificate following their tornado volunteer work, most expressed little interest. One student explained: “I don’t think the Certificate really does anything for you. It’s not winning Jessup or getting on law review, you know? They don’t even hand it out during the awards ceremony.” In addition, The University of Alabama School of Law offers additional awards for volunteer service that most students interviewed knew little about.
able to coordinate through social media on smart phones. According to one student, there “[s]eems to be an excitement among most of the students. How often do you get to climb on roofs or use chainsaws in law school?” While they acknowledged that some students left town following the tornado, they emphasized that the majority of the law school students remained in Tuscaloosa helping the community. One student described “a remarkable culture of giving now evident at the law school among students.”

Students often cited the “selfless” efforts of other students when explaining why they volunteered. One described how “everyone seems to be helping in some way. Some won’t even stop to help themselves first.” Another explained, “it’s really cool to see others drop everything to help strangers—just a really humbling experience.” Students explained that even students directly impacted by the tornado were hesitant to accept assistance because they “all seem to think there are others who are much worse off.” They frequently dismissed praise of their own volunteer efforts by pointing out other students who they believed had done more for the community. Two student organizers insisted that they were “getting a lot of credit we don’t deserve” then went on to list other students who probably had not even slept in the past week because of their long volunteer hours. A student noted, “I’m really in awe of how much [other students have] done. Everyone has worked so hard in the community and through the new clinic, even with exams. There’s enough stress with exams alone, so this is remarkable.” Another proudly proclaimed, “Look at my classmates; they are the most generous people in the world. They are giving up their exam grades to help strangers. It’s just that simple—we all know you have to help your community when you see it hurting.” The new culture of pro bono and volunteerism at the law school was evidenced through the pride expressed for student contributions in the community.

The culture of volunteerism created among the law students in the wake of the tornado included the room to share stories. Though students reported they had little time to spare between volunteering and studying, they also reported instances in which
they created space to process and reflect upon their experiences. During the week following the tornado, students regularly met for dinner or spoke with one another in the apartments they were temporarily sharing about their experiences. Students reported sharing tragic stories about helping people who had lost loved ones or lost the few possessions they owned. They shared strange stories, including one in which students were asked by a medic where to purchase methadone on the streets in Tuscaloosa. The students also reported sharing humorous stories, such as the time in which a student from Detroit found himself searching for a donkey in a rural community near Brookwood at an elderly woman’s request or the day in which students boosted two petite law students onto a roof when they couldn’t locate a ladder. Students also used this time to process the cognitive dissonance between their experiences in a disaster area, law school finals, and national media stories about the royal wedding and the death of Bin Laden. This opportunity to share stories allowed students to validate each other’s volunteer experiences and further established a cultural value of volunteerism among law students.

F. The Missing Role of Professional Responsibility

Professional responsibility as a motivation for service was most notable in its absence from student narratives. Not a single student interviewed mentioned professional responsibility as a motivation for their work in the Legal Project. When asked specifically about the role of professional responsibility in volunteer work, student responses varied. One stated that she had never thought of volunteering as a professional responsibility of lawyers, but “if this is part of professional ethics, then I guess my instincts are good.” Another explained that though she doesn’t think lawyers have a specific professional obligation to provide free legal services, she does believe that everyone has a moral obligation to use whatever skills they have to benefit others. “Lawyers in the context of the field should help others—maybe
more because level of skill and resources they typically obtain.” The only student who referenced professional ethics during the interview did so in the context of a strategy he used to convince the administration to extend finals to allow more students to help.

Students did not identify their work with the Legal Project as a piece of pro bono efforts by the legal profession. One student explained that “there is a lot of pride in the school and the students, but not necessarily the profession.” Other responses were slightly more negative. One student stated that he did not help because of professional ethics or because he’s going to be an attorney. “Maybe because of the opposite. I’m not jaded yet, but close to it before the tornado. Like any law school student, I had been beaten down by the job search and professors. Suddenly it just didn’t matter.” Another explained that his time volunteering in the disaster clinic:

has nothing to do with professional responsibility at all. I feel no obligation to do legal pro bono work, though I probably will do some in my life. My obligation is a much more basic and personal one to help—and has nothing to do with professional ethics. If, at some point, I can use my legal training to help, I will. I have a general obligation to help out with whatever I can when a disaster strikes my community—whether that means opening my home, using a chainsaw, doing intakes here today, whatever it takes.

