



Second-year students at NC Central law school Stacy Lee and Dameka Harrington in Esme Scott's tenth grade civics class at Durham School of the Arts

For the GREATER GOOD



Second-year NC Central law school student John Astle with Sheena Taylor's tenth grade civics students at Hillside High School

Pro bono programs at NC's law schools transform both students and society

WRITTEN BY KATI KNOWLAND

As is the case for most law school students, those studying at the seven law schools in North Carolina — Campbell University, Charlotte School of Law, Duke University, Elon University, North Carolina Central University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Wake Forest University — are busy people. It takes time and dedication to read, research and prepare for the rigors of a legal education.

But despite their busy schedules, students at North Carolina's law schools are dedicating themselves to making a difference in their communities and in the lives of the less fortunate through a variety of pro bono programs.

"I think, increasingly, we're seeing a generation of students that are service-minded," said Melissa Essary, dean of Campbell University's Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law. "They are not viewing the law as simply a way or a means to make a living but rather as a calling and a means by which to serve the public good."

Chris Neeson, first-year law student at the Charlotte School of Law, wasn't as sure of pro bono at first.

"Most of the guys I knew who were going ... it wasn't something we talked about, how excited we were to get our J.D. so that we could go help the underserved," said Neeson.

One trip to the pro bono office changed his whole way of thinking, and Neeson immediately got involved with a pro bono program through the Mecklenburg County Courthouse's self-service center.

"The pro bono project was an outlet for me to take some of the information that I was learning and use it in a way that's both rewarding for me — very gratifying — and practical and helpful for the community," he said.

"We're in classes and reading around 80 hours a week, with our noses in books all the time trying to learn something new," he added. "This is a way to take some of that information and our inchoate knowledge of the legal system and actually use it at this stage. It's very, very affirming to be able to do that."

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Third-year NC Central student Andria Searles with the Future Lawyers and Leaders after-school program students at Shepard Middle School



The Charlotte School of Law is the only school in the state that has a pro bono requirement — 20 hours during the three years of the program. It may not sound like much, but it is just the beginning for most students.

"I have students who come into my office and say I just want to get my 20 hours out of the way," said Rebecca Wofford, assistant professor of clinical practice and pro bono coordinator. "But by the end of it, they're leading a student group project because they get so involved in what's going on in the community and how they're helping that it becomes a part of who they are. So it's definitely transforming how they thought of themselves before coming here."

"I think that before, the way traditional education was without pro bono, students didn't feel connected to giving back to their community," she said. "Making it a part of what they do as a student will hopefully make it a part of what they do as a lawyer. That's why the faculty voted to have a pro bono program that was mandatory here."

Throughout the state, a variety of projects are in place that allow law students, sometimes starting as early as their first year, to transform what they are learning in their classes into real-world experience to make a real impact in the lives of others.

One example is the Street Law program, a nationwide initiative to help put law students into high school classrooms, often in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, to help teach the basics of the law. Several law schools in the state participate in the program, including Campbell.

"It's hard, empirically, to measure what impact Street Law may have, but if even one child in high school goes on to college or seeks a career in law, and we know anecdotally that that has happened, then the investment of time by our students is worth it," said Essary. "But there's a multiplier effect. The more students who get involved with these projects, the greater impact they will have on their communities for good."

While Campbell just started its Street Law program last year, NC Central — one of only five historically black law schools in the country — has been a part of the program since 1999, according to Page Potter, director of pro bono services at the university. She added that it helps law students to learn how to communicate with non-lawyers.

"The benefit to law students is that they really come to appreciate that you cannot talk to clients, juries, people who haven't been to law school the same way you talk to other lawyers or other law students," said Potter. "You've got to be able to communi-

cate about the law in a way that laypeople can understand that won't be intimidating, in a way that won't be off-putting."

Potter added that in other pro bono programs, the nonprofit public interest organizations students work with often have limited staff and limited budgets, so the volunteer workers really make a difference.

"So at the same time that we are providing law students with an opportunity to get their feet wet in that environment and gain some hands-on experience, we are providing those organizations with sources of free labor," said Potter. "It's a wonderful win-win — the student gets experience, they have a chance to network, and they're usually enticed by that experience to go on volunteering."

One other enticement at NC Central is the fact that the law school offers credit-bearing pro bono opportunities, which Potter said are an incentive to help students get started with volunteer work.

"Law students are very busy, and you have to give them something, I think, to encourage them to try something new."

In addition to Street Law, other popular pro bono programs are the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program and the North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence.

At Duke, which has one of the earliest organized pro bono programs in the country,

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the VITA program is one of a long list of pro bono programs in which students can participate. According to E. Carol Spruill, associate dean for public interest and pro bono and senior lecturing fellow at Duke, last year, students participating in the VITA program got more than \$300,000 for the community in tax refunds and credits.

Students at Duke can sign a pro bono pledge, in which they promise to provide at least 50 hours of law-related service to the community through pro bono or clinics. At this year's awards ceremony, Spruill said she expected 125 members of the graduating class to be recognized for achieving that goal.

"It's transformative for some students," she said. "It's exposure to needs that they never knew about before; it's learning about the power of good that can be done by people who are licensed to be attorneys. It makes them feel terrific when they can see concrete results from their efforts and put their studies into practice on behalf of somebody."

Beyond the good feelings of putting their education into practice, students who participate in pro bono programs are giving themselves an opportunity to try out the different areas of the law that they might be interested in as a career, said Spruill. It's also a step in the right direction for their future in pro bono work.

"Also, for people who go into private practice, which is most people in their

first job right after law school, it is sending them into these firms already knowing how to do something for low-income people," said Spruill.

