

'Cuse Conversations Episode 133: Law Student Brianna Sclafani Highlights the Work of the Community Review Board (Transcript)

Jen Maser:

I'm Jen Maser, Associate Director of Internal Communications at Syracuse University, and you're listening to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.

[Episode Snippet]

Brianna Sclafani:

The first mandate is our most public-facing mandate, it's the major one, is to review appeals of civilian disposition. What that means is a member of the university community can file a complaint with the Department of Public Safety, Department of Public Safety fully investigates that complaint, and gives the university member a final disposition. Once they receive that final disposition, if they're unhappy with the outcome, then they can appeal that disposition to the board. That is our major mandate. That is one of the three mandates that we got from the Loretta Lynch report from a few years ago, but that is our main one.

[Episode begins]

Jen Maser:

Our guest today on the podcast is Brianna Sclafani, one of the many accomplished students here at Syracuse. Brianna is not only a third-year law student and a graduate student currently pursuing an MPA from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, she also chairs the university's inaugural Community Review Board, an independent entity that provides oversights of certain functions of the Department of Public Safety, which we'll get into more later in the conversation. Brianna, thanks for taking time out of your day to chat with me. How are you doing today?

Brianna Sclafani:

I'm good, Jen. Thanks for having me. I'm excited.

Jen Maser:

We're excited to have you. I thought we could start going back to the beginning about who you are as a person and what your life trajectory has been like leading you up to your current role as a Syracuse law student and a student in Maxwell. Can you tell me what you were interested about growing up? What was your educational trajectory like and what led you to pursuing enrollment in law school?

Brianna Sclafani:

Yeah, I am born and raised in a small town in Newtown, Connecticut. Really, one of the pivotal moments of my life was Sandy Hook. I was in high school when the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting happened, and that was, as I mentioned, a pivotal moment in my life. I knew from that moment on that I really wanted to serve my community, and so even if it was in a small sense, planting trees in honor of the Sandy Hook school shooting victims, or participating in community events via my lacrosse team that I was a part of in high school, I knew that no matter what I did in my life that I wanted to make sure I was serving my community, and so growing up, in particular in high school, I tried to serve my small local town in any way that I could.

Then moving on to college, I made the decision to go to Virginia Tech, another school that also shares a similar tragedy and a similar history. But I was able to find a really great community at Virginia Tech. I had professors who supported me, who supported my dedication to public service, and my passion for helping others, and eventually knew that I wanted to go to law school. Wasn't quite sure. Law school's a lot of work. It's really hard. I had professors who I was lucky enough to service references for me when I applied to Syracuse, but I knew that I wasn't done when I left Virginia Tech. I knew that there was something else out there for me and I just wasn't sure what it was until I discovered, wow, the law can really make an impact in people's lives, for better and for worse. Each community that I've been a part of, whether it's been at Sandy Hook, whether it's been at Virginia Tech, and now here at Syracuse, I've tried to give back. I've tried to make a positive impact on my community.

Jen Maser:

What was the decision like to not only get your law degree from Syracuse, but also to enroll in an MPA program? What was the thinking there? Is there more impact of having both degrees that you hope to carry into your career going forward?

Brianna Sclafani:

Yes. Thank you for allowing me to explain that part of my story. Syracuse was the end-all, be-all for me. My younger sister is currently a senior at Syracuse. My family is a Go Orange family, so I knew that Syracuse had a unique opportunity for me. Not only could I pursue my law degree, but I could pursue a master's in public administration at the same time. I believe that having a legal background and also a public policy background will help me. No matter what I do after graduation, I think that I'm able to analyze legal issues, and also add to those legal arguments with public policy considerations, "Who are the types of people that we're impacting when we're making all these types of decisions?" I think that the joint-degree program is a unique program. I think Syracuse is a leader in that program and I'm really happy that I was able to be a part of it and made the best decision for me to join Syracuse, both at the Maxwell School and at the law school.

Jen Maser:

That's wonderful. You inspire me just with the dedication to earning your advanced degrees here. Is there a specific area of law that you have been specializing in

through the process of earning your degree or that you hope to specialize in after graduation?

