

PROFESSOR DEBORAH HODGES BELL: ONE OF MY FAVORITE PEOPLE

*Ronald J. Rychlak**

Debbie Bell is one of my all-time favorite people. I'm not unique in feeling that way. Almost everyone who knows her would say that about her; they'd have to. She is so friendly and full of smiles that you can almost forget that she's also wildly smart.

I joined the law faculty at Ole Miss in the fall of 1987 along with Mike Hoffheimer.¹ Bob Davis started in January. At that time there were several icons on the faculty, including Robert Khayat, Bob Weems, and George Cochran.² There were some mid-career professors, like Carolyn Staton, Karen Green, and Bill Walker, and there were a few junior professors, such as Steve Thel and Wes Cochran.

Two professors, however, had been around long enough to become well established but were still new enough to be very highly relatable to a brand-new faculty member: Larry Bush and Debbie Bell. Quite naturally, both professionally and socially, I often found myself in their circles.³

* Distinguished University Professor and Jamie L. Whitten Chair in Law and Government at the University of Mississippi. B.A. 1980, Wabash College; J.D. 1983, Vanderbilt University School of Law. Ron has received the university's highest research and publication recognition, the "Distinguished Research and Creative Achievement Award" and the University's highest award in honor of service, the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award. For thirteen years, Ron served as the law school's Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, and since 2007 he has served as the university's Faculty Athletic Representative and chair of the University's Athletics Committee.

¹ See Ronald J. Rychlak, *My Friend and Distinguished Colleague: Mike Hoffheimer*, 90 MISS. L.J. 1019 (2023).

² See, e.g., Ronald J. Rychlak, *An Influence, A Friend, and a Wonderful Guy: Professor George Cochran*, 85 MISS. L.J. 1027 (2017).

³ The three of us were on the faculty recruitment committee and traveled to Washington DC to the American Association of Law Schools Faculty Recruitment Conference in 1994 at which we met and eventually hired John Czarnetzky, who served on the faculty from 1994 until 2021, when he left to become dean at Ave Maria Law School.

At one point along the way, Debbie's office was next to mine, and I learned a lot from her. In case anyone reading this doesn't already know, if you have any questions about family law or housing law in Mississippi, she is the first person to call. She pretty much wrote both of those laws in this state.⁴ Yet, she seemed always to have time for the steady stream of students that came to visit her, and they certainly respected her.

As a new professor, I was expected to write and publish books and law review articles. Today, the law school has writing groups and other support programs to help with that. Back then, there wasn't much formal structure. I was invited to show my work to anyone on the faculty, but I was reluctant to show my work before it was completed.

Of course, in order to receive meaningful advice on a writing project, one must share the work prior to its completion. Ultimately, I decided that I could show Debbie my work. She would give good advice and not embarrass me if the work came up short. I guess it helped; that article I was working on was ultimately published in the *UCLA Law Review*.⁵ She was the first person with whom I shared a reprint.

My wife Claire and I lived in an on-campus apartment when we first moved to Oxford. We made some nice friends in the complex, but as has been true throughout our marriage, our neighborhood did not attract trick-or-treaters at Halloween. Debbie brought her daughter Lindsey one Halloween, costumed as a cat. It was kind of Debbie, cute for Lindsey, and perhaps the only trick-or-treater we've ever had. It may seem silly, but Claire and I still appreciate that.

Debbie is also the reason why I keep a box of tissues in my office. I don't know why, but one day she was clearly upset and near tears. She asked if I had a Kleenex. I didn't, and I felt bad about that. I've never been caught in that situation again.

⁴ See DEBORAH H. BELL, *BELL ON MISSISSIPPI FAMILY LAW* (1st ed. 2005, 2nd ed. 2011, Supp. I. 2006–2010, & Supp. II. 2012–2017); Deborah H. Bell, *The Mississippi Landlord-Tenant Act of 1991*, 61 *MISS. L.J.* 527, 564-78 (1992). Debbie was the founder and director of the University of Mississippi Housing Law Clinic (1992-1996).

⁵ Ronald J. Rychlak, *Video Gambling Devices*, 37 *UCLA L. Rev.* 555 (1990), excerpted in Franklin E. Zimring & Bernard E. Harcourt, *Criminal Law and the Regulation of Vice* (Thompson-West, 2007).

