

# Helping Houston



# PILS students deliver truckload of donations to Texas nonprofit recovering from water and fire

**O**n the evening of Oct. 5, LSU Law students and members of the Public Interest Law Society (PILS) rented a 26-foot U-Haul truck and packed it with desks, chairs, file cabinets, printers, and boxes of office supplies.

By 9 a.m. the next morning, a caravan that included the U-Haul truck and a half dozen student SUVs loaded with office equipment and furniture drove out of the Paul M. Hebert Law Center parking lot headed to Houston. Their destination: Lone Star Legal Aid, a pro bono legal service whose main offices in Houston were devastated in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in late August.

As news reports and images of unending rain and flooding came in from the Houston area, LSU Law student MJ Hernandez, Community Service Chair of the Public Interest Law Society, knew the Law Center needed to help.

“The first thought was, ‘Let’s do something. Whatever it is, let’s do something. What can we provide to help others?’” Hernandez said. “We wanted to reach out in brotherly fashion to other law communities.”

After all, the members of the LSU Law Center know all too well the havoc Mother Nature can create. Last year, Hernandez said legal organizations from around the south contacted LSU to help with recovery efforts from last year’s Baton Rouge flood. He said this was the time to pay it back.

Hurricane Harvey made landfall on the eastern Texas coast on Aug. 23 before stalling and dropping torrential and unprecedented amounts of rainfall over the Lone Star State. In a four-day period, the storm poured more than 40 inches of water on some areas of Texas, with the Houston area receiving more than 30 inches of rainfall in a span of hours.

Immediately after Harvey dissipated, Hernandez and PILS faculty advisor Professor John Devlin sent emails out to



Opposite page: LSU Law students unload a U-Haul truck packed with office donations for Lone Star Legal Aid in Houston. Top: Students, Professor John Devlin and Lone Star staff at its new temporary offices. Above, David Albano and Nick Algero move a printer to Lone Star’s new office.





anyone they thought might require assistance in their recovery. Through the dozens of attempts to reach out, one organization responded — Lone Star Legal Aid.

The largest indigent legal service provider in east Texas, Lone Star's headquarters in downtown Houston had water enter the first floor of its three-story building. But that wasn't the worst of it. With water still standing in its offices, an apparent gas leak caused an explosion and fire that burned and destroyed everything — from office furniture to client files.

With calls coming in from Texas residents needing legal representation following the flood, Lone Star's staff didn't have time to address its own recovery. Hernandez said that's when PILS decided to take it upon themselves to help the office.

"That was the perfect way that we thought we could provide more tangible material assistance. It was sort of the impetus for, 'Let's try to get physical donations of desks and chairs. Let's help get this office back on their feet,'" he said.

Hernandez said Devlin reached out to LSU Law alumni and the legal community around Louisiana for donations of office

equipment, furniture, and supplies. In short time, supplies started to pour in from across the state: Law firms from Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lafayette, and the Northshore; businesses in Baton Rouge; students, faculty, and the administration of LSU and the LSU Law Center; and legal organizations all donated enough furniture and equipment to fill the U-Haul truck.

Hernandez's job was to find volunteers to get all of the donations to Houston. Working around students' class schedules, Lone Star employees' schedules and other unexpected delays, Hernandez said he found no shortage of students willing to make the journey.

"All of the volunteers were so on board with it. They never complained. They never asked questions. They were very willing to just do what we needed them to do, and that made it so much simpler," he said. "It really fell into place that all these people just were ready to go for it."

Hernandez said about 15 students gave up a Friday to drive to Houston and back, and countless more helped collect donations from around the city and load vehicles.



Opposite page: LSU Law students Cody Frye and Bret Shallenberger secure office furniture donated by Preis PLC in Lafayette. Above left: Fire destroys Lone Star Legal Aid’s office in downtown Houston. Above right: A football signed by LSU football coach Ed Orgeron for Lone Star Director Sue Sere.

Finally, when the day arrived to make the close to 300-mile journey from Baton Rouge to Houston, Hernandez said PILS collected so many donations that one U-Haul truck wasn’t enough. He called upon students to load up their trucks and SUVs with desks and chairs and drive to Houston so they could bring everything to Lone Star.

