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**Teaching Through Tragedy: The Aftermath of September 11—A Community Service Response**

Matthew Wilkes*

Historically, New York Law School, situated in lower Manhattan since its founding in 1891, has considered its location to be one of its primary assets. In the late nineteenth century, when Columbia University's School of Law was moving uptown, a core of Columbia's students and faculty, including adherents of its founder and first dean, founded New York Law School (NYLS). Consistent with a practice-oriented approach to legal education, New York Law School's founders decided to remain downtown near the Civic Center, the site of State and Federal courts, City Hall, the Municipal Building, and offices for numerous City, State, and Federal agencies. The school also has ready access to the Wall Street financial district and the many law offices and corporate headquarters in the area. In addition to enjoying the benefits of its location in what came to be known as TriBeCa (Triangle Below Canal Street), near SoHo (South of Houston Street), Greenwich Village, Chinatown, and Little Italy, the School also is within ten blocks of the site of the World Trade Center.

Thus, on the morning of September 11, 2001, the impact of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center was felt at the school immediately. Classes were cancelled that day and those who were at the school, quite a number of whom had witnessed the impact and the immediate aftermath, had to evacuate the area and deal with the uncertainty of what to do and how to negotiate the disruptions to transit and communications systems. By the end of the afternoon that day, the school was without electricity and telephone services, and all that goes along with that. The school's computer system was down, resulting in loss of e-mail and internet access, which otherwise might have served as alternate means of communication.

Over the next two weeks members of the law school administration engaged in daily, and at times more frequent, conference calls to plan the next steps and responses, a process made more difficult due to disruptions to communications systems that were now experienced across a wider portion of the metropolitan New York area. An early priority was to account for students, staff, and faculty, as well as graduates. This was further complicated by the lack of access to central administrative records held in the law school's now-inaccessible facilities and the fact that many, especially those who lived near the law school in an area designated as the "frozen zone" (where little or no access was allowed, except through police

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Numerous alternative means of communication were employed in the effort to account for those connected to the law school, including a personal visit to the dormitory facility where a number of students reside, establishing telephone calling trees, email message distributions, many of which were from faculty to students currently enrolled in their classes, and postings to an emergency web site that was established remotely through a service provider in Florida. Again, faculty members fashioned individual messages for postings to the web to address the concerns of students in their respective classes, including plans for how the course of study was to be pursued once classes could resume.

Even when the school remained in a restricted access area, efforts were made to allow students to gain access to their books that were still at the school. For those students who lost books in offices that were destroyed in the disaster, arrangements were made, through efforts by members of the law school library staff, to replace the books at no cost to the students.

After power was restored to the law school’s facilities (an electrical generator had been set up in one of the buildings to provide temporary power for the School), there still were difficulties and limitations in available services, including limited telephone service (local service was restored well before long-distance service became available); continuing over a considerable period of time. During the week following the attack, when access to the area was still strictly controlled, faculty and administrators attempted to regroup at the law school in preparation for resuming classes the following week.

At one point a meeting had to be discontinued and the building evacuated in response to a minor electrical fire in the basement of one of the buildings. Once it was possible to return and the meeting resumed in an alternative location. It was not long until the next disruption—a bomb scare. The warning was relayed to the School through a call received by Con Edision. This apparently resulted from the fact that their trucks, along with those from the Fire Department, had been parked outside our buildings as they responded to the minor electrical fire discovered in the basement of one of the school’s buildings. The telephoned threat forced a complete evacuation of the buildings, ending the first of the post-September 11 on-site gatherings convened at the school in the hope of taking steps to prepare to reopen.

Despite the difficulties and disruptions encountered in preparing to resume classes, the faculty shared plans with one another about how to address what had happened while also preparing to reengage with the
substance of the academic program. Teams of mental health professionals who had come to the school on a volunteer basis participated in planning sessions held at the school. Counseling was made available to students, faculty, and administrative staff. The director in the law school's new Office for Public Interest and Community Service was assigned responsibility for coordinating counseling services. There were counseling and discussion sessions, held both in groups and for individuals, that continued to be made available at no cost over a period of months.

