The Gulf Coast has long been a favorite destination for students on Spring Break. They spend a week lounging on the beach, soaking up the sun and dancing until dawn. But for a group of 19 Brooklyn Law School students, their Spring Break in the Gulf Coast region was anything but a trip to the beach. Instead, working with a national organization known as The Student Hurricane Network — a coalition of law students from around the country devoted to assisting victims of the 2005 hurricanes — these BLS students worked 12-hour days during a massive pro bono effort in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. They helped defendants receive due process, workers receive their wages, hurricane evacuees navigate FEMA, and small businesses get back on their feet. The students, who documented their experiences in photographs and blog posts on their Web site (http://bls-shn.blogspot.com), returned with new perspectives on law student life and their futures as lawyers.

“Something like this shows how powerful law really is,” observed Kesav Wable, who spearheaded the Brooklyn Law School effort.

In late August 2005, as Wable and his fellow 1L’s were just getting settled in at the Law School, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. The Brooklyn Law School community quickly took action, and on September 6, the Law School opened its doors to a group of displaced Tulane Law Students. That same week, the Brooklyn Law School Student Bar Association, together with over 20 student organizations, hosted a benefit event that raised almost $9000 in cash and much needed supplies for the hurricane victims.

A few weeks later, Wable approached Elizabeth Kane, the Director of Public Service Programs, to find out what he could do to assist with hurricane relief. Kane put Wable in contact with From the Lake to the River, a foundation that needed volunteers. Soon Wable was donating his time responding to phone calls from hurricane victims. This work led Wable to the law student coordinators of the Student Hurricane Network (SHN), who put him in touch with SHN members at New York-area law schools, and he learned of their plan to send law students to the Gulf during the winter break.

With the end of the fall semester approaching, Wable set his sights instead on Spring Break. In early February, Wable sent a school-wide email asking students to volunteer their Spring Break time to “go down south and do some good work.” After a flurry of emails, Wable, working with the national SHN, managed to secure placements for 19 BLS students. Although all of the students who signed on as volun-
Volunteers were prepared to pay their own way, Wable, along with fellow 1L’s Josie Beets, Mary Anne Mendenhall and Christopher Soverow, approached the administration with a proposal seeking official support from the Law School for the effort.

“We did not require much convincing to see that it was a very worthwhile project, both for the students and for the communities they would be serving,” Dean Joan G. Wexler said. “We gave our wholehearted support to the project and agreed that the School would subsidize the students’ travel and hotel expenses.”

Wable and the growing group of BLS students interested in the Gulf relief cause raised additional money and the profile of the BLS-SHN movement by hosting a tremendously successful Fat Tuesday-themed fundraiser at Geraldo’s café in Feil Hall on February 28. The party, complete with Mardi Gras beads, featured live jazz music, as well as Southern-themed food and drinks donated by local restaurants and bars.

When Spring Break arrived, the volunteers headed for their assignments in New Orleans, Austin, Dallas and Jackson, ready to put their legal training to work. For the 14 students who went to New Orleans, the week kicked off on Sunday, March 12 with an orientation sponsored by the law firm of Jones Walker in the Central Business District. Some 200 volunteers from law schools around the country heard presentations by local lawyers, a leading civil rights attorney and education advocate, and a panel of law students from Tulane. “It was a great way to start,” said Josie Beets ’08 of the orientation event.

Beets and ten other volunteers from Brooklyn Law School spent their week working for “Project Triage,” creating a database of information about individuals who are scattered in prisons all over Louisiana after being evacuated from New Orleans: “There are countless people incarcerated whom the state has agreed to let out once they are identified, people who are jailed for having committed misdemeanors, and whose maximum sentences are well under the six months they’ve already served,” remarked Mary Anne Mendenhall ’08. In a blog post, Beets offered an example of one such case: “Today we met (on paper, that is) A.A., a black male who served 7 months of a 5 month sentence.” Other tales emerged from the docket sheets throughout the week, including that of “a 52-year-old man who has been incarcerated for over a year for marijuana possession,” according to Mendenhall in a blog post, adding that this was “his first-ever arrest.” The first two days of work on Project Triage were long 12-hour days, said Beets, but, she added, “It was so hard to leave.”

Laureve Blackstone ’06 and Christopher Soverow ’08 volunteered with the Workers Rights Project in New Orleans. The project’s goal, Blackstone explained, “is to identify who the low-wage workers are, what the working conditions are, and how these conditions might be improved.” Blackstone and Soverow were on a team with other law students, and spent their days roaming the city and talking to workers. They discovered a range of obstacles that

Sickening. Unacceptable. Incomprehensible. Wrong. Thus far, my trip “home” has been a memorable one, but not for any of the right reasons. I am confident that by week’s end, I will be a part of changing the descriptive list above to one that can bring a smile to my face. Progress. Hope. Justice. Right.

Daniel Zweben ’08
Blog post, March 13, 2006
workers in New Orleans encounter, including finding housing, receiving their wages, and facing hazardous, unsafe working conditions. Some workers face an additional burden; they are immigrants, some legal and some undocumented. “It’s estimated that 30,000 immigrant workers have come to New Orleans since Katrina,” said Blackstone. She summed up her experience in a blog post: “Everyone of us who has witnessed this situation has a serious obligation to use our skills and privilege to do more.”

