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## AVOIDING THE ADVERSARIAL ABYSS

A lawyer finds personal fulfilment in Moore, Oklahoma.

*Ryan Wozniak*

The rigours of practising law, which are by no means exclusive to trial counsel, can leave one feeling isolated and distant. Day after day goes by to the point that it appears as if the planet begins at our in-tray and ends at our keyboard. When a massive EF5 tornado touched down in Moore, Oklahoma last May, Ontario lawyer Ryan Wozniak booked a flight, grabbed his work boots and joined Habitat for Humanity's disaster recovery efforts in the devastated community.

Lawyer Jan Schlichtmann (who was chronicled in the 1995 book *A Civil Action* by Jonathan Harr) once said that being in trial is like being submerged in deep water for weeks at a time. War, scandal, and natural disaster may occur, but none of it seems to matter. And when you finally come to the surface to breathe again, the world seems altered in fundamental ways.

However, while law firms are busy advocating and trying cases, there are an alarming number of people who are busy struggling with poverty and homelessness. According to Habitat for Humanity, approximately 826 million people worldwide live in urban slums. It is estimated that this number will reach one billion by 2020. In November 2012 the US Census Bureau said that more than 16% of the American population lived in poverty, including almost 20% of children, at its highest level since 1993. As many as 3.5 million people in the United States experience homelessness in a given year. According to a 2008 report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the rate of poverty in Canada is among the highest of the OECD member nations.

It is important that lawyers not dive too deeply into the adversarial abyss, lest they lose sight of what's going on above the surface.

On May 20, 2013, a massive EF5 tornado touched down in Moore, Oklahoma. The tornado had peak wind speeds of 340 km/h, was over a kilometer wide and stayed on the ground for almost 40 minutes over a 17-mile path. Approximately 1,150 homes were destroyed and the storm caused an estimated two billion dollars in damage. Twenty-four people died, including 10 children.

In an effort to gain more perspective, and given my own concern over escalating levels of global poverty, I recently began volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. It has been an extremely rewarding experience. After the Moore tornado hit, I decided that I ought to be doing even more, so I shut down my computer, turned off my iPhone and contacted Habitat for Humanity's Oklahoma City chapter to inform them that I was coming. I packed my gloves and steel toed

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boots and headed to the airport.

When I arrived in late June 2013 the wonderful folks at Habitat's Oklahoma City office loaded me in a truck and drove me to a debris field to get to work. They took me to the hardest hit suburb of Moore, located just northwest of the intersection of I-35 and Southwest 19th Street. The scene I witnessed when I got out of the truck was shocking – street after street of empty lots once occupied by homes that were instantaneously blown to bits, concrete ripped right out of the ground, huge mounds of debris strewn about for miles, a tractor trailer ripped in half and the splintered remnants of a large tree trunk, perhaps two to three feet in diameter, lodged into the second floor of a house at a 90 degree angle, like a huge arrow shot from an oversized bow. This scene of unbridled destruction could easily be mistaken for the set of a post-apocalyptic Hollywood blockbuster.

After digging my shovel into a massive pile of rubble I uncovered more haunting images, including a mangled doll, damaged children's toys and numerous personal effects. At one point, our group was working next to a home that had been sheared clean in half – the left side destroyed and the right side intact. It was like looking into a dollhouse – clothes were hanging in a closet next to a bed, but a mere two to three feet from the edge of the bed, where the rest of the house used to be, there was nothing but a scrambled collection of twisted 2x4s, broken glass and disintegrated shingles. Half a mile away sat a memorial erected at the public school where seven children drowned.

Experiences such as the one I have just described inevitably cause one to approach life with a renewed perspective. I appreciate that for lawyers this is easier said than done; our jobs require us to analyze and interpret events using the cold calculus of reason and precedent.

However, it is important that lawyers not dive too deeply into the adversarial abyss, lest they lose sight of what's going on above the surface. Meaningful activities outside of work can offer a fulfilling reprieve from the relentless demands of practice and remind us that there is big, busy world carrying on beyond our offices. In the words of former record executive Allan Klein, a little perspective, like a little humour, goes a long way.



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[TOP OF PAGE](#)



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