RESUMING CLASSES

The date for reopening the law school was set for Monday, September 24. As it happened, while the school by then would have been closed for nearly two whole weeks, several scheduled holidays occurred during this period, resulting in the loss of only seven class days. Rescheduling was arranged to make up classes, either by lengthening class meetings or adding sessions, including some now held on weekends. It was determined that the fall semester schedule of classes would end as originally designed and that the final examination schedule would proceed as originally planned.

Once the fall term resumed, the faculty adopted a policy to allow students to choose to take one of their courses that semester on a pass-fail basis, with the choice to be made once the student had knowledge of the grades that would have been received absent the election of the option. (Accompanying this policy was the understanding that the law school was prepared to make additional arrangements to respond to needs of members of the student body who faced extraordinary demands at that time, including police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical service personnel, a number of whom are enrolled as Evening Division students. Many now were called upon to work long shifts and were faced with demanding and stressful work in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center.) The faculty also decided to extend the period of tenure eligibility by one semester, in recognition of the extent of disruption to normal work experienced here during the fall 2001 semester.

Upon reopening the law school buildings for classes to resume, there was a strong effort put forth to make the return for students a welcoming one. This was in the face of the fact that the law school was to remain in the limited access and cordoned-off “frozen zone” for weeks to come. Early on there were a large number of wrecked vehicles that had been moved from nearby the World Trade Center site and deposited on streets near the law school. Trucks rumbled past the law school transporting remnants removed from the World Trade Center site, to be taken to nearby barges for water-borne removal from Manhattan, while water was sprayed on the streets in an effort to control the dust falling from the trucks. The military and law enforcement presence around the area remained strong and very visible, and concrete barriers were placed around the many nearby government office buildings and other strategic facilities, including the
courts, police and fire stations. Telephone and power lines now ran along the surface within aboveground shells constructed to contain them, to enable electrical and communications services gradually to be restored to the area. Finally, smoke and accompanying odors remained a palpable presence, an inescapable reminder that continued even after many weeks and months had passed, contributing to continuing concerns about air quality and safety in the area.

In the face of all this, the welcoming back effort was led by the dean, Richard Matasar, who, together with associate deans, personally greeted students at the entrance to the building. What proved in hindsight to be a lighter note, though at the time it was quite indicative of the tension that remained in the atmosphere, was the initial response of a student who wondered what possibly could have happened now that caused the deans to be meeting students at the door of the law school.

Once classes resumed discussion sessions among faculty and administrators continued to be held, to provide a chance to check in with one another about how we as individuals and as a group were responding and what issues remained as we went about our business in what continued to be a difficult working environment. An example of efforts of this sort was a discussion, facilitated by the school’s mental health consultant, Dr. Judith Rosenberger, on the subject of “Balancing Empathy and Academics.” Also accompanying reentry to the academic program a series of town meetings and teach-ins were held, starting even before classes resumed and continuing over a period of weeks, with participation by both full-time and adjunct members of the faculty as well as students, including a panel organized by the South Asian Law Students Association (SALSA).

Another event of this type, held at the law school on October 3, 2001, and open to the public, was a symposium on “Responses to the September 11th Events: Causes, Reactions, Long-Term Solutions.” It was sponsored by the New York City and NYLS Chapters of the National Lawyers Guild, the NYLS Office for Public Interest and Community Service, the NYLS Latino Law Students Association, the NYLS Public Interest Coalition, and Phi Alpha Delta of NYLS, with organizational leadership by NYLS Professor Carlin Meyer. Panelists included Manning Marable, of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University and co-founder of the Black Radical Congress, Donna Lieberman, Interim Executive Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, Abdeen Jabara, a civil rights lawyer and past president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Michael Ratner, former national president of the National Lawyers Guild and legal director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, and with Ron Daniels, Executive Director of the Center for Constitutional Rights and former Executive Director of the Rainbow Coalition, as moderator.

