Nomination of the Student Hurricane Network
2006 LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbard Exemplary
Public Service Award for a Student Project

Submitted by:

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Karen Comstock, Assistant Dean for Public Service, Cornell Law School

Diane T. Chin, Director, Public Interest Program, Stanford Law School

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Charlene E. Gomes, Public Interest Coordinator, American University Washington College of Law
1. **Purpose and scope of the work:** The Student Hurricane Network (SHN) was initiated by a small group of law students in the immediate aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. SHN was formed to mobilize the skills and energies of law students throughout the country to provide critically needed legal support to individuals, communities and legal organizations in the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of the destruction caused by the hurricanes.

SHN creates and coordinates volunteer opportunities for law students to get involved in the relief efforts and rebuilding process. The legal questions, problems, and issues facing the people and communities throughout the Gulf Coast are monumental in scale, and will remain for years to come. During winter and spring breaks, 12/05 –1/06 and 2/06 – 3/06 almost 1,000 students from over 60 law schools throughout the country traveled to the Gulf Coast. As a result of the student’s organizing work, the delegations increased from over 240 to 700 students! Dozens of the students returned to spend the summer as legal interns with the organizations they worked with. A wave of student trips are planned for this summer. In addition to the work during school breaks, students are involved with “long-distance” research projects: a listserv has been developed and projects available on the SHN website.

Students are working with a broad range of organizations and providing assistance in such areas as civil legal services (e.g. including landlord-tenant, mortgage foreclosure, FEMA benefits, insurance, tax assessments, bankruptcy, assistance to small businesses), civil rights/civil liberties, criminal justice, juvenile justice, racial justice, economic justice, employment/labor law, and community development.

SHN plans include: a report of its work, lobbying effort in Washington, DC, development of disaster preparedness plan for other communities, and Matchmakers for Justice to pair law students with displaced residents.
2. **Innovative approach or model to impact fellow law students and the community:**

The four founding law students have created an organization, SHN, which has developed into a truly national network. Over 50 law schools currently have chapters and/or institutional liaisons. SHN has built a strong organization, with working committees and subcommittees to carry out its work. The work has involved law students at all stages of their law school careers (e.g. first, second, third year, fourth year evening, LLM students) as well as law faculty and administrators. SHN participants have included students with extensive background in public interest law as well as those with no such prior history. SHN has created the largest mobilization of students to the South since Freedom Summer in the early Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s. The work of law students with SHN during a short, but intensive period of time has had a significant impact. (See # 3)

An important part of the work of SHN has been to keep the community’s attention on the problems and issues confronting the people of the Gulf Coast. SHN has done this in a variety of ways which have touched the law school community as well as many cities and towns throughout the country. SHN Chapters have done report backs, including slide presentations which vividly portray the current conditions. The media has profiled SHN delegations. Newspaper articles have appeared in legal publications such as the New York Law Journal and the Virginia Law Weekly, as well as local papers and television channels such as the New York Daily News, New York 1 Cable News, Jackson Clarion Ledger (MS), Oregon Daily Emerald, The Register-Guard (Eugene, OR), The Pitt News (PA), The Georgetown Voice (DC), Cherry Hill Courier Post (N J), the Badger Herald (Madison, WI) and the Iowa City Press Citizen. SHN is becoming involved in policy work and building partnerships with nationwide legal organizations and law student associations.
3. **Outcomes and accomplishments:**

Law students have worked with a broad range of legal and grassroots organizations to provide legal support including: Access to Justice, the ACLU of Louisiana (LA), Acorn of LA, the Advocacy Center, Common Ground, Community Labor United, Equal Justice Center, Gillis Long Poverty Law Center at Loyola University (“Loyola Clinic”), Human Rights Watch, the Justice Center’s Capital Appeals and Innocence Project and their LA Capital Assistance Center, the Juvenile Justice Project of LA, Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, LA Bar Young Lawyer’s Division, Mississippi (MI) Bar Young Lawyer’s Division, MI Center for Justice, MI Rural Legal Services, MI Volunteer Lawyer’s Project, NAACP of LA, National Association of Katrina Evacuees, National Employment Law Project, National Immigration Law Center, National Immigration Project, New Orleans Legal Assistance (NOLAC)—Southeast LA Legal Services, Oxfam/MI Immigrant Rights Alliance, Orleans Parish Juvenile Court, People’s Hurricane Relief Fund (“PHRF”), the Pro Bono Project, Rebuilding LA Coalition, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The impact of the work has been significant. The majority or legal services and public defender organizations were woefully under-funded before the hurricanes. After, their offices were decimated as staff could not return as a result of loss of their homes. Yet the need for legal services was at a critical level. SHN’s work—through remote research in the early fall and on the ground during winter and spring break—has provided sorely needed legal support. Each organization with whom students have worked extol their work. While the space constraints of this application cannot do justice to the breadth of work undertaken by SHN students, several examples of the accomplishments are described.
SHN participants working with NOLAC and the Loyola Law Clinic have done extensive legal research and advocacy to protect the rights of low-income tenants affected by the hurricanes, secure the ability of evacuees to obtain housing vouchers and remain secure in temporary housing. Students working with the PHRF and the Loyola Clinic played a critical role in the litigation to stop the demolition of houses in the lower 9th ward without prior notice to the owners. Their physical presence on the ground prevented bull-dozing in violation of a state temporary restraining order. SHN volunteers painstakingly performed the documentation and legal research which resulted in a negotiated settlement of the lawsuit.

SHN law students were involved in the reviewing hundreds of court files which resulted in the cancellation of scores of warrants against juveniles who are now able to pick up their lives. Over 50 people were released from prison as a result of the work of students who worked with the courts and criminal justice organizations—these individuals had been “disappeared” in the system after the hurricanes: some had been in jail because they were poor—they could not pay even low bail before the hurricane hit, others had been held well beyond their sentences.