Though students volunteering in the disaster clinic often worked next to pro bono attorneys from the local bar, they uniformly failed to identify legal professional ethics as a motivation for their volunteer work.

**G. Lasting Impact?**

One limitation of this research was the timing of the interviews. At the time the interviews were conducted, it was too soon to know whether or not the law student volunteer experiences following the tornado would have a lasting impact on students’
future pro bono efforts. Nonetheless, I asked interviewed students about how they believed their experiences with both non-legal and legal volunteer work would impact their career. Two of the students who disclosed that they now hoped to enter public interest law reported that their volunteer experiences solidified their interest. One stated, “There were so many poor people affected by this storm who needed help throughout the year. This makes me more passionate to provide these services in the future.” Another student who was considering international work prior to the tornado reported that she is now particularly interested in international relief work. She explained that she “just want[ed] to help people out a lot. This disaster has strengthened my confidence that my calling may be there.”

Most students interviewed stated that they never considered a public interest career and were not seriously considering it after the tornado. One clarified that he began law school with an MBA and hoped to become a corporate lawyer. He said “before this experience I had zero interest in a public interest career; now I would consider it, but I’m probably still going to be a corporate attorney. I do think I will make sure to do pro bono work now.” All of the interviewed students stated that these experiences increased their interest in pro bono work. One student explained that he had already hoped to do some pro bono work at some point in his career, but that this experience convinced him that he will be “more proactive in looking for future opportunities.” Another student stated that while he had previously thought pro bono work

---

90 There is some limited research that indicates student pro bono work in law school may increase future pro bono efforts. According to one study, between 75 and 80% of law student participants in mandatory pro bono programs believe their experiences will increase the likelihood that they will participate in pro bono programs as practicing attorneys. Rhode supra note 40, at 2434 (citing John Kramer, Mandatory Pro Bono at Tulane Law School, NAPIL Connection Close-Up (National Ass’n for Public Interest Law), Sept. 30, 1991, at 1, 1–2); see also Committee on Legal Assistance, Mandatory Pro Bono Programs, Preparing Students to Meet Their Ethical Obligations, 50 REC. OF THE ASS’N OF THE BAR OF N.Y.C. 170, 176 (1995).
was something he might do at some point in his career, he now planned to always make it a regular part of his work. Anecdotally, it does appear that the disaster relief pro bono experiences of students at Alabama increased their interest or strengthened their desire to provide legal service to those unable to access or afford attorneys.

V. SUGGESTIONS BASED ON LESSONS LEARNED

Though, hopefully, the unique circumstances created at the University of Alabama by the Tuscaloosa tornado will not be replicated at any other law school, the student narratives about this experience may provide guidance to other law schools. Countless law schools already set official goals to support students entering law school with public interest aspirations and to encourage all students to perform pro bono work. Law schools have also implemented many innovative programs to achieve these goals. These broad suggestions are not intended to overlook existing public interest and pro bono programming at law schools, but to suggest some foundations in values attainable by all law schools.

A. Empowering Students through Meaningful Volunteer Experiences

The University of Alabama students reported their primary motivation for volunteering as the recognition that people needed help and that they were capable of providing it. Students did not identify social justice, politics, or professional ethics as motivations. Though law schools should emphasize the

91 Though students did not include social justice as a primary reason for volunteering, many recognized social justice issues once their volunteer work took them into poor communities. They commented on the disparate impact on low-income and minority communities, as well as their impressions of the interactions between residents of these communities and local officials. This paper does not address whether or not pro bono programming in law schools should include discussions about social justice, though others suggest that clinicians and pro bono directors must engage in social justice when students experience a “disorienting moment” recognizing injustices. See Fran Quigley,
responsibility of lawyers to provide pro bono services, it is perhaps equally important that law schools remind law students that they are talented and privileged individuals capable of providing assistance to others and providing consistent opportunities to do so. Students were more motivated by their role as moral individuals than as members of the legal profession.