The return to classes also afforded opportunities to pursue the continuing effort to account for all concerned. It was known that some
number of New York Law School students had placements through the School’s Externship Program and Workshop courses, in offices in and around the World Trade Center, as well as some number who had work-study or regular employment in offices there. Not surprisingly, the number working in such positions is even greater among the School’s part-time students, many of whom work full time, including a substantial number employed as members of uniformed services, whether as police officers, firefighters, or emergency medical team personnel. With all this, after all the efforts to account for those connected to New York Law School, the result was the fortunate discovery that all students, staff, and faculty were safe. Sadly, however, it was learned early on that one of our graduates had been lost; then, after a period, news came about another lost, and then a third. Now, even months later, news has been received about a fourth graduate lost.

**EFFORTS TO SUPPORT AND RESPOND TO THE URGE TO SERVE AND CONTRIBUTE**

A notable and widespread response to this crisis was manifested in a dramatic upsurge in interest of many people to engage in volunteer efforts, to find some way in which to help those suffering as a result of the devastation. It was observed on a number of occasions that at times there were many more volunteers available than there were opportunities to put them to work. However, it also was clear that the need for social services, and the accompanying lack of sufficient support for their delivery, was present before this tragedy and clearly would continue long afterward.

The challenge became one of harnessing the available resources, applying them wisely, and, further, maintaining the commitment to respond over time. (A proposal looking to the longer-term prospects, both in attempting to continue the spirit of service and volunteerism that emerged while also potentially serving as part of the effort to establish a suitable memorial to those lost in the tragedy, appears as an addendum to this piece.) Following are some highlights of activities in this vein emerging from New York Law School over the past several months. A significant aspect of the response is that it was immediate; the creation of course offerings and volunteer projects responding to the tragedy was accomplished in time so that students could plan their spring semester schedules and register to participate in the various offerings, as described below.

**September 11 Law School Pro Bono Coordinating Committee**—In response to emerging needs for legal services connected to the disaster, and even before classes at New York Law School resumed, Professor Stephen Ellmann, Associate Dean for Faculty Development, convened a meeting at the Law School on September 21st. The intent was to bring together clinical law teachers and others in legal education to meet with representatives from
organizations providing legal services, including those working through bar associations to coordinate pro bono activities among the private bar.

Among those attending was Robert MacCrate, senior counsel at the Sullivan & Cromwell law firm and former president of the New York State Bar Association and of the American Bar Association. Mr. MacCrate observed that the gathering represented an historic occasion and that it deserved to be named, both to memorialize the gathering itself and to provide a banner under which to operate continuing efforts to bring the bar and the academy together with legal services providers. The name chosen was the September 11 Law School Pro Bono Coordinating Committee. Minutes of that meeting and a report on efforts of the law schools represented, both assembled by Professor Stephen Ellmann and some of which is reflected in this document, are found on the NYLS web site.¹

Institutional contributions New York Law School was able to offer included making its facilities available to lawyers from the community. Lawyers from the nearby court facilities, the Legal Aid Society (which had been displaced from their downtown Manhattan offices), and other offices were able to use the law school Library. The DC 37 Municipal Employees Legal Services program arranged to use the Law School’s clinic interviewing rooms to meet with their clients, since their building was not accessible. The New York County Lawyers Association moved at least one training program to the law school, since their building, across the street from the site of the World Trade Center, was also not accessible.

A graduate now working at the law school volunteered her assistance to do research for the Legal Aid Society on service availability for undocumented immigrants, and she recruited a current student to give additional help; another alumna worked with law student volunteers at the Family Assistance Center established just a few blocks from the law school.

The law school also made its facilities available for community groups and organizations seeking to address issues growing out of the World Trade Center Disaster. This included, in addition to meetings of the local Community Board, a hearing for the “Ground Zero” Elected Officials Task Force chaired by Congressman Jerrold Nadler, seeking to provide information to, and to gather information from, small business owners in the downtown area who were facing difficulties as a result of the disaster.

Office for Public Interest and Community Service—Within New York Law School, the Office for Public Interest and Community Service (OPICS), having begun operations during summer 2001, became a central collection point for information about pro bono service opportunities, including, as described further below, those available to students, whether the setting involved: 1) an academic credit-bearing offering; 2) a paid work-study position; or 3) volunteer community service work.

