

We Are ND

Tia B. Paulette '18 J.D.

An Advocate for the Innocent

by Claire Reid '24 [\[link:/stories/authors/claire-reid-24/\]](#) February 14, 2022



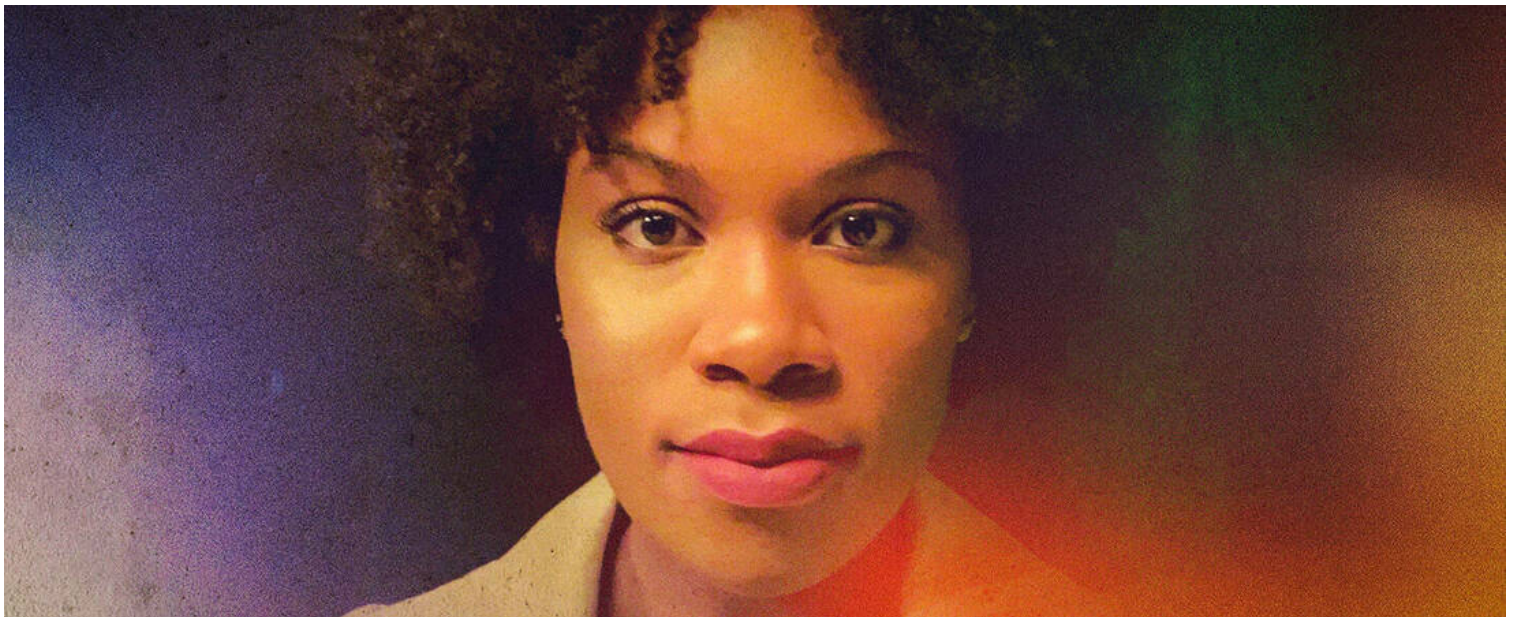
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Tia B. Paulette '18 J.D. remembers the exact moment she decided to become a lawyer. At 15 years old, she was sitting in a high school government class and realized she wanted to help others who faced similar struggles to herself. She came from a difficult background that included neglect, abandonment, and various forms of abuse.

“I remember feeling so unseen and unheard growing up,” she said. “So when I got older, I knew that I wanted to dedicate my life to social justice and helping people who were in similar circumstances as I was and felt like they didn’t have a voice or anyone to stand up for them.”

While still a high school student, Paulette used her dream of attending law school as an incentive to persevere through the trials and odds that surrounded her.

“What a lot of people don’t understand or experience is that sometimes ... you have to decide a path for your life for survival purposes,” she said. “You know, I was 15 years old ... I looked around at my circumstances, and, for generations, a lot of my family members were not able to graduate from high school, and had to drop out. So I made a decision right there to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, otherwise, I could fall victim to the same circumstances.”

Paulette not only graduated from high school but graduated from the [University of Missouri](https://endeavors.missouri.edu/spring-2015/paulette/) [link:https://endeavors.missouri.edu/spring-2015/paulette/](https://endeavors.missouri.edu/spring-2015/paulette/) in 2015 with degrees in philosophy and political science and a certificate in multicultural studies. She then enrolled at Notre Dame Law School.

In the fall of 2016, an email was sent to Law School students soliciting interest in reactivating inactive student clubs. One of these clubs was the Innocence Project, a club affiliated with the [non-profit organization](https://innocenceproject.org/about/) [link:https://innocenceproject.org/about/](https://innocenceproject.org/about/), that advocates for the exoneration and release from prison of inmates wrongly convicted of crimes. Paulette was surprised to see it included on the list.

“I thought to myself “That’s really perplexing. Why would that club be inactive?”” she said. “There’s no other realm of law that so intimately and drastically affects people’s lives more so than criminal law where life, liberty, and freedom are at stake.”

At first, only Paulette and five other students expressed interest in reactivating the club. They began researching the history of the former club but discovered that it had been inactive for over a decade.