It was clear from student interviews that volunteer experiences did not have to be legal in nature in order to be meaningful, but they did have to either involve personal contact with members of the community who needed assistance or utilize specific skills or talents of students. Several students commented on the importance of listening to survivors and learning from their experiences, including stories of personal disasters and injustices which predated the tornado. Their narratives revealed the role of empathy in the choice to volunteer and confirmed studies that show that an ability to empathize is an intrinsic factor that motivates volunteerism.92

Interviewed students also articulated their preference for organized, well-run opportunities. Students who felt empowered by their volunteer experiences routinely described those experiences to explain why they continued to seek out new volunteer opportunities. Law schools can replicate this experience by offering a continuum of well-organized volunteer opportunities to all students. Law schools may also be able to replicate some of the energy created through the emergency nature of disaster volunteer work by creating opportunities focusing on the emergency nature of many legal issues facing people in need of legal assistance, such as evictions, domestic violence protection orders, and public benefits.

Law schools should work to strengthen and expand existing pro bono programming. Though first year students may be

---

92 See Rhode, supra note 40, at 2848 (reviewing literature finding that a capacity for empathy is an intrinsic factor influencing pro bono motivation).
unqualified to represent clients in court, they do have specific skills and talents that qualify them for volunteer experiences beyond collecting canned goods or cleaning rivers. Law students are natural leaders and problem solvers, as was demonstrated by the Alabama students and their ability to find creative volunteer opportunities in the midst of a natural disaster. The Alabama student narratives add to the Katrina narratives by demonstrating how law students are uniquely qualified to serve as legal first-responders following natural disasters. However, law schools should not overlook the vast opportunities for public service that always exist in their own communities. Law schools should share both successful and unsuccessful models for pro bono programming, and researchers should continue to evaluate different models of mandatory and voluntary public service projects at different schools.

**B. Increasing the Value Placed on Law Student Pro Bono**

While the narratives of law students in Tuscaloosa struggling with the decision of how to utilize their time following the tornado provide an exceptional example—both in the clarity of the need for community help and in the timing during final examinations—this basic decision is one faced by law students across the country every day. Providing pro bono assistance does require a sacrifice of time that could be otherwise utilized by studying. The Alabama example oversimplifies this either-or decision in that it ignores the other extracurricular activities law students engage in on a regular basis. Law students routinely commit time away from their studies to participate in law school journals, moot court competitions, externships, and judicial clerkships.

93 See Bonnie Allen, Barbara Bezdek & John Jopling, *Community Recovery Lawyering: Hard-Learned Lessons from Post-Katrina Mississippi*, 4 DEPAUL J. FOR SOC. JUST. 97, 98–99 (2010) (describing how more than 1500 law students from across the country provided pro bono services to Katrina survivors through the Mississippi Center for Justice).
Upon entering law school, students learn which activities are valued by both the law school and potential employers. The majority of students entering law school today have a history of providing volunteer work prior to enrollment. If public interest activities were equally valued, more students would find the time to participate. Public interest and pro bono programs exist today at most law schools, but rarely is participation in those programs valued to the same extent as participation in other activities. Rarely are the most impressive student volunteers or clinical students honored the same way in which members of law review or students who win moot court competitions are honored. Law schools have the ability to increase the attractiveness of volunteering by adjusting the cost-benefit analysis of pro bono activities. In an environment in which students are socialized toward new values, law schools can and should work to increase the extrinsic value placed on their existing programs.

C. Nurturing a Pro Bono Culture at Law Schools

None of the students with whom I spoke mentioned professional ethics as a motivation for their pro bono service. When this motivation was suggested, students were surprisingly resistant to the idea. A few went so far as to explain that the service was not because of their legal education but in spite of it. This may be partially explained by the timing of the tornado and the choices many students felt they had to make between scholastic achievement and service. Nonetheless, even students who didn’t feel particularly torn by this decision seemed adamant that they do not believe pro bono is part of their profession or that their service as attorneys differs in any meaningful way from their other volunteer work. This suggests that discussing pro bono work in the context of a professional responsibility course is insufficient and

94 See Rhode, supra note 40, 2428-30 (discussing the influence of extrinsic factors in the likelihood of volunteer assistance).
that schools need to take greater steps if they hope to increase the percentage of practicing attorneys providing pro bono hours.

