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Immersionaries

DePaul law students lead service trips to New Orleans and Washington, D.C.

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When the levees broke, the law students got moving.

It was the fall of 2005 and Hurricane Katrina was ravaging the city of New Orleans. Emily Miller, a third-year student at DePaul University College of Law at the time, was watching the madness unfold on TV.

She decided to act.

"After seeing everything that happened on television with the hurricane, how it just kept getting worse and worse for those people, it was hard to not have a way to help," she said.

"Being law students, we definitely had a special skill set that we could offer."

A former member of Americorps, Miller came to DePaul in large part because of the school's Vincentian identity. As circumstances in Louisiana grew dire, she found her calling.

Her idea was to lead a group of DePaul law students for a service immersion trip to New Orleans during the school's winter break. She held "the usual student fundraising efforts" such as lunches and bake sales and put the word out to students to apply for her trip.

Students would assist in whatever ways were needed. This meant giving more than just legal opinions.

"I was fairly certain that there was a role we could play in terms of legal support," she said, "but obviously there was a lot of work that needed to be done in terms of just manual labor and satisfying people's immediate needs."

So she reached out to Thomas Judge, the law school's chaplain, for assistance.

"I helped get some university resources — in other words, money and contacts — to

support the trip," Judge said. "And in January 2006, we went down there."

"Going down there" meant filling a couple of vans with DePaul law students and making the nearly 14-hour drive overnight from Chicago to New Orleans. The school then partnered with facilities in New Orleans to provide housing for students while they worked with hurricane survivors.

Next month, students will stay at the St. Jude Community Center, a social services center near the French Quarter.

After four years of successful New Orleans trips, Judge and a group of law students wanted to launch another trip to a different part of the country. They chose Washington, D.C., arriving there in January 2010.

In 2014, both trips run from Jan. 4 to Jan. 11.

'People on the margins'

While the needs in New Orleans are obvious, the capital's needs are not.

Until you get out there, that is.

"I would say that D.C. has a lot of the same issues that affect urban communities," Judge said. "They have people on the margins lacking access to housing, to legal services, to other social services."

“(T)his weeklong service trip is just a bit more of an intense, immersive experience. That’s what makes it unique.”



Thomas Judge

Students on the D.C. trip will sleep in two locations: an outreach center for the homeless called the Father McKenna Center and the William Penn House, a Quaker hostel.

Along with helping those in need, it is hoped students going on the upcoming D.C. trip will get the same taste of historical flavor experienced by previous attendees.

Like many other students drawn to the trips, third-year student Brandon Clark came to DePaul with service on his mind. He found the D.C. trip during a DePaul volunteer fair. He attended the outing in January 2012 and returned this year as a trip leader.

In D.C., students worked at various food pantries serving meals, assisted at a homeless shelter and helped the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless edit and update the volunteers' handbook.

Students also met with Sister Simone Campbell of the NETWORK lobbying group as well as Terrance W. Gainer, the Senate's sergeant at arms and a DePaul law school alum.

Gainer and his general counsel, Joseph Haughey, spoke with students and also gave them a comprehensive D.C. tour, including areas typical visitors don't see.

"(Haughey) took us down into the bowels of the Capitol ... where there are these immense marble bathtubs that were

installed in the 1830s or something," Clark said.

"It was the first running water of the Capitol. They diverted these little streams to come through and run into these bathtubs, so when the congressmen came off the dusty trails on the way to D.C., they could come down and get into these enormous bathtubs."

Down on the bayou

The students Miller led to New Orleans had two jobs: manual labor and legal assistance.

They helped residents with tenant issues and helped others figure out which government entities to contact in neighboring states to find their family members.

Students also spent lots of time gutting flooded houses. For Miller, the memorable image wasn't a bathtub under the Capitol, but a piano inside a garage.

"I went into a house and there was sheet music all over," Miller said. "So I knew there would be a piano somewhere, but I couldn't find a piano."

She searched the home, looking for people, animals and firearms. Room by room, the house was clear. Room by room, no piano.

"So I made my way into the garage, and the piano had gone through the living room, through the hallway, out of the house, into the garage and was on top of the car, lodged between the roof of the car and the roof of the garage, on its side," she said.

"The water had picked it up and moved it through the house."

For Paul Temple, who attended the second and third New Orleans trips and completed his J.D. in 2009, the trip's lasting image was front yard football.

"There was a single mother and two small children who were living in a trailer about two blocks away from the school," Temple said. "My friend Scott and I wandered over to the house because we'd heard they needed help."

"When we got done (gutting), the kids asked us to play football. So Scott and I played football with them out in the street. The

kids ... didn't really understand that there had been a flood. They just wanted to play football and have fun."

This sort of interaction is exactly why Judge supports the trips.

"This is what we try to do in the classroom, with student organizations, with internships and externships at the college of law all the time," he said. "But this weeklong service trip is just a bit more of an intense, immersive experience. That's what makes it unique."

The service immersion trips have left a lasting impact on students. Miller is now policy and advocacy director for Voices for Illinois Children.

And Temple followed the New Orleans trips by launching a trip to rural Kentucky during his 2008 spring break. His work as an in-house attorney for a social media company in Madison, Wis., prevents him from

spending as much time as he would like on pro bono work, but he still looks for those opportunities and he still keeps in touch with his contacts in Kentucky.

To Judge, those lasting relationships are the other key to the success of these trips.

"The nature of these trips is to try to bring us closer together," he said. "You throw 10 or 12 law students together in vans as they drive for hours and hours across the country and they stay in homeless shelters and then they go out and meet people and serve people and listen to people for a week. That really brings them closer, we hope."

That was Michelle Cass' experience. She attended the New Orleans trip for the first time a year ago as a second-year student and is co-leading this year's New Orleans trip.

Cass returned because of the experience in her first year, such as seeing the impact of Katrina

on houses even seven years after the hurricane.

"You could see the markings on housing where it marked how many people were alive or dead inside," she said. "You saw areas of completely blighted housing and not just from urban sprawl. Sides of housing that were missing, yards full of debris."

During her time in New Orleans, Cass helped rebuild homes, observed a federal judge during criminal sentencing and developed a closeness with the people she was serving.

But it was the van ride home that provided her with insight into the trip's lasting effect.

She was serving as co-pilot for fellow student Brian Jant, meaning staying awake to talk to Jant as he drove the overnight shift back to Chicago. The two met on the trip and became good friends, mostly through the eight-hour stretch he pulled behind the wheel.

Rain was slamming down as they drove north through Illinois toward Chicago. And as can happen on cross-country car trips in the dead of night, something went wrong.

"We had pulled off to go to a gas station and made a wrong turn somewhere, and all of a sudden we were ... driving through the woods and there was a lot of mud," she said.

"We're thinking, 'If we get stuck, we'll have to build our own shelter out here.' It was kind of a hari-kari sort of moment, but we made it and found the highway again.

"It was a bonding experience to be in the car so long. We really got to know each other working side by side. I think we felt that no matter what happened, if we broke down on the side of the road or if we got stuck in the mud in the middle of a field, we could accomplish whatever we needed to."