Office of Public Affairs—OPICS was able to use electronic media (both through web postings and mass e-mail distributions to specified audiences) as means of communication. This involved working with the School’s Office of Public Affairs, under the direction of Altagracia Diloné Levat, Associate Dean for Public Affairs. That office has oversight responsibility for the school’s web site (www.nyls.edu), which was then undergoing a redesign process. It proved an effective means for getting the word out and providing updates about new public service opportunities as they became available.

Announcements posted to the school’s web site pertaining to disaster relief operations in need of volunteer assistance included those from Safe Horizon, New York City’s leading provider of victim assistance and violence prevention services. The organization became deeply involved in responding to the grief and hardships caused by the World Trade Center disaster, and at a certain point was the only organization providing immediate financial assistance to all victims of the disaster. The school’s web site, along with mass e-mail distributions, was used regularly to relay this organization’s calls for assistance, including requests for volunteers to work at the Family Assistance Centers that had been set up to provide coordinated responses to those in need of services.

Other calls for volunteer assistance that were posted included those from the American Red Cross and from Bouley Bakery, a restaurant located nearby the law school that was working around the clock, eventually with a contract from the Red Cross, to provide food services for rescue and recovery workers at the World Trade Center site.

Another call for assistance that was posted to the NYLS web site came from the Arab American Family Support Center, which, given the feeling of possible danger threatening this community, sought volunteers to accompany women and children to buy food and to walk to and from school. Also posted was the call that came from this group as part of their effort to create a list of “Arab professionals and intellectuals and university students” that could be provided to media representatives calling the Center. New York Law School Professor Sadiq Reza, a member of the faculty who is an American-born Muslim with Indian heritage, made himself available as a spokesperson concerning Islamic issues, both to this group and as a participant in educational panels and discussions organized within the law school.

From these postings we received reports back from students and others, including graduates and adjunct faculty teaching at the Law School, who were using the information provided to learn of volunteer opportunities which they then pursued, some quite intensively. This even included some from out of town who had no prior connection to the Law School and who, in preparation for coming to New York and seeking to offer help, had found our postings through web searches and who we then were able to assist in linking with organizations seeking volunteers. The reports of the
experiences of volunteers seeking to help those suffering losses from the attacks were that the work was both rewarding and, not surprisingly, at times draining and emotionally very difficult.

**Justice Action Center**—OPICS worked in cooperation with the Law School’s Justice Action Center, and Professor Richard Marsico, the Center’s Program Director who also teaches in the law school’s Civil and Human Rights Clinic, to assist in development of new offerings to provide vehicles through which students could participate in responding to emerging needs, as highlighted below.

**Poverty Law Seminar and Workshop: Civil Legal Services in a Time of Critical Need**—This example of a newly created credit-bearing offering is taught by Adjunct Professor Raymond Brescia, a staff attorney with the Urban Justice Center (UJC), a civil legal services office. The course offers students the opportunity to assist in providing civil legal services to financially needy clients who were victims of the World Trade Center disaster.

Students work at the Urban Justice Center under the supervision of UJC attorneys and advocates, and the available work is quite varied in nature. Primarily, students provide direct assistance to those coming before government entities and private groups dispensing aid. In addition, with the economic aftershocks of the tragedy placing added stress on already overburdened systems dispensing unemployment benefits, welfare, disability benefits, and Medicaid, students have the opportunity to work with the economic victims of the disaster, to serve as advocates to help them gain access to desperately needed services. Finally, students have the opportunity to provide technical assistance to community groups concerned about the economic effects of the disaster on low-income communities and the impact that redevelopment efforts will have on such communities.

The seminar portion of the course provides students an overview of the law and policy relating to the legal advocacy they are to provide. This includes Medicaid, unemployment benefits, and welfare and disability law. In addition, the seminar covers practical skills, including administrative advocacy and interviewing. It deals with ethical issues that arise in dispensing and receiving aid in the wake of a tragedy. Finally, the seminar addresses policy and legislative issues involving post-disaster reconstruction efforts.

