

Making Meaningful Change Now

A Leadership Fellow in Action

BY RACHEL EDWARDS

Being a leader means having a vision and working with others in pursuit of that vision to achieve a great result,” says Brooke Gledhill Wood, a 3L at BYU Law. Wood was selected as one of six leadership fellows for the 2021–22 school year and serves as president of BYU Women in Law (WIL). These opportunities have helped her to “strengthen the muscle of leadership,” she says, and have affirmed that law school was the right path for her to take.

“A law degree is a leadership degree, a platform for making meaningful change in the community,” Wood says. “My legal education is preparing me to recognize and analyze problems and to develop solutions to those problems in order to help other people. That’s why I came to law school.”

Leading Out as a Fellow

The Leadership Fellowship is one component of BYU Law’s Inspiring Leadership Initiative, a program launched in 2019 under the direction of Dean D. Gordon Smith. “Law students are graduating into an increasingly complex and unpredictable world,” Smith says. “The purpose of the initiative is to equip students with the insights that will inform their work and their lives after law school.”

Each year, a select number of students are designated as leadership fellows and given the

opportunity to be mentored by BYU Law’s Council of Inspiring Leaders, a donor group that supports leadership initiatives at the Law School, including the Annual Law and Leadership Conference, the Leadership Study Tour, and the Leadership Fellowship. “The goal is to challenge students to think critically about leadership and to develop their own ideas about ethical leadership as members of the legal profession,” Smith says.

For Wood, being selected as a leadership fellow has validated her desire to use her legal education to effect social change. “I came to law school with the hope that I could gain a set of skills that would enable me to add value to an organization that is making positive change,” she says. “I’m very mission driven. I’m less concerned about what type of work I’m doing for an organization and more interested in what the organization is achieving as a whole. As long as I feel motivated about the impact an organization is seeking, I feel ready to get on board.”

As a first-generation college graduate and soon to be the first attorney in her family, Wood says that the leadership fellowship has been an incredible boost to her confidence. “I’m connecting with so many people from across the state and country who are interested in causes I care about,” she says. “It’s amazing to be aligned with these individuals and to step into a role where I’m not

only learning from them but can contribute something as well.”

Applying Her Law Skills

In September 2021, Wood put the skills she is developing as a law student and a leadership fellow into action when she became involved with a Utah nonprofit known as the Policy Project, an organization focused on advancing healthy, long-term policy at a local and national level. “I saw an Instagram post from the group about one of their focus issues, the Utah Period Project, which is a campaign aimed at promoting menstrual equity in the state of Utah by—among other things—repealing the tampon tax and increasing access to period products in Utah’s public and charter schools,” says Wood. “I felt this might be a great Utah issue that a group of future women lawyers could get involved in.”

Wood contacted the founder, Emily Bell McCormick, inviting her to speak at a WIL event at the Law School. She subsequently began attending weekly meetings with McCormick and the other founders of the Policy Project. Wood volunteered to help the organization with their founding documents and application for 501(c)(3) status and later received an official invitation to join the board. Since that time, she has become actively involved in all aspects of the Utah Period Project.

“When it comes to period poverty and menstrual equity issues in Utah, many people are unaware that any problem exists,” Wood says. But the statistics tell a different story. According to the Utah Period Project’s website, 46 percent of women in poverty have chosen between purchasing a meal or purchasing period products, and 25 percent of teenage girls can’t afford to purchase menstrual products.

School-age girls are at the highest risk for mis- or under-managed menstruation as almost all begin their periods before they are able to legally work (90 percent menstruate by age 13), and they rarely have control over family finances or the ability to drive to a store to purchase period products. Lack of access to period products leads to missed school, health risks, lower confidence, shame, embarrassment, and missing out on myriad beneficial programs thoughtfully put in place for students. [“The Period Project,” the Policy Project, accessed December 13, 2021, thepolicyproject.org/theperiodproject.]

In addition to working to advance legislation that would repeal the tax on period products in Utah (adding them to a category of products deemed medically necessary, which currently includes Rogaine, Band-Aids, Viagra, and Advil), the group is campaigning for the Utah Legislature to



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increase access to free, safe, and good-quality menstrual products in female and all-gender bathrooms in public and charter schools throughout the state.

"This is an issue that is fixable but that we are just not paying attention to. That's why I'm so excited to be involved," says Wood. She says this "smart, ground-up approach" to fixing problems in Utah is exactly the type of work she wants to be doing. "We are a scrappy organization, essentially a group of five or six women getting together each week with a startup mentality, asking, 'What skills do you have to offer, and what do you have time for this week?'"

Wood is in a business organization lab at BYU Law this semester, learning about bylaws and articles of incorporation—information she has used to inform her work with the Policy Project. "I'm definitely learning on my feet, but it's been nice to see that what I'm learning is so helpful and applicable," she says.

Bringing Awareness to the Issue

On November 11, 2021, the Policy Project hosted a symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah, in an effort to spread awareness about period poverty and to create a broad coalition of support among nonprofit leaders and policy influencers from across

the state. Speakers included Diana Nelson, global advocacy director for Days for Girls; Jennifer Weiss-Wolf from the NYU Center for Justice and author of *Periods Gone Public*; and Susan Madsen, founder of the Utah Women & Leadership Project. Wood helped organize and also spoke at the conference, sharing information she learned while researching period poverty for her 3L substantive writing paper.

"This issue transcends age, race, and socioeconomic status in a way that few issues do because it's connected to biology," Madsen says. "Historically, periods and menstruation have been taboo subjects, but as the stigma lessens, each state is deciding how to handle menstrual equity issues. Utah was one of the first territories to allow women to vote and the first to elect a female state senator. It is our heritage to lead out on these issues and to pass these laws that benefit women."

In addition to increasing community awareness around period poverty in the state, the Policy Project board is working with Representative Karianne Lisonbee on a bill that proposes adding period products to Utah's ongoing school budget, which already covers toilet paper and paper towels in school bathrooms.

"We have had multiple meetings with distributors and have researched the best supply options. We want to have answers to all the potential questions and to mark the path of least resistance by the time this bill gets introduced," Wood says. "We recognize that there needs to be an educational component during the rollout, and we are working to mitigate any misuse of the product. We don't

want girls to feel that they need to stockpile products. We want them to understand that these are always available."

The initiative has garnered enthusiastic support from Utah's business community, including private sponsorships from the Larry H. & Gail Miller Family Foundation and the Andrus Family Foundation, which have donated funds to cover the costs of purchasing dispensers for period products in all public and charter schools.

Wood says that while life as a 3L can be hectic, she has no regrets about her decision to become involved in the Utah Period Project. "There is a heart-breaking element to this story. There are so many women and girls who struggle with this issue, with access to period products and management strategies that allow them to be truly productive in their lives," she says. "On the flipside, it is such an empowering issue because it is solvable. It is an issue where you can make a big impact in a short amount of time."

Wood is certain that her time at BYU Law and the opportunity she has had to serve as a leadership fellow and assist with the Policy Project are helping prepare her for whatever the future brings. "There is something about the way we are trained in law school that helps us to understand the bigger picture, to see the holes and to come up with solutions to fix those problems," says Wood. "It's easy to be aware of many issues, but for me, leadership means stepping up and taking ownership of part of a problem and putting your skill set to work solving it. I'm very grateful for the donors who have made the leadership fellowship possible. It's been an exciting opportunity."