The two BLS students in New Orleans who worked with Second Wind, Christine Creamer ’06 and Anna Statnikova ’07, took on a very different role from those of their counterparts. Second Wind is a nonprofit organization devoted to helping small business owners in New Orleans to rebuild. “I spent this week soliciting small business owners throughout every corner of New Orleans that was still standing,” wrote Creamer in a blog post. “I was asking them to sign on to this initiative, to support each other, so that they can get the grant money the federal government has promised New Orleans and promised them.” In her blog post, Statnikova added, “I am convinced that the people of New Orleans aren’t only looking for housing help and legal defense. While those things are tremendously important, these people ultimately wish to regain their livelihood and re-energize their city.”

Other students who worked in cities in Texas and Mississippi that were not directly hit by Hurricane Katrina dealt with hurricane-related issues from a different vantage point. Jeannette Weiss ’07 and Hilary Bauer ’07 assisted with the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative. The influx of evacuees from New Orleans increased the number of children in need of assistance. Weiss and Bauer helped the organization determine how best to utilize donations received from hurricane relief funds.

Three BLS students spent the week working in Texas. Amy Benedetto ’07, together with Denice Szekely ’06,
worked with Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid under attorney Heather Godwin, who is herself a hurricane survivor. They focused on the issues affecting the thousands of Katrina evacuees in Austin, a situation that has stirred up its own fallout. “The influx of 4,000 people who are all in need of public assistance puts pressure on job markets, housing supply and Austin’s already existing and strained public assistance program. So the five of us will spend the week making contact with the evacuees, documenting their situations and helping them file appropriate [FEMA] appeals,” wrote Benedetto in a blog post. There are many in Texas, Szekely wrote, “who are still seeking FEMA assistance that they have been promised publicly but often denied in seemingly arbitrary ways.”

Joseph “J.J.” Varley ’08 also spent the week in Texas working with Legal Aid of Northwest Texas in Dallas to help Katrina evacuees gain access to federal aid and assistance. “Many of those evacuees who were granted housing on a limited basis by local housing authorities have been caught in the middle of a financial dispute between those authorities and FEMA over who will pay for what housing, and when,” Varley explained in a blog post. “As a volunteer, much of the work I do involves understanding the applicant’s case, divining the real reason they were denied assistance, and writing an appropriate appeal letter.”

Despite the struggles and frustrations encountered daily — on docket sheets, in tent camps, or through evacuees’ stories — the BLS contingent managed to find moments of escape. Mary Anne Mendenhall wrote about one of the trip’s highlights, a surprise visit from Federal District Judge Jay Zainey to Project Triage. “He was incredibly warm, and told us stories of his days as a criminal defense attorney in Louisiana, well before Katrina.” The group also explored restaurants, music and local culinary delights. “More than anything else,” wrote Beets on the blog, “I’m really having a great time working with the students from BLS.”

So many stories, so many obstacles. Bureaucracy can create solutions or it can take a simple solution and blur it, lengthen it, and add in lots of conditional clauses and formalities that befuddle even the most educated mind. Imagine navigating a system of phone operators and government forms while trying to find a job, keep your family safe and sheltered, and grieve for a life you were plucked from by a helicopter to be brought to a random and often very far away “disaster recovery center” so that you can begin to rebuild your life.

Denice Szekely ’06
Blog post, March 15, 2006
Their experiences also reconnected the BLS students with the purpose of their legal education. “The trip was useful in grounding me in the reality of why I came to law school,” said Christopher Soverow ’08. Mendenhall had a similar reaction. “The trip affirmed for me that I want to do capital defense work in the South,” she said, shortly after her return from New Orleans. “In law school right now, it’s about the fact that eventually, I’ll have a degree; I’ll be a more powerful advocate, a more powerful citizen.”

The students’ efforts to assist hurricane victims have garnered much attention. They were featured in the New York Law Journal, among other papers, and the group appeared in a live news segment broadcast by NY1 News. On April 8, Kesav Wable’s participation in a panel discussion at the Northeast Regional Conference of the National Lawyer’s Guild regarding the legal landscape after Hurricane Katrina continued to keep the legal issues the students worked on in the Gulf Coast region in the public eye. The national Student Hurricane Network, including the Brooklyn Law contingent of 19 students, was awarded the Lexis Nexis Martin- dale-Hubbell Public Service Award at the Equal Justice Works 2006 Awards Dinner in October.

The BLS-SHN volunteers have also gladly shared their stories in conversations with Brooklyn Law School students and faculty, and through their blog posts, with anyone who has an Internet connection. At a school-wide event held on April 18 in the Subotnick Center, which featured a panel discussion and slide show of student photos, the students gave compelling accounts of their experiences and spoke of their desire to return to New Orleans and continue their work.

This article was written by Jean Marie Hackett, the Law School’s former Director of the Office of Student Affairs.