**Project to Provide Corporate Legal Services for Distressed Small Businesses**—Another example of a program emerging in response to critical needs identified in the community is the creation, under the inspiration and direction of Professor Anthony Fletcher, of a project to provide Corporate Legal Services for Distressed Small Businesses. The project is designed to provide assistance to those small businesses in the downtown area experiencing difficulties as a result of the September 11 disaster. It has emerged as a project with the promise of offering badly needed services, and eligible student participants are able to receive
compensation through the Federal Work-Study Program for their work on
the Project. Student participants receive excellent hands-on training, thus
giving them an opportunity to learn practical business law skills while they
serve others.

Students are supervised in developing practical skills needed to assist
the small business enterprise, with particular emphasis on the challenges
faced by these businesses within an economically distressed environment.
This Project also explores the typical legal and economic challenges
generally faced by small businesses (including, but not limited to, inability
to raise capital and obtain insurance coverage). A primary objective of the
Project is to expose students to the practical mechanics of corporate law and
to equip them with the requisite substantive legal skills needed in the role of
the corporate lawyer as a planner and counselor to a small business

Students complete basic corporate law workshop sessions that include
a mix of lectures and simulation exercises designed to address the expected
range of legal problems likely to be encountered, beginning with intake
procedures and extending through the period of active representation.
Matters covered range from incorporating the small business to
renegotiating leases to providing application assistance for federal and state
loan and grant assistance. Students, under faculty supervision, participate
in advising and providing counsel to proprietors and/or managers of small
businesses in connection with the development of long-term business plans,
relationships with vendors and suppliers, and rudimentary corporate

Furthermore, the Project emphasizes practical skills associated with
client representation in this context, including interviewing clients with
varying degrees of business sophistication, identifying legal issues, and
helping in development of proposed legal and economic models for
economic growth. Students analyze the extent to which corporate law
accommodates the distressed small business and provides the necessary
tools to redress adverse residual effects in contexts such as this. It is
contemplated that the Project, initially offered on a pilot basis, has the
potential to develop into a regular curricular offering, expanding the nature
of clinical services offered by the school.

Economic Literacy Consortium—This is an effort operating under
the umbrella of New York Law School's Justice Action Center and is led
by New York Law School Professor Karen Gross, a recognized expert in
the field of bankruptcy law. Professor Gross's work in this area, including
her collaboration with Fordham University School of Law Professor Susan
Block-Lieb, involves conducting programs to assist those facing conditions
of financial hardship as well as programs to "train the trainers." A session
of the latter kind was offered to community service providers with the
expectation that, following the training, they could then go out into the
communities they serve and provide their constituencies with the debt and
money management skills they need. The design of this program, and another debtor education program offered to the public and entitled "Dealing with Debt in a Time of Uncertainty," placed an emphasis on providing assistance to those facing financial burdens and difficulties as a result of the World Trade Center tragedy.

In addition to these initiatives, Professor Gross's ongoing financial literacy/bankruptcy debtor-education programs, for which Helena Prigal, Director of Public Interest and Community Service, provides administrative support, offer opportunities for student involvement and have ongoing relevance to the legal needs of those suffering as a result of the World Trade Center attacks.

The New York Law School Community Fund—"Helping our community rebuild." This is a philanthropic initiative by the law school with the stated intention to support recovery efforts in the downtown area. The administration of the fund is being handled through the law school's Institutional Advancement Office, headed by Associate Dean Barbara Leshinsky, who is charged to convene a committee composed of faculty, students, and staff representatives to help determine the best use for the funds collected and generated by the School for this purpose.

Employment-related legal services for low-wage and immigrant workers affected by the World Trade Center disaster—The National Employment Law Project (NELP), The New York Legal Aid Society, and MFY Legal Services have implemented a project to provide employment-related legal services to low-wage and immigrant workers directly or indirectly affected by the attack on the World Trade Center. The project works with labor and community organizations to educate their constituencies about relevant legal issues, such as wage and hour standards, unemployment insurance and disaster unemployment assistance, and reemployment programs and benefits, and to identify potential clients. NELP sought law students able to make a substantial commitment to participate in the project (asking for approximately 15 hours per week during the spring 2002 term).

