

Runsdorf winners share passion for public service

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Graduating seniors from the School of Liberal Arts Barclay Zislin, left, and Maya Shields are this year's winners of the Jim Runsdorf Excellence in Public Service Student Award. (Photos by Kenny Lass)

They come from opposite ends of the United States — Maya Shields from the Pacific Northwest, Barclay Zislin from the Alabama Gulf Coast. Despite growing up worlds apart, they share a passion for community service.

So, when the two began exploring college possibilities as high school juniors, they were immediately drawn to Tulane University. Each applied, gained acceptance and set out to make a difference on campus and in New Orleans.

Shields and Zislin's dedication to community service over the past four years did not go unnoticed. The two graduating seniors are the 2025 recipients of the Jim Runsdorf Excellence in Public Service Student Award.

Given by the Tulane Center for Public Service, the award honors students who demonstrate social responsibility and awareness of community needs through significant contributions during their undergraduate years. Recipients are recognized as committed, compassionate leaders who embody the best practices of civic engagement.

"I chose Tulane for multiple reasons, but community service was the most compelling and exciting thing about Tulane to me," Shields said. "I had attended a high school where service was integrated into the curriculum and found that experience incredibly valuable, so when I saw it was similar at Tulane, I was already very excited."

Zislin felt that same draw to Tulane. "When applying to schools, it was very important for me to feel as part of a community. From what I had heard, Tulane wasn't just a community on campus but also off campus. It felt very much like the kind of university I would want to go to and eventually graduate from."

Neither Zislin nor Shields wasted time getting involved. Shields began her community service journey in her first year, joining the executive board of CACTUS (Community Action Council of Tulane University Students). CACTUS facilitates all service projects and organizations on campus and sponsors campus-wide service events. Shields eventually became president of CACTUS, following stints as events coordinator and co-president.

"One of our goals was expanding the knowledge of what CACTUS is, and what we do on campus, and I believe I have really seen that transformation over the years,"

Shields said. Through that work, she has served in other leadership roles, including founding treasurer of Students Against Food Insecurity; vice president of programming for Epsilon Eta, an environmental pre-professional fraternity; and founder and co-director of the Tulane Earth Day Festival.

As busy as she's been with community service, she excelled in the classroom as well, majoring in English and political economy and minoring in environmental studies and international development. Following Commencement, Shields will stay in New Orleans for at least a year.

"I plan to stay in New Orleans and continue to work in the community," she said. "I am really excited to explore ways to connect and be engaged in New Orleans as a non-student." She will eventually take some time to travel abroad before applying to law school to study environmental law.

Zislin, who is graduating with bachelor's degrees in international relations and social policy and practice, plans to take some time off before working towards a PhD in political science. He hopes to eventually work in the nonprofit world or for the U.S. Department of State.

Zislin believes his experience with the Center for Public Service, specifically the Civic Engagement Fellows Program — an initiative he helped create — will open doors for him as he pursues his next steps.

As part of the inaugural cohort of seven fellows, Zislin helped design, implement and evaluate initiatives aimed at promoting bipartisan understanding and civic engagement among the student body. The program includes workshops, public forums, guest speakers and collaborative projects, including D.C. Insider, a conversation focusing on careers and internships in Washington, D.C. and the Civic Connections Networking Night, an evening featuring young professionals in politics.

Zislin's dedication to civic engagement led to him being recognized with Campus Compact's Newman Civic Fellowship. Campus Compact is a national nonprofit dedicated to civic and community engagement in higher education. In the year-long program, Newman Civic Fellows learn to collaborate across disciplines and to apply their skills to create positive change in their communities.

Although he is graduating from Tulane later this month, Zislin plans to keep up with the activities of Civic Engagement Fellows Program and help spread the word of its value. "I think our student body has the potential to make a real impact in the

community,” Zislin said. “Tulane is built on principles of service and community, and I see civic engagement as a direct expression of those values.”

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Maya Shield, graduating senior