Katrina and Beyond: Reclaiming Rights and Restoring Communities in the Face of Disasters.
(3 credits comprised of a 2 credit seminar and required 1 credit service-learning component during the March 2012 Spring Break, in the Mississippi Gulf Coast)

Since the Spring of 2007, we have offered this course at the David A. Clarke School of Law. The course was created as a response to Hurricane Katrina and the legal issues raised by the natural and governmental disaster that nearly destroyed New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf Coast region in August 2005. While progress has been made in the re-building of New Orleans, significant parts of the city - mostly residential, once home to poor, largely African American New Orleanians - remain in ruins, unoccupied by its former residents. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath showed dramatic flaws in the government’s capability, and willingness, to respond effectively and judiciously to the needs of people and communities affected by natural and man-made disasters. At the same time, the disaster exposed the fault lines of systemic poverty and racism, as well as the enormous gaps in the legal system’s ability to respond to events of this magnitude.

The fact that we are holding this course more than six years after Hurricane Katrina highlights the reality that the recovery in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf Coast has been an agonizingly slow, flawed and uneven process and is still incomplete. Then, in April 2010, the Gulf Coast became the epicenter of the unprecedented BP oil spill, making life for those still struggling to recover from Katrina even more difficult. The BP oil disaster caused an acute and continuing crisis in the area, exacerbating residents’ ability to reclaim their rights, communities, livelihoods and futures. Therefore, in March 2011 we traveled to Biloxi, Mississippi to work with the Mississippi Center for Justice (www.mscenterforjustice.org), a nationally renowned not-for-profit public interest legal and civil rights organization. The Center has been instrumental in assisting Katrina survivors in Mississippi and has been leading the struggle for legal rights of Gulf Coast residents against BP. We provided legal assistance to low-income residents on post-Katrina housing, discrimination and recovery issues, as well as assisted in the claims process against BP and other community restoration and rights issues. The Biloxi service week was a resounding success, merging immediate disaster recovery issues with longstanding civil rights issues, which are still unfolding in the Deep South. As a result we will be returning to Biloxi to work with the Mississippi Center for Justice in spring 2012.

During the seminar portion of this course, we will examine the government’s role and the legal issues that arise from disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill disaster. We will read about and discuss issues including federalism, the statutory frameworks for disaster prevention, response and recovery, and the impact of social vulnerability, economic, racial and gender disparities in the recovery process. We will discuss the importance of political will, community empowerment and the role of legal and justice advocacy in seeking social justice for those in need.

This course provides students (and teachers) with a unique opportunity to learn, while also making a measurable difference in the lives of those struggling to recover from disasters, while facing poverty and racial discrimination. It is an educational “capstone” experience in that students are given the chance to build on what you learned in clinic. This seminar and the spring break service-week are a part of the important legacy of civic engagement and service-learning in this country. This is not a final exam course; instead students will prepare and present written research projects that build upon the issues addressed in the seminar and the service-learning week. The seminar and service-learning week will be taught and supervised by a team of UDC law professors.
COURSE REGISTRATION: Enrollment is limited to fourteen 3L students. You will be selected based upon your written responses to the following two questions: (1) Why do you want to travel to Biloxi to work with the Mississippi Center for Justice over Spring Break? (2) How will you build upon your clinical law courses to make the most out of this service-learning experience? Submit a one paragraph response to each question and email to Professors Susan Waysdorf and Laurie Morin at swaysdorf@udc.edu and lmorin@udc.edu by December 15th. You will be notified by December 27th whether you have been selected to participate in this course. Hotel expenses, rental cars and several meals while in Biloxi will be paid for; each student also will receive a substantial subsidy towards their airfare.