Brianna Sclafani:

I don't think there's a particular area of the law that I'm most interested in, but what I am interested in and what being a lawyer means to me is serving the community. It means giving back. No matter what area I practice in, I know that I will be well-equipped with my law degree from Syracuse and also my public administration degree from Maxwell that I'll be best prepared to handle all any sort of legal or policy issue that comes my way because of the experience here.

Jen Maser:

Wonderful. Can you talk about some of your experience as a law student, what some of the most rewarding parts of your experience will be? We will talk a little bit more about the Community Review Board, which I'm sure has been a big part of your experience here.

Brianna Sclafani:

Yes. CRB is definitely one of my most favorite experiences here at Syracuse as a law student. I think an additional favorite of mine is being editor-in-chief of the Journal of Global Rights and Organizations. At SUCOL [Syracuse University College of Law] and at most other law schools around the nation, students have an opportunity to join a journal. They focus on writing legal research and editing and so I've really seen myself grow as a leader. I lead a team of about 35 2L and 3L students and so I've really cherished that opportunity to lead younger law students and develop their writing skills. Then also, it's helped me become a better writer. Being a lawyer is not always standing up in front of the courtroom and giving the best oral arguments possible, but it means taking a step back, putting together your thoughts in a cohesive document, and being able to defend those arguments via words.

Jen Maser:

Does anything else stand out in terms of your experience over the last few years here personally or professionally?

Brianna Sclafani:

I think another really cool experience is that I mentioned previously is that my younger sister is here, and so being able to see her grow as a student, she is currently a psychology major, and so we will actually graduate a week apart. The law school graduation is May 5th and she graduates the next weekend, so being able to share that experience with her, being able to go to football games or basketball games with her is, I think, a very unique experience. Selfishly, one of the additional reasons why I chose Syracuse as opposed to other institutions because I knew that my family meant so much to me and that I would be able to see her selfishly as much as possible.

Jen Maser:

Your parents will probably be very happy come May with two commencements coming up.

Brianna Sclafani:

Very happy that they have two daughters graduating, but also that they have to make the four-hour trip from Connecticut to come see us back to back, but they're proud.

Jen Maser:

Yes. Oh, yeah. Didn't think about that. Good, I'm glad to hear that. Honing in specifically on the Community Review Board, well, let's just start with what it is. How would you explain it to somebody who maybe has never heard of the Community Review Board? What is it charged with? What is it responsible for?

Brianna Sclafani:

The Community Review Board is an independent entity. We have a relationship with the Department of Public Safety, but want to again, reemphasize that we are an independent body made up of faculty, staff, undergraduate students, and graduate students that work to fulfill three mandates. The first mandate is our most public-facing mandate, it's the major one, is to review appeals of civilian disposition. What that means is a member of the university community can file a complaint with the Department of Public Safety, Department of Public Safety fully investigates that complaint, and gives the university member a final disposition. Once they receive that final disposition, if they're unhappy with the outcome, then they can appeal that disposition to the board. That is our major mandate. That is one of the three mandates that we got from the Loretta Lynch report from a few years ago, but that is our main one.

The two others again deal with the community, the second being to host an annual forum, which I'll be happy to talk about in a little bit.

The third is to provide policy advice to the Department of Public Safety per their request. We just recently fulfilled one of those additional mandates. We had an online webinar where we talked about two policies that DPS asked us to review. One was featuring the arrest of students, faculty, and staff members in a classroom environment, and the other was exculpatory evidence.

Again, those are the three major mandates of the CRB, but what the CRB is and what it really boils down to is an independent body focused on making sure that our community members feel like their voices are heard when it comes to dealing with the Department of Public Safety. Like I said, we have an independent relationship from DPS. We're not under them. They don't oversee us. We make sure that DPS follows the highest standards of community policing, follows their own internal policies and procedures, and when they don't, we make sure that they're held accountable in the proper mechanisms, and in the proper ways.

Jen Maser:

Thank you for that very thorough background explanation. I think it'll be helpful for people to wrap their brain about what this board is and what it's meant to do. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to chair the CRB, what inspired you to get involved, and especially in this key leadership role?