Following the tornado, students described a new culture at the law school where helping became the norm. If law schools hope to train lawyers who donate regular pro bono services in practice, they must make pro bono an integral part of the school culture. As was the case with the Alabama students, most entering law students today have some history of volunteerism. It is important for law schools to capitalize on this new generational trend. Furthermore, many law students continue to enter law school with social justice ideals. Law schools must utilize the idealism of new students during orientation and first year programming rather than wait until students are closer to graduation and further from the values they brought with them to law school. Law schools must encourage all students to participate in pro bono experiences and not just provide some support for those students who maintain their commitment to public interest law. Pro bono and clinical programing should be part of every mainstream law school curriculum.

Law school faculty has great influence over the culture of a law school. Professors must not only encourage law students to engage in pro bono work during law school, but must set an example through their own service.95 As Professor Thomas Morgan noted, “The sense that professors are uniquely situated to model a commitment to justice and the public interest—and their moral obligation to do so—should be largely beyond dispute.”96

95 Law school professors share the same pro bono obligations as other attorneys and should strive to meet their aspirational hours of public service as role models for the next generation of attorneys. See American Association of Law Schools, Statements of Good Practices by Law Professors in the Discharge of Their Ethical and Professional Responsibilities, V (amended May 2003) available at http://www.aals.org/about_handbook_sgp_eth.php (“[o]ne of the traditional obligations of members of the bar is to engage in uncompensated public service or pro bono legal activities. As role models for students and as members of the legal profession, law professors share this responsibility.”).

96 See Thomas D. Morgan, Law Faculty as Role Models, in Section of Legal Educ. & Admissions to the Bar, ABA, Teaching and Learning
Law professors’ commitment (or lack of commitment) to public service signals professional norms to law students that directly impact their commitment to public service as new attorneys. In nurturing a pro bono culture in law schools, professors must meet their own ethical obligations and share both their work and their commitment to public service with their students.

Student interviews revealed that the culture of volunteerism at the University of Alabama was strengthened through the opportunity to share their experiences with one another. Law schools can provide this space through organized programming where students, professors, and guests discuss and reflect upon their pro bono experiences. Interviewed students also described how the enthusiasm to volunteer spread among them. Law schools can replicate this culture of enthusiasm each year by providing law school students with a platform to share stories of meaningful volunteer experiences with incoming students, signaling that pro bono service is a part of the law school culture.

**D. Infusing the Curriculum with Public Interest Narratives**

In addition to providing and valuing specific pro bono opportunities in law schools, law schools should infuse doctrinal classes, particularly first-year courses, with public interest stories and access to justice discussions. Students consistently used tornado narratives to explain their continued commitment to volunteer work and many shared other students’ stories during their interviews, demonstrating how students shared narratives to motivate one another. Both feminist legal scholarship and critical

---


97 See Kuehn, supra note 96, at 279.

race theorists have suggested the introduction of narrative and storytelling into law teaching. Carrie Menkel-Meadow argues that introducing stories and real cases into legal education enables students to develop empathy for others outside their own experiences. Empathy for clients serves as a powerful motivation for pro bono work.

The inclusion of narratives should not be focused solely on client stories, but must also focus on public interest and pro bono attorneys. Just as students shared stories of the people they helped, they also shared stories of their actions and thoughts as pro bono student attorneys. Public interest and pro bono stories must not only be present in courses focused on legal ethics, but must be included throughout the curriculum, and infused in first-year courses in particular. The inclusion of pro bono lawyering stories and discussions of public interest commitment will enrich law students’ understanding of the law, while assisting them in viewing public interest law as a valid career choice and pro bono work as an important part of the profession.

E. Creating and Strengthening Community Ties

Students explained how their membership in the community was a key motivation for their volunteer work and how their definition of community expanded through their volunteer activities.

