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Handling Hurricane Harvey

Hurricane Harvey didn't significantly impact most law students and law professors of Houston's three law schools—South Texas, the University of Houston Law Center, and Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law. But students and professors who lost everything have struggled to get back on track, and they could face long-term impacts as they slowly and painstakingly work to recover.

By Angela Morris | November 01, 2017



A few weeks after

Hurricane Harvey ravaged Houston, law student Jacquelyn Toman couldn't bring herself to go to school for a week.

She couldn't bear to face one more classmate or professor asking the well-meaning question, "How are you doing? How is your house?"

Everyone knew that Harvey's record-breaking rains in late August—nearly 52 inches—brought floodwaters rushing into Toman's home. Pressure was there to put on a happy face and deliver the news they wanted: she was fine; everything was coming along at home.

Would it let them down to hear the truth? Toman's beautiful home was in ruins, floors ripped up, walls torn out. She and her boyfriend of seven years, Rodney Sutton, were living with friends in a two-bedroom apartment. It was hard there for Toman, a second-year law student at South Texas College of Law Houston, to study quietly. She couldn't prepare for class because she spent hours every day on the phone with her home insurance company or the Federal Emergency Management Agency. She knew she'd have to skip class again soon to apply for disaster food assistance.

"I don't want to be there right now, but school is important to me, and it's something I'm very determined to do. I don't want to miss any more than I have to, but it's still the same question: 'Is everything lined up in your house now?' No, it's not," Toman said.

Hurricane Harvey didn't significantly impact most law students and law professors of Houston's three law schools—South Texas, the University of Houston Law Center, and Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law. But students and professors who lost everything have struggled to get back on track, and they could face long-term impacts as they slowly and painstakingly work to recover.

Going through Harvey has taken a mental toll.

"We're a little more on edge as far as our mood," explained Jessica Rodriguez, a visiting third-year student at South Texas. "Your relationships take a toll in that time because when you're dealing with something stressful, your mood is worse."

When the stress is too much, Rodriguez cries it out. She's trying to stay strong, but noted Harvey was such a traumatic experience that some law students might deal with anxiety or panic attacks, and they might need counseling.

UH Law adjunct professor Allison Winnike, whose home in Galveston County was flooded, said her experience at home has made her heart go out to students in the same predicament. With homes and cars flooded, they don't have a place to live or reliable transportation to get to school. They might have lost their books, notes and computer.

"Law school is already a tremendously stressful environment," Winnike said. "I can imagine it would be an overwhelming sense of stress these students are facing."

UH Law Dean Leonard Baynes said the school surveyed its students and found that 23 percent said they suffered minor losses and 3 percent suffered major damages. About six law professors had their homes flooded, he added.

"We need to be patient and kind with them to help them in any way they can to make sure they return to some sense of normalcy," said Baynes.

TSU Law Interim Dean James Douglas said that flooding displaced only three or four law professors, and five or six students. The school is dedicated to helping them to the end, knowing for some, it will be a long-term process, Douglas said.

South Texas Law Dean Donald Guter said that 29 students, faculty and staff have applied for aid from two hurricane relief funds totaling \$25,000. The school plans to hand out every penny. But some students have declined to participate because they're very self-reliant.

"They want us to know they want all the funds to go to people even more needy than they are, so there's a really beautiful aspect to this about people sharing and wanting the best for their colleagues," Guter said.

Flood and Evacuation Terrors

Law students and professors who lost it all during Harvey tell similar stories about the terror they felt when floodwaters rushed into their homes and the frightening realization that they were trapped in a very dangerous situation with no one to help them.

Toman recalled sitting on her couch in pitch darkness at 3 a.m. on Aug. 27. Water had been coming in for hours. No one was answering eight phone calls to 911. She and Sutton could hear the noise of wooden floor boards popping up and bumping together in the water. A bar cart was floating around the house, and its glasses were clinking together. That loud scraping sound outside—was it a car hitting the house? At one point, with nerves twisting her stomach into knots, Toman threw up.