Brianna Sclafani:

Yes. As I mentioned, even from being a young high schooler, I was really interested in serving my community, and so I was looking for an opportunity at the end of my first year of law school in my 1L year, how can I best serve the community? How can I use my experience, whether it be at Sandy Hook, or other things to best serve Syracuse? So I stumbled upon the CRB application. There is one law student and one graduate student position, so I was interested in serving as the law student representative. I submitted an application detailing my interest in community policing and law enforcement in general and was nominated by our Student Bar Association to serve as the law school representative.

Once I was nominated, we had our first meeting, and I knew that I wanted to take on a leadership opportunity. We have a chairperson position and then a vice chairperson position and so I thought it would be a really cool and unique way to give back to my student body in particular to chair the board. I was voted in by our members, so I thought it was really cool that faculty members, staff members, and undergraduate students felt like I was the best voice for the board. I have chaired the board ever since and I've been grateful to do so. I've learned so much from my peers and my colleagues on the board and I have learned a lot about my leadership capabilities, too. I work with two wonderful advisors to the board, Bea González and Tony Perez, and also my vice chairperson, Sam Castleberry, so it's been a great working relationship this year and the previous year with other board members so far.

Jen Maser:

I know the board is relatively new, I mean, it's been established since fall of 2021, I believe, but it's still new in the grand scheme of time on this campus, especially, and you're still working to establish yourself. Can you speak at all about what the experience has been like so far, what kind of work you guys have been involved and engaged on and how you hope to take some of the skills you mentioned that you've been learning forward into your career?

Brianna Sclafani:

Yes, the board is still very new. Our inaugural year was last year. Last year, we primarily focused on establishing the board, making sure we were fully staffed, making sure that we had the advisors that we needed since again, we are an independent entity. We do not provide legal advice, we do not do anything of that nature, so we also have help from general counsel's office here at campus. Last year, again, we were really focused on establishing the board. We put up a website. We, through the help of Jen and your great team, established some SU News stories. The Daily Orange had reached out to the CRB for some comments, and we wanted to get our name out there. We had our monthly meetings, but other than that, it was focusing on establishing the board.

Now, in its second year, we've been able to actually fulfill some of our mandates. Again, our most recent example of this is providing DPS with some recommended policies. The way that that process works and will work hopefully in the future is that DPS has some changes or revisions that it wants to make to its policies and procedures. Because those certain policies and procedures deal with the community, the Community Review Board gets a say, gets to see those policies, gets to offer input and recommendations.

After working with Chief Stone on the arrest-in-classroom policy, in layman's terms, that's what we call it, we were able to emphasize in that policy in particular that all efforts should be made to not arrest a student, faculty, or staff member in a classroom environment. We understand that that is particularly traumatic for students experiencing that and for faculty and staff members, too, so we were able to provide those recommendations to Chief Stone and DPS in its entirety, and hopefully after their review of our document, they can see that all efforts should be made, barring imminent threats and exigent circumstances that students should not be arrested in a classroom environment.

Jen Maser:

I love that. It's such a concrete example of your role coming to life and you really interplaying with the Department of Public Safety as the board is intended to do to maybe shed a light on things they're not thinking of, or to be that voice representing the larger SU community. Can you talk about what your pitch would be to other members of the campus community, whether that's students, faculty, or staff who want to get involved in the Community Review Board, whether it's by having their voice heard, providing input on these matters, or actually serving on the board?

Brianna Sclafani:

We have positions open for next year and I would recommend anyone who's interested in serving their community at large apply. Again, as previously mentioned, we are comprised of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff members. For students, in general, you don't have to be a law student, you don't have to have taken a criminal law class. That's what most first-year students take. You do not have to have any experience in law enforcement. You do not have to even have an interest in law enforcement. But what you do need to have an interest in is serving your community, serving the Syracuse University members who potentially come forth in front of this board unhappy with something that has happened, and just service in general, I'll echo again, is the most important part of wanting to be on this board or why you should be a part of this board.

Jen Maser:

What's the anticipated time commitment that a member of the board spends on the serving the board?