Through this project, students are trained to assist with client screening and intake and in the litigation of individual cases as appropriate. A student from New York Law School was designated by NELP to be the student clinic coordinator for the project, while another NYLS student worked on the project through the MFY Legal Services office; both receive financial support from the Law School through the Federal Work-Study Program. When NELP put out a call for law students fluent in Spanish and/or Chinese dialects who can serve as translators during the weekly clinics set up to provide employment-related legal services, seven NYLS students (five from the first year and two from the second year) responded. These students then participated in an Employment Law/Translator Training for law student translators, covering such topics as how to do
intake, issue-spotting for unemployment insurance, employment and wage discrimination issues, as well as how to be an interpreter in a legal setting.

**Further developments**—Another example of the continuing nature of the commitment to examine subjects arising in this context is reflected within the academic program through another curricular addition, designed by Professor Stephen Ellmann to be offered during the 2002-03 academic year. It is a three-credit course focusing on “The Constitution and Terrorism,” and its description states:

This course will study the issues, unfortunately likely to remain timely, emerging from our response to terrorism on and after September 11, 2001, with a primary focus on United States constitutional law but some attention to international and comparative constitutional law as well. Since the response to terrorism raises issues both of constitutional powers and of constitutional rights, this course will address a wide range of questions, including issues of executive and legislative power to begin, pursue, and end wars; emergency powers; the guarantee of habeas corpus and the suspension of that guarantee; the application of the constitution to the actions of the US and its allies abroad, to the rights of aliens here at home, and to prisoners taken in the war against terrorism; the constitutionality of military tribunals; and questions of civil rights and liberties under the First, Fourth, Fifth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments, ranging from free speech to racial profiling to the creation of national identity cards.

Recognition for some of the work described above has come from sources such as PSLawNet. (Public Service Law Network Worldwide – PSLawNet – describes itself as “a global network of some 120 member law schools and nearly 10,000 law-related public service organizations and offices around the world.”) In October 2001, New York Law School and Pace University School of Law were honored as joint recipients of PSLawNet’s 2001 Pro Bono Publico Award, for the efforts the schools were making in response to the World Trade Center attacks.

The Society of American Law Teachers (SALT) each year awards its Stuart and Ellen Filler Fellowship to a social justice organization for the purpose of enabling that group to hire a law student to participate in its work. This year the award has been made to New York Law School’s Office for Public Interest and Community Service and the school’s Justice Action Center “for their collaborative work with legal service organizations on behalf of individuals, community groups, and small businesses harmed by the events of September 11.”

Of course, even now we do not yet know the full ramifications to emerge from this fateful year. The experience of confronting terrible loss that is beyond our control is contrasted by the fact that the course we choose to follow in the aftermath of this tragedy remains determinable within our individual and collective power. If we find it within ourselves to
draw from this experience lessons leading to the exercise of a greater sense of compassion and deeper capacity for understanding, these redeeming values can constitute, even in the face of great catastrophe, a longer term victory for those forces for good we would wish to draw upon as guides in coming days, providing a base of constructive lessons to be reflected upon in future years.

At an immediate level there is a question to address regarding the legacy we wish to create for the benefit of the next and future generations. From this will flow whatever promise of security and possibility for fulfillment the future holds for them. Addressing this reality may be a particularly salient factor in the lives of those engaged in the educational enterprise and who define their work to include efforts to advance the state of humanity and promote processes that enable us to transcend our ordinary limitations, rather than succumbing to and collapsing within and under them. Certainly that is part of the challenge those in the academy can choose to set for themselves. In particular, it is difficult to imagine how those in legal education, who examine societal mechanisms established to address disputes and differences, and ideally to bring to bear a spirit of justice, would be able to ignore this aspect of their work.

