

Nicole Hallett, 2001 Richard J. Wood Student Community Commitment Award winner



Nicole Hallett, Recipient of the 2001 Richard J. Wood Community Commitment Award was a sophomore at DePauw University when she wrote her acceptance speech. At that time, her service and civic engagement activities included promoting literacy through Indiana Campus Compact's Indiana Reading Corps, working with Habitat for Humanity, serving in an orphanage in Bangladesh, registering people to vote, establishing a Greens Party Group on DePauw's campus, and attending the 6th Conference of the Parties UN Summit in the Hague.

Eleven years later, Nicole is an attorney with the Urban Justice Center in New York where she represents low-wage immigrant workers in some of New York City's most impoverished neighborhoods. She is also a professor at Yale University and New York University of Law.

As part of our 20th anniversary celebration, "Looking Back. Moving Forward", I interviewed Nicole to hear her reflections on her speech 11 years later, what she's learned about service learning and civic engagement, and what changes she'd like to see in the future.

Liza Newman: Do you have any early memories of Indiana Campus Compact and Indiana Reading Corps?

Nicole Hallett: I came into college as an unengaged, completely self-absorbed teenager, much more concerned with my personal accomplishments than how I could contribute to society in a positive way. Indiana Reading Corps was the first "activity" that I got involved in where I found myself actually caring. It may seem naïve now, but I remember thinking "Hey, I can actually make a difference here!" That epiphany has motivated me ever since.

LN: Do you have any reflections on how the work has evolved over the years?

NH: I think it has become increasingly clear that we cannot address a community's problems in isolation, but instead must address the structural inequities that are the root cause of the problems. Obviously, students cannot be expected to solve such problems during the course of a semester or a year – or even a lifetime. But they must be challenged to think about them.

LN: What have you learned about service learning and community engagement?

NH: I'm less interested in community service and more interested in community empowerment. To me, service learning implies an uncomfortable power dynamic between student and community. Students learn how to give to, but not necessarily become a part of, their communities. The focus is student-centered, not community-centered. The result is often superficial service projects that do more to pad resumes than anything else. That said, community engagement is very important to me and the work that I do. Today, I am a lawyer and I represent low-wage immigrant workers in some of New York City's most impoverished neighborhoods. It's a very different environment from Greencastle, Indiana, but the lessons I learned there continue to inform the work that I do today.

LN: What can Indiana Campus Compact do (or continue to do) that will ensure future students are as invested in their community as you were?

NH: I think the key is designing meaningful experiences for students that also require them to step outside their comfort zone. A service learning experience should challenge students' assumptions about the people they are serving and should require them to think critically about their role in the system.

LN: What do you see as Indiana Campus Compact's role in the future of civic engagement and higher education?

NH: Organizations such as Indiana Campus Compact are critical to ensuring that the next generation is civically engaged. If students aren't exposed to these ideas early, it is very hard to get them to engage later after they enter the adult world.

LN: You were a sophomore in college when you wrote your speech – it's 11 years later. As you read it over, do you think we, as a people, have made any strides in learning who is throwing the baby in the river?

NH: The recent economic collapse has exposed the fact that there are many people and institutions responsible for throwing the proverbial baby into the river. The question now is whether we, as a society, have the courage and the strength to stand up to these entrenched power interests and stop them from doing it.

LN: You mentioned that if students don't look beyond volunteerism to the reasons they were needed, your children will be tackling the same problems you were 11 years ago. Do you have children? I'm assuming if you do, they probably aren't old enough to come to understand your point, but if they were – would they find a different world than you saw 11 years ago?

NH: My first child is due in about a month, so I haven't yet had the experience of parenthood. But I will say that I am still optimistic about the future. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice."

LN: You asked a question of the educators in the audience – can they do anything about the students who weren't standing where you were. Were there educators in your life who were able to facilitate the learning with the service, either in your undergraduate years or beyond?

NH: At DePauw, I credit Sue Parsons, who directed the Indiana Reading Corps, with teaching me a lot about community service. The joy and openness with which she approached everyone around her was inspirational to me as a young person still trying to figure out who I was. I also had several professors in law school who taught me how to be an advocate. The adversarial nature of the legal system can sometimes be uncomfortable, but at the end of the day, I know I've fought hard to protect the rights of my clients.

LN: As an educator, have you incorporated service learning into your curriculum? Do you have any students who remind you of yourself 11 years ago?

NH: I teach both undergraduate students at Yale University and law students at New York University School of Law, and I am constantly amazed by the passion and enthusiasm my students have for social justice. I am more concerned about what happens to students once they leave the classroom. All educators, including myself, need to be working harder to instill in our students values that they carry with them beyond graduation.

LN: In remembering your passion for the families who can't volunteer at the soup kitchen because they must eat there, what have you carried with you from 11 years ago?

NH: I have been amazed by the ability of the disadvantaged to step up and fight for themselves when they are given the tools and resources to do so.

LN: You closed your speech with by talking about an infinite cycle of service and the need to have a greater awareness of the world around us in order to break that cycle. You said "Only then will we no longer be participating in service learning. We will be living it." Do you still feel the same way? Do you feel that you are living it? Have you seen a reduction in apathy?

NH: I was pleasantly surprised rereading my speech because I didn't remember being so insightful at the age of twenty. I continue to be concerned with cycles – of poverty and injustice as well as of charity and service. In the work that I do today, I am constantly thinking about how I can break these cycles, rather than just solving the individual problems my clients bring to me. I do feel like I am "living it" – I have devoted my life to public service. It is the reason I wake up excited every single day. My husband (a civil rights lawyer) and I cannot wait to instill these same values in our son.