

World-renowned Expert on Trauma and Disasters Joins Tulane University Faculty

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Charles Figley, an internationally renowned expert in disaster-related mental health, has joined Tulane University as the Dr. Paul Henry Kurzweg distinguished chair and professor of disaster mental health in the School of Social Work.

Figley is one of the country's leading academics on trauma and disasters, having written more than 200 scholarly works on the topic and conducted research on catastrophes ranging from the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. He helped found the Green Cross, a group of mental health professionals that provides assistance to communities after disasters, helped establish the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and coined the phrase "compassion fatigue," a condition of secondary post-traumatic stress disorder that afflicts first-responders to catastrophic events.

Figley came to Tulane from Florida State University, where he worked since 1989 as a professor in the College of Social Work and director/founder of the FSU Traumatology Institute and the Psychosocial Stress Research Program. He directed FSU's Interdivisional Doctoral Program in Marriage and Family from 1989-1996 and, during the same period, led the university's Center for Marriage and Family Therapy. Figley worked at Purdue University's Department of Child Development and Family Studies for 15 years prior to joining FSU.

Figley chose to come to Tulane and New Orleans because of the wealth of opportunities for research in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the country's most devastating natural disaster. The fighting spirit of area residents and their determination to rebuild impressed Figley.

"What I see as an outsider is the unbelievable resilience of this community. It's amazing to me. You have a population who has gone through all these things, and yet the city is vibrant," he says. "It is really a testimonial to the chutzpah of the

people that live here. I tend to see things in a way that maybe other people don't because I've been to various places that don't come back."

Figley brought the FSU Traumatology Institute he founded with him to Tulane, renaming it the Tulane University Traumatology Institute and Psychological Stress Research Program. The institute, which studies the effects of disaster-related psychological trauma, publishes a quarterly journal. The latest issue is devoted to Tulane and includes perspectives from University President Scott Cowen, Susann Lusnia, associate professor of classical studies, former social work student Ellen Boyer as well as School of Social Work instructors and staff such as Fred Buttell, Richard Ager, Judith S. Lewis and Heather Gillis, among others. The issue is about the faculty, students and administrators' experiences before and after Hurricane Katrina. A preliminary copy is available online [here](#).

Figley plans to expand upon those testimonials by creating a larger oral history project to preserve Tulanians' accounts of the storm and the city's recovery. Another of his goals is to expand upon the study of trauma at the graduate school level by taking an interdisciplinary approach involving other schools within Tulane. "I love interdisciplinary work," he says. "That's what I am going to be focusing on — engaging a conversation with all of my colleagues here about trauma."