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PERSPECTIVE

Empathetic advocacy: law schools and our veterans

By Rachel Van Cleave

On Sept. 12, 2012, I was driving home from my early morning swim, processing my thoughts for my day ahead when I heard a snippet of news on NPR about my law school classmate and friend, Chris Stevens. The story was so disturbing I was convinced I had misheard. By the time I pulled into the driveway I realized that it was true — my friend, Ambassador Chris Stevens, had been killed in Benghazi. It was like a punch to the gut. After not having seen Chris in many years, I saw his name and picture everywhere in the days and weeks that followed. Three other Americans had also been killed and as I read more about Chris and Tyrone Woods, Glen Doherty and Sean Smith, about their lives and their families, it all became heartbreakingly real. How war and conflict affect the lives of soldiers, their families and our communities became even clearer when I met law student veterans at Chris' memorial held at our law school alma mater.

At the reception after the memorial, I heard one law student veteran say to another, "We need to talk; people here [in law school] don't get us." Surprising even myself, I offered my help. The student asked, "What do you have in mind, dean?" I was in my second month as interim dean. I had no idea what I had in mind; I would not presume to know. However, it disturbed me that students who had chosen to serve our country felt misunderstood or not appreciated. On reflection, I believe that the lessons I learned from my friendship with Chris compelled me to work to bridge this chasm. I decided to ask and listen, acknowledging that although I am a dean, I needed to learn from the law student veterans. I am learning that these students have a perspective on our democratic principles and values, and therefore on law school, that comes from their appreciation of what it takes to secure and defend these values.

This perspective, if given space and respect can greatly enrich the law school experience for all students as well as faculty. In addition, narrowing this gap in understanding has the power to dramatically impact the lives of veterans who can benefit from legal services that law schools and law students can provide, by encouraging all law students to work to support veterans.

In the weeks and months that followed, I met with veteran law students and others in the veterans' community, gathered their thoughtful and constructive ideas, and worked with my law school faculty and staff to implement most of them, or collaborated with other schools and outside groups to move them forward.

One key collaboration is the Law Student Veterans' Coalition (LSVC) of Northern California, which supports the professional development of and collaboration among its student members — from Golden Gate University School of Law, Pacific McGeorge School of Law, Stanford Law School, UC Davis School of Law, UC Hastings College of the Law, and University of San Francisco School of Law — to assist the veterans community. Another is an annual Veterans Law Conference. Hosted by GGU Law and the LSVC, the inaugural conference, held in Fall 2013, focused on veterans' needs in the community as well as career counseling for law student veterans.

GGU's Yellow Ribbon Program now provides 100 percent tuition for qualifying veteran students. A Veterans Benefits Externship course at GGU allows law students to serve veterans dealing with benefits issues, and this fall GGU Law will proudly launch its Veterans Legal Advocacy Center to work with students and others in the legal community to expand legal services for veterans. These efforts were conceived, implemented and have so far been successful because of the guidance and input we received from these

remarkable students and other advocates. But what drove my initial desire to be involved directly and dedicate the time and resources necessary to make a difference may be of even greater importance: empathy. Upon Chris' death, I found myself profoundly connected with the challenges veterans face upon return to the civilian world, because I sought to learn about these experiences.

So when I read Phil Klay's recent piece in the Wall Street Journal, "Duty and Pity" (May 24-25, 2014), I had to ask myself hard questions. Klay spoke of people expressing pity for him and other veterans based on narrow, essentialist assumptions about veterans that come from identifying a group relying on a single story one hears or experience one has. Since reading his piece, I have reflected on my role, and that of my law school, as veterans' advocates. For me, Klay's piece clarified the danger, and the art, of advocacy. In order to be effective, advocacy must include the totality of experiences, voices and community needs as defined by the community itself. In other words, effective advocacy requires profound empathy. Such empathy necessarily eschews essentialist thinking.

David Brooks recently published an op-ed in the New York Times titled "Stairway to Wisdom" (May 16, 2014). In it, he explores the centrality of empathy in acquiring an in-depth understanding of a social issue or problem. Brooks defines empathy as the true understanding of another that is achieved through intimacy and premises such wisdom on the Augustinian belief that only through selfless love can one truly understand another person. While knowing the dire statistics about the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, homelessness, and the backlog of benefit applications, is instrumental for guiding meaningful action, attaining funding, and tracking success in addressing an issue, such

knowledge does not form the substance of lasting commitment and social change. Such powerful advocacy, commitment and change come from meaningful, ongoing connection with the stories of others. In my case this connection was elicited by a very personal loss — the death of my friend. However, such connection with veterans may also be evoked by reading stories like those shared by Klay in "Redeployment" or that in Nicholas Kristof's New York Times op-ed, "A Loyal Soldier Doesn't Deserve This" (April 13, 2014), or Damon Armeni's personal essay, "A Soldier Fights Off the Cold" (NYT, May 11, 2014), stories which depict a rich variety of experiences, emotions, triumphs and struggles of those who have served.

My awareness of and connection with veterans that my friend's death has led me to has fueled my determination and resolve to support veterans. Chris's life work as ambassador was about building bridges of understanding and empathy between diverse people and cultures. Since 99 percent of us do not have military experience, it is imperative that we strive to understand our veterans through the cultivation of deep empathy. To that end, it is crucial that we become more aware of and appreciate better that there is no singular, essential veteran experience. Indeed, the current turmoil at the Department of Veterans Affairs must give us all pause and time to reflect on the collective action and empathy needed to support all veterans, especially those most in immediate need. Only with this approach can we hope to meet Klay's challenge to show our utmost respect for those who have served.



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