At Elon, where 70 percent of students say they plan to do volunteer or pro bono work, one outlet for that work is the Elon University Innocence Project, which is affiliated with the North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence. The statewide center was organized in 2000 and was originally intended to heighten communication and efficiency between innocence projects at Duke and UNC. The center has since established programs at NC Central, Campbell and Elon.

This year, the Innocence Project at Wake Forest, which originally worked with the Forsyth County District Attorney and others to identify cases that qualified for DNA testing, will begin working with the North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence to investigate potential claims of actual innocence, based on any type of reliable evidence.

Students participating through various schools in the Innocence Project review and investigate innocence claims made by prisoners incarcerated in North Carolina. According to the program's description, its fundamental goal is to review files and, upon discovery of a valid innocence claim, assist prisoners in challenging their wrongful convictions.

"These pro bono projects are illustrative of the kind of work that connects our

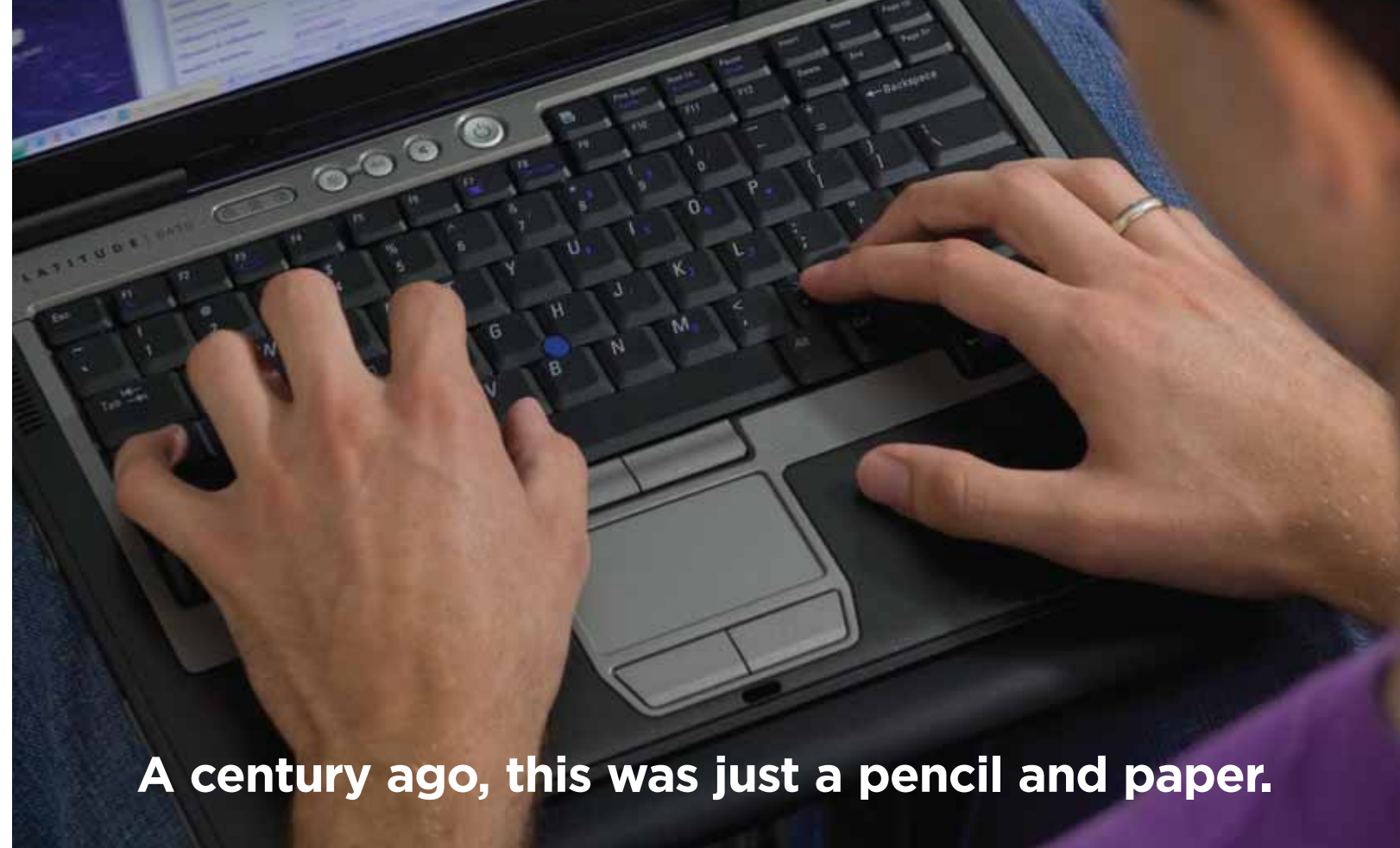
students, not just with the profession, and not just with the law, but on a deeper level the notion of the law as a service profession," said Essary. "The giving of oneself to something greater than oneself."

But those aren't the only pro bono projects available to students. Sylvia Novinsky, assistant dean for public service programs at UNC, said that in addition to the pro bono programs organized through her office, there are about 50 different student organizations on campus, many of which participate in pro bono activities on their own.

Novinsky added that participation in pro bono programs during law school makes students better lawyers for a number of reasons.

"They are better lawyers in the sense they have an appreciation for life beyond the law school; they have an appreciation for how the legal system helps or doesn't help poor people; they have an appreciation for their own skill and the unique skills that they have, that they really can do something to change someone's life," she said. "And I think that they see that the law degree is more than just your job. It's about your role in the community and bettering the community that you live in."

"I think it reinforces what we're trying to say, which is that lawyers are not what you hear about. They're not the jokes you hear about; they're not the stereotypes that you have."♦



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