Promoting a caring approach to thinking about the real-world implications of, and outcomes that can be expected from, processes that are the subject of study in law school, particularly with respect to methods for addressing differences and resolving disputes, can be accomplished by incorporating relevant material and exercises into study lessons. This approach has the potential to exert a powerful influence on the nature of the lessons students draw from their studies and can thereby prove to have a salutary effect on the path taken by decision makers of the future. Though work in the academic world may be a step removed from the arena where policy decisions are implemented, there is in this realm the opportunity to study, reflect upon, plan, and propose thoughtful approaches that can lead to better solutions and resolutions in the world.

Key questions that remain concern the depth and duration of the commitment to continue to pursue the good work and spur to volunteerism witnessed in the extraordinary circumstances experienced here. Following is an addendum describing a wider-reaching proposal seeking to give continued attention to such matters, including how these might be addressed on a considerably broader scale, as part of an effort to realize a degree of longer-lasting good even in the face of such tragic circumstances.

ADDENDUM

[Note: The material in the addendum appeared originally in the fall-winter 2001 issue of the New York Law School magazine, In Brief, as part of a special section concerning the effects of September 11 and its aftermath on those connected to this law school.]
REDEVELOPMENT WITH HEART: A SUGGESTION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ACTIVE MEMORIAL – IN THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

By Matthew Wilkes, Associate Dean for Public Interest and Community Service

As we consider approaches to the redevelopment of downtown Manhattan, we ought to contemplate how to keep alive the expressions of deep caring and generosity of spirit that emerged in the aftermath of the great tragedy of September 11. A possibility is to consecrate the site of the World Trade Center by creating there as a core element, along with whatever memorial and other appropriate development that emerges, a world service and volunteer center.

Such a facility can honor those who did so much in the face of extreme conditions and can help to continue the spirit of active service and volunteerism that was summoned from deep levels as individuals responded to this crisis, and to one another. Inspired by both individual and organizational responses to this tragedy, the proposal is to create a center to assess, and further refine, methods for effective delivery of essential services in times of critical need.

For example, a central tenet that emerged as a guide in responding to this crisis came from the urge to create more supportive and streamlined methods to deliver assistance. The proposal now is to retain this sense of urgent humanity and to continue to develop approaches that remove unnecessary barriers, confusing dead ends, and other maze-like diversions often faced by those seeking assistance. Ideally, approaches that avoid these pitfalls will become the norm for delivering social services, and not only under extreme conditions.

By focusing on the roles played by the “helping professions,” both uniformed services and others, the center can serve as a training venue and offer opportunities for hands-on placement experience, geared to address both domestic and international rescue and relief efforts, responding to natural and any other disasters we may face.

The basic components of the proposed design include development of: (1) coordinated and humane service delivery systems; (2) career training for the helping professions; and (3) research, study, and means for dissemination of information concerning, improved methods of service delivery.

The idea is to constitute a living memorial designed to sustain, learn from, and continually regenerate the inspirational ways of being and acting that emerged on the part of so many who were touched by this tragedy. This can serve to reinforce and keep alive the core values we share, with an emphasis on mindful responses based in compassion, understanding, and a
recognition that, beyond responses to basic physical needs, emotional and mental health needs of victims and rescuers alike deserve attention. A complementary response to these concerns can be realized in the physical environment as well, such as through the creation of a meditation garden, to benefit all who come to the site.

The generative power for this project, to be drawn and built upon, is based in the collective and continuing urge to help and to express our better selves that became so palpable and dramatically visible at this time. Like a stone dropped into a pool, the movement begun here can help to create waves of caring and goodwill, continually expanding outward and across the artificial divisions that often separate us.

Such a center, dedicated to service, can be part of a series of projects developed at the site to reflect and promote the finest aspects of community in New York, from a spirit of access and inclusiveness, to support and appreciation for creativity, expressed through the arts, education, philanthropy, and civic consciousness, demonstrating how diverse groups can prosper together, celebrating differences along with all they have in common. Developing means to recognize, reinforce, and propagate a spirit of mutual care – expressed through giving, healing, learning, and planning for better outcomes – can contribute to the ongoing recovery process, serving both as source of remembrance and of hope.