The work of SHN volunteers has played an important role in bringing attention to the plight of the over 25,000 immigrant workers who have traveled to New Orleans to contribute to the clean-up and rebuilding. SHN outreach to laborers at day laborer job sites and the temporary locations where the workers (e.g hotels, camps) has been important in documenting the flagrant labor law, occupational safety and health violations. Students’ have provided “know your rights” education to workers. This has led to the filing of lawsuits against some of the most widespread law-breaking employers and will hopefully lead to enforcement and protections for workers and the creation of a worker center.
4. **Impact of the experience:**

Involvement in legal support to individuals and communities in the Gulf Coast has had a profound impact on the majority of the 1,000 participants involved. Obviously, the extent of the devastation and its impact on the survivors’ lives is extraordinary. Students have shared many dimensions of their experience including their exposure to the inequalities in the Gulf Coast that existed before the hurricanes—the poverty, disparity of wealth, lack of economic opportunity, failing schools, environmental problems (e.g. Cancer Alley), police brutality, grossly under-funded public defender organizations; gross failures in the government’s response; the heroism and selflessness of so many people responding to the needs of the survivors as well as the greed of others; the enormity of the human and legal needs of the survivors; a sense of the battles over the rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast—what will be built, where and for whom; the length of time, likely to be decades before any significant rebuilding will be done.

The impact of the experience has been multi-dimensional. Students have worked tirelessly to create and build an organization--SHN has grown from three students to now more than 1,000. Local chapters are developing long-term relationships with organizations in the Gulf Coast to carry out work over the long haul.

On an individual level, the impact has been profound. Students have come to deeply understand how precarious the lives’ of poor people and how limited their access to justice. A number of students who have not previously done public interest work and are considering public service career paths, post-graduate fellowships, or searching for firms with meaningful commitment to pro bono. Others have redoubled their commitment to public service. Each participant has a deep sense of the centrality of access to justice in work they undertake whether it’s in their hometown, the Gulf Coast or elsewhere.
5. **What was learned:**

Students realize the efficacy of collective work and their own skills and power to make a difference. They learned that with sensitivity, hard work, and love they could create something very powerful. They learned that other students really care and will rise to the occasion.

They are have learned that lawyers can play many roles, including advisor, litigator, facilitator, teacher, media contact, and listener. They learned that lawyering is not always done at the office or in court, but that it also occurs on the streets, in press conferences and hearings, and community meetings.

Students learned that there are some extraordinary people out there giving of themselves in the fullest ways—and that they are among this group of people.

Faculty and administrators learned that students are an inspiration to them and capable of so much.

Students learned that in the midst of death, destruction and suffering there can still somehow be hope, determination, and beauty. They learned that people who have very little in material goods will share whatever they have, while others with a lot more may refuse to. They learned that New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities were very special places, particularly to people who called it home, and that people want to return home.

Students learned that there is much work to do. They saw that the work includes assistance to individuals with particular problems as well as issues that are systematic and complex, and that is important to respond to both. SHN participants learned that is it our responsibility to stay involved and that engagement is exhausting and exhilarating.
6. Biography:

The Student Hurricane Network has been a collective project. The initiators include:

- Anna Arceneaux and Laila Hlass, both ’06 graduates, Columbia Law School
- Morgan Williams, ’07, Tulane University School of Law
- Vanessa Spinazola, ’07, and Tress Valentine Loyola Law School
- Katy Shuman and Allison Maimona, both ’06 graduates, Fordham Law School
- Allison Korn, ’07, University of Mississippi
- Jeff Jamison, ’06, Harvard Law School

Students who have taken on major leadership include:

- American University
  - Lauren Bartlett, ’07, Communications and Projects Committee

- Brooklyn Law School
  - Josie Beets, ’07, Leadership Committee
  - Kesav Wable, ’08, Communications Committee Chair

- Columbia Law School
  - Adam Pulver, ’08, Communications Committee
  - Melody Wells, ’08, Communications Committee Chair

- Cornell Law School
  - Andy Cowan, ’08, Communications Committee
  - Jonothan Sclarsic, ’08, Communications Committee
  - Jamie Rogers, ’08, Research Coordinator

- University of Denver Law School
  - Michael Goldstine, ’08, Lobbying and Communications Committee

- Fordham Law School
  - Anamaria Segura, ’07, Projects Committee Chair
  - Jeremy Pfetsch, ’07, Communications Committee

- Georgetown Law School
  - Andrew Doss, ’08, Lobbying Effort Coordinator
Loyola Law School
   Erica Garnett, '07, Leadership Committee
   Heather Ansart, '07, Lobbying Effort and Admin Committee
   Morgan Sears, '07, Treasurer
   Tressa Valentine, '07, Projects Committee

University of Maryland
   Clayton Solomon, '08, Projects Committee
   Sean Mahoney, '07, Projects Committee

University of Mississippi
   Allison Korn, '07, Admin Committee Chair

University of Nebraska
   Sean Zehtab, '08, Projects Committee

New York University Law School
   Carrie Johnson, '08, Research Coordinator
   Mimi Franke, '08, Communications Committee
   Jackie Brand, '07, Projects Committee

University of Pittsburgh
   Gina Mosley, '08, Admin and Projects Committees

Thurgood Marshall Law School
   Courtney Broussard, '07, Leadership Committee

Tulane Law School
   Agnieszka McPeak, '07, Project Committee Chair
   Kati Bambrick, '09, Communications and Projects Committee
   Mary Nagle, '08, Projects Committee
   Morgan Williams, '07, Admin Committee