“We had no funding, and we had no constitution,” Paulette recalled. “We essentially started from scratch.”

The students approached revitalizing the club from a three-step process: awareness, advocacy, and action. The awareness stage focused on exposing the campus community to the injustices of wrongful conviction. Paulette strived to bring attention to these issues in a creative way that focused on the individuals behind the statistics. Her group started by displaying 166 [white roses in the Law School Commons](https://ndsmcobserver.com/2017/11/exoneration-project/) [link:https://ndsmcobserver.com/2017/11/exoneration-project/](https://ndsmcobserver.com/2017/11/exoneration-project/), each representing an innocent person exonerated in 2016.

“It took the school by storm,” Paulette recalled. “People were really taken aback by it, and it really touched people’s hearts.”

Using the traction gained from the rose display, the Notre Dame Innocence Project — which by then had renamed itself the Exoneration Project — moved into the advocacy stage by bringing Keith Cooper and his attorney, Notre Dame adjunct professor of law Elliot Slosar, to campus to speak to students. In 1996, Cooper was wrongfully convicted of and imprisoned for an armed robbery in Elkhart, Indiana. In 2017, he was pardoned by Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb, making him the first person in the state to be pardoned on the basis of innocence alone.

“It was an absolutely amazing event,” Paulette said. “His story moved so many people; it provided us with an opening to continue advocating for our cause.”

Following Cooper's talk, Slosar, who is involved with the Chicago Exoneration Project, invited law students from the Notre Dame Exoneration Project to assist him in investigating corruption cases in Elkhart County that had led to wrongful convictions.

Slosar's work with the law students evolved into the Exoneration Justice Externship, which Paulette led the initiative for with friend and classmate **Erika Gustin '19 J.D.** and Notre Dame criminal law professor Jimmy Gurulé. Under the guidance of Gurulé and Slosar, the externship provided law students with opportunities to represent wrongfully convicted clients in Northern Indiana.

By that time, the number of students interested in the Exoneration Project grew from five to over 200. The club even piqued the interest of the [South Bend Tribune](https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/news/courts/2017/12/31/keith-cooper-case-revives-exoneration-work-by-notre-dame-law-students/46481017/1)

[\[link:https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/news/courts/2017/12/31/keith-cooper-case-revives-exoneration-work-by-notre-dame-law-students/46481017/1\]](https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/news/courts/2017/12/31/keith-cooper-case-revives-exoneration-work-by-notre-dame-law-students/46481017/1), the *Washington Post*, and *US News*. But being only a student-led club, Paulette worried it could dissolve just as easily as its first iteration once her team graduated.

"We were dedicating over 40 hours [a week] to this cause," she said. "We felt like the cause should not just be confined to a club. We wanted a clinic."



Notre Dame [Law School clinics](https://law.nd.edu/academics/experiential-courses/clinics/) [\[link:https://law.nd.edu/academics/experiential-courses/clinics/\]](https://law.nd.edu/academics/experiential-courses/clinics/) are teaching law offices where second- and third-year students receive academic credit for providing free legal services to individuals and organizations in the surrounding community. Paulette believed issues of criminal justice and innocence were just as deserving of a clinic as the other issues that clinics focused on such as taxes and intellectual property.

In 2020, the Law School formally established the [Exoneration Justice Clinic](https://law.nd.edu/academics/experiential-courses/clinics/exoneration-justice-clinic/) with Gurulé as the program's director. In 2021, the clinic's work was crucial in the exoneration of Andy Royer, a man who spent 16 years in prison for a murder he did not commit.

"The Exoneration Justice Clinic was born from pure student action," Paulette said. "I think that's very powerful. No other clinic at the Law School has that history where students got together and placed such a high importance on an issue that it led to the faculty founding a clinic. I'm really proud of that because it makes me believe not just in the power of humankind, but also the power of students."

Paulette and Gustin are now in the final stages of establishing a scholarship, the Tia B. Paulette and Erika S. Gustin Award, which will be conferred on law students who have "demonstrated a personal commitment to criminal justice and public interest law and furthering the goals of the Exoneration Justice Clinic."

"This will be the first prominent scholarship [at the Law School] to be named after women, and we're really excited about that," Paulette said. "I think that representation is really important, especially with the impact the Exoneration Project has had on the school."

For her instrumental role in laying the foundation for the clinic and her work on the Exoneration Project and externship, Paulette was named to the 2021 [Domer Dozen](https://domerdozen.nd.edu/team/tia-b-paulette-18-j-d/) cohort — an award given annually by the Notre Dame Alumni Association to 12 alumni under the age of 32 who exemplify the association's tenets of faith, service, learning, and work.

"I'm extremely humbled that people thought so much of me to recognize me to that extent," she said. "I hope to use it as a platform to solicit more interest in public interest."

After graduation, Paulette initially became a prosecutor, but her work with exoneration issues in law school inspired her to return to public service as an Assistant Attorney General. In her current role, she litigates federal cases where she aids members of underprivileged communities in navigating their way through the legal system.

"I honestly don't think that I would be the attorney I am without having attended Notre Dame," she said. "For me, attending Notre Dame was a dream come true, and then achieving everything we did with the Exoneration Project — I never would have imagined it looking back at myself, that little girl who felt so abandoned and unseen. I look back and smile at her now. She took that and put it back into the world to help other people who feel that way. I'm very proud of her."

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