99 See Stone, supra note 26, at 549.
100 See Menkel-Meadow, supra note 98, at 814.
101 Id.
102 See Jamison Wilcox, Borrowing Experience: Using Reflective Lawyer Narratives in Teaching, 50 J. LEGAL EDUC. 213, 239 (June 2000) (advocating the inclusion of “lawyer stories” in traditional law courses to show how doctrinal knowledge is applied to the law and provide the human interest and vicarious experience of lawyers to students).
103 One of the critiques cited in the first section of this paper discussed the role law school professors play in public interest drift through their dismissal of public interest employment as less valuable and the example they set through their own common experiences in corporate law. See supra notes 31-40 and accompanying text. If law professors demonstrate the importance of pro bono by meeting their own pro bono ethical requirements, they should also share these experiences with students in class.
experiences. The shared trauma of the tornado enabled students to connect with other residents of Tuscaloosa.\textsuperscript{104} Studies indicate that an intrinsic characteristic that positively impacts volunteerism is a sense of human or group solidarity.\textsuperscript{105} Student narratives revealed their sense of solidarity both with other students and with the broader community of Tuscaloosa.

Interviewed students regularly mentioned their isolation from Tuscaloosa prior to the tornado in contrast to other communities in which they had resided. Law schools encourage students to become a part of the law school culture often to the exclusion of the larger community. The schools themselves need to forge better relationships with community organizations and encourage their students to become a part of their host community. Law schools can capitalize on the energy of new law school students in creating community partnerships. The interviews revealed that student-led projects provided students with additional emotional incentives to become involved and utilize their leadership skills. Law schools should encourage participation by law school faculty and staff as well, and should encourage such participation through the “service” requirement by faculty in the tenure process. New students learning law school culture will replicate a connection and commitment to the local community if

\textsuperscript{104} The importance of connecting to people in a community has been noted by other legal scholars discussing pro bono work. For example, William Quigley describes the importance of connection when he provides advice to a hypothetical law student interested in social justice. He shares the story of a law student who came to the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina to identify home owners prior to demolition and the moment of her deep emotional connection to the absent owners when she discovered a plaster Madonna in the backyard resembling the one in her mother’s backyard. \textit{See} William Quigley, \textit{Letter to a Law Student Interested in Social Justice}, 1 DEPAUL J. FOR SOC. JUST. 7, 7 (2007) (illustrating the importance of connecting to people in a community).

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{See} Rhode, \textit{supra} note 40, 2484 (reviewing literature finding that a sense of human or group solidarity is an intrinsic factor influencing pro bono motivation).
they witness such a connection being forged by other students and valued by faculty.

Community partnerships may also provide an additional benefit of assisting students with their cognitive dissonance and the depression frequently reported that follows. Community non-profits would benefit from the energy and talents of law students, and law students would benefit from their ties to communities outside of the academic setting. These experiences may help law students keep law school in perspective and avoid the frustration and isolation articulated by several of the interviewed students.

VI. CONCLUSION

As the legal profession continues to debate how to increase access to justice, law schools have an important mission to increase the percentage of future attorneys providing pro bono and public interest service. In answering this challenge, law schools created LRAPs, public interest scholarships and stipends, and pro bono programs. In spite of these efforts, students enrolled in law school continue to lose interest in public interest by graduation and the number of attorneys providing needed pro bono services has failed to increase.

The University of Alabama law student narratives about their legal and non-legal service following a natural disaster offer insight into the motivations for law student pro bono. These students responded to what they perceived as an immediate need for help, and continued to volunteer after finding personal interactions with strangers meaningful and the utilization of their skills and talents empowering. Students prefer to provide pro bono through opportunities that are organized and involve their community or a group of people with whom they can empathize. Positive individual volunteer experiences changed individual values regarding volunteerism, and the opportunity to share volunteer experiences transformed the culture of the law school into one in which helping others became a normative value.

106 See generally Stone, supra note 26.
Law schools can and should encourage law student pro bono by providing meaningful, organized volunteer opportunities throughout the three years of law school and increasing the extrinsic value placed on these experiences. Professors can nurture a pro bono culture at law schools by serving as model attorneys fulfilling their own pro bono obligations and infusing the curriculum with public interest client and attorney narratives. Law schools should also discourage students from isolating themselves and encourage positive interaction with the local community. As the training ground of future lawyers, law schools have the ability to create a pro bono culture among students that could transform into a professional culture where pro bono becomes an ethical norm.