

Week One with United Way

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Haley Norris newcomb@tulane.edu

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I began my internship for the Women's Leadership Council (WLC) of the United Way of Southeast Louisiana at the end of this spring semester. With guidance from WLC members and other interest groups I am researching the current state of affairs around several key issues for the creation of a Voter's Guide/Ballot Initiative to be published in the fall of 2015. The guide will be based on a questionnaire sent to all candidates for state-wide office. Gubernatorial candidates will have their responses published in local newspapers while all other candidate responses are to be published online.

The task is exciting and daunting because it is largely shaped by my own motivation to research and my own judgment on what constitutes an important issue. My initial meeting with the WLC was eye-opening and inspiring. All of these women are passionate, skilled, and creative advocates for our communities. I am honored to be working for them for these few months.

My first official week was spent largely reading on my own. On April 29th, however, I got my first taste of the action. In a post on my personal blog I shared my frustrations with the day's events. I spent the morning sitting through hearings on various bills that came before the House Committee on the Administration of Criminal Justice. I witnessed the passing of a bill which would formally institutionalize the Family Justice Centers and the defeat of HB 488. This bill, written and sponsored by Representative Moreno and the United Way, provided stricter sentencing for those convicted of stalking. It was meant to add further protections to survivors and victims of domestic violence, something the legislature had no problem with last year. This session, however, falls before election season and even the local politicians fall prey to campaign woes. The NRA came out in opposition to the bill, and a few libertarians and young gun's rights advocates. As I explained in my piece on my own blog, these opponents were confused. I sat dumb-struck as men lamented the end of the family, dating, and of "passionate relationships". HB 488 did not make it out of committee that day.

I went to lunch with my supervisors in the cafeteria of the Capitol. I had a ragging headache and I couldn't seem to see past what I had just witnessed. It was a learning moment for me. I didn't feel squashed or powerless. Instead, I felt more invigorated and determined to fight for the policy initiatives of the United Way—initiatives that respect the women of this community and strive to make it a better, safer place.

I am so pleased to have found this assignment and I hope that my work contributes to a more informed electorate in October and November.

-Haley Norris