“Everyone was on the same page, but it really helped out so much that all of the volunteers that we had were so easy going,” he said. “All we really needed to say was, ‘Hey, we’re leaving on Friday at 9 a.m. Bring your car around and we’ll load it up and we’ll roll out.’”

The caravan left the LSU Law parking lot and traveled west down Interstate 10 toward Houston, making one stop in Lafayette to collect more office donations from Preis PLC.

By that afternoon, as the caravan reached the temporary new offices of Lone Star, Hernandez said Lone Star’s office staff greeted the U-Haul with an ovation.

“I talked to probably every office person as I was helping them carry stuff up and they all expressed just so much gratitude for us to be able to come and bring all this stuff,” he said. “They were all very excited, and a couple of them were in tears.

“That made it worth it. All that trouble of getting the stuff there, it all went away once we started working with them to put the stuff in their office.”

For Lone Star, the donations helped bring a sense of normal life back to its offices. The staff, with no time to shop for supplies or chairs, now had the equipment to do their work.

“Our staff is excited to get back to work. All of our attorneys are in touch with their clients, drafting pleadings and moving cases forward. New intakes are coming in and our client community needs help with disaster recovery,” Lone Star Legal Aid wrote in a release about the LSU Law Center donations. “With some of our temporary office space being unfurnished and the loss of so many computers and office

**“I was smiling the entire time I was there. It brought so much joy, not only to them, but to us to be able to help out in that way and be able to say that we did our part to try to help bring them back.”**

**— MJ HERNANDEZ**

LSU Law Student,  
LSU Public Interest Law Society  
Community Service Chair



supplies, these donations will fill the remaining voids in our return to normal office life.”

LSU Law’s Hurricane Harvey assistance didn’t stop with office furniture. Numerous student groups put on events and fundraisers to raise money or other donations for relief. PILS hosted a trivia night fundraiser and held a merchandise sale, and the Christian Legal Society hosted a karaoke fundraiser.

The Student Bar Association teamed up with the LSU Vet School to host a “Deep in the Heart of Texas” fundraiser GIF with proceeds going to the South Texas College of Law Student Relief Fund. Also donating to that fund were the Hispanic Law Students Association — which held an enchilada plate fundraiser on Oct. 4 — and the Powderpuff Flag Football

Auction on Oct. 20. The Black Law Students’ Association is planning a charity basketball tournament with proceeds going to help those affected by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

As for Lone Star, PILS had one more surprise up its sleeve for its director, Sue Sere. Hernandez said Sere told him that she lost an autographed football by former LSU head football coach Les Miles. As staff placed the final chairs in the new office, Devlin presented her with a hat and football signed by current coach Ed Orgeron.

“I was smiling the entire time I was there. It brought so much joy not only to them but to us to be able to help out in that way and be able to say that we did our part to try to help bring them back,” Hernandez said.



# Legal Assistance

## Organizations that made donations include:

- Taylor Porter Brooks & Phillips LLP of Baton Rouge
- Hurlburt, Monroe & Ernest LLP of Lafayette
- Legacy Estate and Elder Law of Louisiana
- Preis PLC of Lafayette
- Louisiana State University
- The students and faculty of the LSU Law Center
- BARBRI Co. and their Law Center representatives
- Emprint Moran Printing
- Capital Area Computer Recycling
- The staff of the Louisiana Law Institute



## Donated items delivered to Lone Star Legal Aid:

### OFFICE FURNITURE

- 9 Desks
- 4 Credenzas
- 1 Side Table
- 20 Swivel Desk Chairs
- 12 Client Chairs
- 2 Conference Tables
- 3 Trash Cans

### WAITING AREA & MISCELLANEOUS

#### FURNITURE:

- 2 Sofa/Love Seats
- 14 Miscellaneous Chairs

### KITCHEN/BREAK ROOM FURNISHINGS

- 3 Round Tables
- 1 Microwave Oven
- 1 Coffee Maker
- 1 Wall Clock

### ELECTRONICS:

- 12 Complete Desktop Computers (CPU, keyboard, monitor & cables)
- 1 Laptop Computer
- 3 Keyboards
- 4 Printers (One with a scanner)
- 1 Cassette Tape Recording System

### OFFICE SUPPLIES

- 1 Box of Copier/Printer Paper
- 8 Boxes of 3-Ring Binders
- 3 Boxes of Miscellaneous Office Supplies

Approximately \$3,000 Cash Raised and Donated