

Law alum aids through pro bono work

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Courtney Crowell (L *19) was working as a maritime attorney in New Orleans last year when she received a fateful phone call from her former Tulane Law School professors. They were asking if she'd serve pro bono as co-counsel for the parole hearing on a case she had worked on while a law student - representing a woman serving life for fatally shooting her abuser in the 1990s while he was strangling her.

"It was the best phone call I've ever received, just because I was so thrilled that she was getting one step closer (to being released from prison)," said Crowell. "She had been in prison longer than I've been alive."

The case had been Crowell's first as a student attorney in the Domestic Violence Law Clinic at Tulane Law School. Near the end of her third year of law school, Crowell helped successfully argue for a commutation of her client's life sentence

(making her parole-eligible). The parole hearing wasn't set until after Crowell had graduated, passed the bar exam and was working as an associate at Pusateri, Johnston, Guillot & Greenbaum. Tulane professors Katherine Mattes and Becki Kondkar, directors of the Women's Prison Project, asked Crowell if she wanted to serve as co-counsel on the parole hearing and see the case to the end.

In summer 2020, Crowell co-counseled with Mattes and Kondkar. After a hearing, held over Zoom, the Louisiana Parole Board granted Crowell's client immediate release, and she walked out of jail a week later. Her entire family cheerfully greeted her, including her two children who had been toddlers when she was arrested. "I have this beautiful video of her picking up her granddaughter that she has never seen outside the walls of a prison," said Crowell. "To watch her come out of the prison system and to reunite with her family was just the most humbling, beautiful moment. To watch her finally walk free and into this new chapter of her life was fantastic." Her client now has a job and is living near her family, Crowell said.

Crowell is proud to use her law degree to give back to the community and give a voice to victims of domestic violence who have been unfairly treated by a criminal justice system that is often stacked against them. "Our purpose is to give these women the tools to help themselves," Crowell said. "When my clients speak for themselves and are given the opportunity to do so, they save themselves, they dig themselves out of impossible situations."

Crowell was one of the first students chosen to work on the Women's Prison Project, launched by Kondkar, director of Tulane's Domestic Violence Clinic and Mattes, director of Tulane's Criminal Justice Clinic. The Women's Prison Project advocates for imprisoned domestic violence victims and pushes for systemic reform of the criminal justice system.

Tulane Law School has eight student law clinics that give third-year law students the opportunity to practice law under the supervision of expert faculty. Crowell called her work with the Domestic Violence Clinic and the Women's Prison Project the most rewarding part of her law school experience.

Crowell will use her experience at Tulane and carry that throughout her legal career, advocating for reforms and helping other lawyers, judges and legal professionals to recognize the domestic violence that exists everywhere. "Being able to identify

individuals that may be victims of intimate partner violence makes you a better lawyer and able to help even more victims, which ultimately is the goal. This is an issue that needs to be made a priority in our communities, and Women's Prison Project is making important strides to accomplish that prioritization. They not only help women that have long gone unseen and unheard, but they are training a new generation of lawyers, one that demands more from its community and legal system.

Just as she has generously given her time and support to the Women's Prison Project, Crowell encourages other alumni to get involved with an initiative that is changing lives and making a difference.

"It means so much to me to be able to continue to be involved in a program like this," said Crowell, adding that the Women's Prison Project supports making systemic change to the criminal justice system to help victims of domestic violence who have been unfairly incarcerated. "That's the type of project that I would never walk away from. It's not something that we will solve overnight. It takes passionate people who believe in pouring all their resources, both intellectually, emotionally and financially, into solutions. As an alumna, I've never been prouder to have my name next to a program because they do such wonderful work."

[Learn more](#) about the Women's Prison Project.