“It was the most terrifying thing because you couldn’t see what was going on, but you could hear everything. At the same time, you could hear the water moving and coming in,” Toman recalled. “All I wanted to do was lay down and curl up in a little ball.”

Rodriguez, who is visiting South Texas from DePaul University College of Law in Chicago, said her experience escaping from her flooded home has made her never want to see water or a boat again.

She never imagined that her parents’ home, where Rodriguez lives with her wife and parents, would have flooded. But on Aug. 27, the water on the first floor was nearly up to the waist of Rodriguez, who is 5-foot-3-inches. As it poured in, the whole family hustled all night to save heirlooms and mementos by rushing them up to the second story. Rodriguez never had time to worry about her own desk—the water destroyed her law school books, notes and computer.

They were rescued the next day. She explained that on Aug. 28, two men and a woman from Louisiana brought a boat to her home. Rodriguez and her wife both wore backpacks on their chests to carry their two small dogs. To get to the boat, two other larger dogs and the rest of the family had to swim through their front yard, holding on to their under-water cars to fight the harsh current.

“The memory I will never forget is being on the boat and turning on the street when we were rescued and seeing our home down the street,” said Rodriguez, explaining it was devastating to not know if the flood would destroy her home, when they could return, and where they’d live in the meantime.

When the waters receded and flooded-out students and professors finally made it back home, they found utter destruction. They had to rip out their floors and cut the drywall from the bottom parts of the floors. Kitchens and bathrooms were ruined. Furniture and clothes were lost.

“It looks gutted and ruined. We hope to put the walls back in, put the floor back in, so we can continue to live here,” said Winnike, the UH Law adjunct professor. “What really makes me emotional is when I drive down the street and drive through the neighborhood. It’s not just me with this pile of debris in the driveway. It’s house after house after house. When I see all these families with their lives piled up in the street for debris removal, it’s just heartbreaking.”

Neither Winnike nor Rodriguez had flood insurance at home, leaving the cost of repairs up to them.

On the other hand, Toman and UH Law Professor Sandra Guerra Thompson did have flood insurance. But the claim process has eaten up hours of Toman’s life and left her discouraged at the slow pace of payments.

Thompson and her husband, whose insurance covered only possessions and not the house itself, have decided not to move back home. For now they’re living in a law school colleague’s vacant home. Eventually they’ll try to sell their home and move to an apartment.

“We moved out pretty quickly. It’s a lot easier to move out of your home when virtually all your furniture is destroyed. You’re just talking about boxes,” noted Thompson.

Back to School

It's been hard for students to juggle the overwhelming chore of repairing their destroyed homes with studying and attending class. They're afraid it might impact their grades and disrupt their plans to compete on law school advocacy or appellate teams.

Rodriguez explained that law school moves so fast that losing two weeks means missing a lot. When it comes time to study for finals, Rodriguez expects a hard time as she catches up on all the readings she missed and drafts outlines.

"I'm hoping I can work really hard and catch up so my grades won't suffer, but it's in the back of my mind that this whole time, no matter how much I work, because I wasn't in class to learn about the subject, that my grade will be affected," she said.

Toman managed to catch up on all her readings and lectures. But she's not sure how Harvey will impact her plans—already hard under normal conditions—to compete in an advocacy program.

"With all of this, it's just that much harder. I hope it can all still be done. I'm going to try my best, but it will be tough," Toman said.

Going back to work has been extremely difficult for Winnike. Before the storm, she had announced she would become full-time CEO of The Immunization Partnership, a public health nonprofit. She's still teaching classes as an adjunct professor. Balancing the two jobs with everything that comes with a flooded home has been really tough.

"My priority is really for the safety and well-being of my students and to make sure I'm giving them all the resources they need," Winnike said. "I feel confident and I feel optimistic that by the time we make it to finals in December, that things will seem back to normal, I hope, for most of our students. I hope we've been able to help them and get them in safe and reliable situations."

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