Brianna Sclafani:

We have monthly board meetings, so those are about an hour a month. Then if needed, we will hold hearings, and so we ask members to potentially block off portions on their calendars. If we do have to have a hearing, we have specific timelines requested of us, or I should say required of us per our mandates, so those have to happen fast, and so if we do not have a hearing scheduled for the next couple of weeks, or months, then the schedule is very light. We ask you come to all of the board meetings, but if we don't have a hearing, we're working on policy issues from DPS, or other issues as they arise.

But I cannot make any promises as to how many hearings will be held next year. We always hope that it's zero. We always hope that the Department of Public Safety is doing its job and that those community members receive their dispositions and feel satisfied with the internal investigation, but that might not be the case, so monthly meetings are the major requirements, and then as needed, we will get in touch with you if things have to move very fast.

Jen Maser:

I feel like I cut you off mid-thought earlier when you were talking about just other ways for the campus to get involved.

Brianna Sclafani:

I think I just wanted to reiterate that undergraduate or graduate students, you don't have to be in necessarily the practice of law, or you don't have to be a forensic student, or a criminology student. You can be a journalism student, you can be barely interested in policing, but just being dedicated to serving your community and wanting to be a voice for your other fellow students and other members here on campus is really important. That, again, can apply to both faculty and staff.

Jen Maser:

Now, you mentioned earlier in our conversation that one of the charges is for the CRB to hold at just an annual open forum about its work. I think the next one is scheduled for maybe this March.

Brianna Sclafani:

Correct. We will be hosting our second annual forum March 22 from 6 to 7 p.m. in the Schine Underground. We welcome anybody who's interested to attend. The general format of the meeting will most likely start off with me introducing the board members and also reviewing those three mandates as we've briefly discussed here. Then mainly the rest of the portion and what we did last year was giving students, faculty, and staff an opportunity to address issues with us. We are grateful that Chief Stone will be present at the March 22 meeting so that way he can properly address issues if they more directly pertain to DPS and not the Community Review Board. But we're excited that university members can come attend, learn more about the CRB with the brief presentation at the beginning, and then ask thoughtful questions.

Jen Maser:

Are there any surprises or misconceptions about the work of the CRB that you've encountered so far over the last year and a half that you've been involved?

Brianna Sclafani:

I think the main misconception is a general lack of awareness. The CRB is in its second year. It's very new. I've even had conversations with my fellow law students that have no idea that this entity exists, this entity working to represent them, and making sure that all students' voices are heard. I think we're obviously still working on that. It is in its second year, so we've spent a majority of our time propping up the CRB, making sure that it has a lasting legacy, and it will be successful after this first and second year's board members leave, so again, misconception, or just unaware that this entity exists not only for appeals purposes, but also just exists to address community issues as they relate to the Department of Public Safety.

Jen Maser:

Yeah, and I think it's important for people to understand, too, like you've been saying, that this is a representation of our student body, of our faculty, and staff members, so it's not even this abstract organization entity that exists somewhere on the campus, it's actually like this represents you, and you should be keyed into what they're doing, and stay involved, and pay attention to what's going on because it's speaking for the entire student body in terms of these very specific issues.

Brianna Sclafani:

Exactly.

Jen Maser:

My last question for you is just, how do you feel like you've been able to make a difference through this work with the Community Review Board, specifically?

Brianna Sclafani:

I think for me personally, any impact is an impact, and so as I've mentioned, being a part of every community, whether it's from Sandy Hook, to Virginia Tech, to now Syracuse, just one positive moment means the world to me. The most impact that I felt I have had and that the CRB has had together was the arrest-in-classroom policy. We had a great conversation with Chief Stone and we had great public participation a couple of weeks ago. All the work that we did last year, building up the CRB to address these critical policy questions I felt came to ahead a couple of weeks ago. We were able to fully institute that mandate and I was really happy to be a part of really critical conversations because it's not an easy issue. It won't be solved right away, but we're really happy to be a part of these critical conversations that are occurring on campus and also across the nation.

Jen Maser:

Thank you so much, Brianna, for joining us today on 'Cuse Conversations. I really appreciate your time and I hope everyone takes the opportunity to get involved in the CRB and its upcoming work.

Brianna Sclafani:

Thank you. It was great to be here.

Jen Maser:

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