

DEAN DEBORAH HODGES BELL TRIBUTE†

DEBORAH “DEBBIE” BELL: A MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

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Deborah “Debbie” Bell led the University of Mississippi School of Law for two years as its Interim Dean.¹ A consummate family law scholar and innovator in experiential learning and clinical education, Debbie Bell proved to be a groundbreaking, compassionate and visionary leader who combined her deep knowledge of legal education and love for her students, with her understanding of the state of Mississippi.

It is that expertise that enriched the law school so extensively during Debbie’s tenure. The University of Mississippi, the flagship public institution in the state, is home to the state’s only public law school. That standing comes with a great responsibility to serve the state and to provide access to its most disadvantaged populations. It also requires a crisp vision for the role of law.

Debbie possessed these qualities of service and vision of the role of law in spades. As a colleague of Debbie Bell, I learned first hand that the secret to her successful tenure as teacher, scholar and leader in the state was her compassion and thorough dedication to service. Through her seminal textbook, *Bell on Family Law*, Debbie became the singular name for guiding practitioners and students of the law on the contours of family law and its duty to protect the

† For the remaining articles and essays submitted to honor Dean Deborah Hodges Bell, see 93 MISS. L.J. 569, 569-612 (2024).

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¹ See UNIV. MISS. SCH. L., *Deborah H. Bell*, <https://law.olemiss.edu/faculty-directory/deborah-h-bell/> [<https://perma.cc/745X-NA7G>] (“Bell served as Interim Dean of the law school from July 2015 to July 2017.”).

vulnerable.² Debbie extended this passion for justice and her innate compassion to clinical education, expanding the University of Mississippi's clinics and partnerships that allowed students to provide services to diverse constituencies, including communities in prisons and detention centers.

I had the opportunity to get to know the facets of Debbie Bell's legacy while at the University of Mississippi. When I moved to the state in 2008, Debbie was among the friendly faces who extended a warm welcome to me. I admired Debbie's strength, brilliance and compassion, and wanted to learn from her own journey in the state and legal education.

I learned a tremendous deal, indeed. Through our many tea sessions, pilates classes and routine conversations, Debbie confirmed my sense of her fortitude. As part of the generation of women who had to forge her way despite overt sexism and systems of exclusion, Debbie built a career putting the needs of students first and excelling in everything she did.

At no time did this become more apparent than when Debbie Bell served as Interim Dean of the University of Mississippi School of Law in 2015. I was thrilled when Debbie agreed to lead the law school during its transition. We had had stellar and compassionate stewardship in years prior under the leadership of Dean Richard Gershon and we were eager to continue this progress with ambition, inclusive practices and excellence.

Debbie embodied all of those characteristics. She led us dexterously through a comprehensive and productive strategic planning process, supported the law school's intellectual life and nurtured talent cross-generationally. With Debbie at the helm, the law school thrived, with collegial and thought-provoking exchanges, an inclusive environment, and with an exciting vision of the road ahead.

Through her decades of contributions, Debbie Bell possesses another laudable quality. She is modest. In addition to her myriads of accomplishments and the model of leadership she etched for the law school, Debbie served as the law school's second female dean. Debbie astutely and diligently paved the way for the law school to recruit her talented and stellar successor, Dean Susan Duncan.

² See DEBORAH HODGES BELL, *BELL ON MISSISSIPPI FAMILY LAW* (1st ed. 2005).

Serving as a trail blazer in any role presents its own challenges. And, it is a testament to Debbie's character and grace, that she never dwelled on the burdens of this historical achievement. Debbie is the personification of grace under fire.

And in Mississippi, where so many laudable giants have graced its soil, Debbie stands in the same vein as Louis Westerfield, the University of Mississippi School of Law's first African American Dean, Susie Blue Buchanan, Marian Wright Edelman, and Constance Slaughter-Harvey; each transcendental in their own right. We are all better because of Debbie Bell's commitment to continue this tradition of service, compassion and leadership.