Debbie used to live outside of Oxford in a cabin-style house with a tin roof. It had a great fireplace. At some point along the way, she mentioned that she needed to have her chimney swept. It so happened that I had recently bought a brush and swept our chimney, so I said that I would take a look. I do not remember most of the details, or even whether I actually swept the chimney, but I got up on the roof.

The slant of the roof was steep, and—as noted—it was made of metal, pretty much the same thing they make playground slides out of. As some point as I was making my way from the chimney back to the ladder, I started to slide.

This could have been a serious accident. It is said that at a time like this, episodes from your life flash before your eyes. Other people, I guess, experience extreme fear or panic. For me, it was neither of those things. I kept thinking that I was going to look really stupid in front of my wife and Debbie. It was that, more than fear of injury or even death, that was utmost in my mind. Fortunately, I regained my footing and didn't plummet to my embarrassment. I did not, however go back up on the roof.

When she lived at the cabin, Debbie used to invite us to cut a cedar tree each December to serve as our Christmas tree. Claire, the children, and I would pile into the minivan, drive to Debbie's cabin, and select our tree. That became a cherished Christmas tradition and great memory from our children's youth.

Debbie also used to host wonderful parties out at her cabin. One story that I probably would have forgotten by now but for my wife regularly reminding me relates to my habit of showing up exactly at the time a party is scheduled to begin, rather than being fashionably late. Claire and I arrived while Debbie was still in the bathtub. She yelled that we should come on in and fix a drink, which we did and waited until Debbie got dressed and could join us. Claire was embarrassed. I got over it pretty quickly.

One of my funniest memories with Debbie relates to an interview. The law school opened a new legal writing position in 1993, and a woman who worked in the library applied for it. When she was not hired, she sued the law school, alleging age discrimination. She was 54 years old, and we had hired someone younger.

In 1995, while the lawsuit was still ongoing, the law school created a second legal writing position. Larry Bush was the associate dean at the time. He came to my office and explained that the administration needed someone to chair the new search. He had chaired the first search, but he was now named as a defendant in the case. He assumed that the plaintiff would apply for this position, and it would, therefore, be awkward for him to chair this second search. So, I agreed to chair it.

Sure enough, the plaintiff was a candidate. In fact, she was one of our top three finalists. One of her complaints in the lawsuit was that she had not been taken out for dinner as had the out-of-town candidates. So, when we selected her as a finalist, I made certain that we took her out. I scheduled a lunch for the candidate, Debbie, and me at City Grocery on the Square in downtown Oxford. It was, at the time (and arguably still is), the nicest restaurant in town.

The committee had been very conscious of the lawsuit and careful to treat all candidates equally. In particular, of course, we did not want to do anything to emphasize or highlight matters related to age with this particular candidate. As the three of us sat down at the restaurant, however, the candidate looked around the room and announced, “you know, I remember when this was a grocery store.”

I immediately looked at Debbie. Her eyes were as wide as I’m sure mine were. I didn’t even know that there had ever been a grocery store in that building, but we both knew enough not to say anything until we had fully regained our composure.⁶

It’s rare to spend over 30 years on a faculty without having a significant conflict with a colleague, but I cannot think of a serious disagreement that I ever had with Debbie. I’m quite sure that we voted on different sides of many issues, but I never saw her let politics get in the way of common sense or let emotion interfere with her gentle approach to others. That ended up having some

⁶ No, we did not hire her, and yes, she added a complaint alleging that we were retaliating against her due to the lawsuit. The case was sent to trial, and I was pleased that the jury found that my committee had not retaliated. The jury did, however, find that the original search discriminated against her on the basis of age. That verdict, however, was overturned on appeal. See *Scott v. University of Mississippi*, 148 F.3d 493 (5th Cir. 1998).

important long-term ramifications of which she might not even be aware.

It was around 2005. Colleagues Jack Nowlin and John Czarnetzky talked to me about forming a center in the law school that would concentrate on the American Founding. It would be based on the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, where Jack had earned a PhD. John, Jack, and I would be named as founders, but it was really Jack's project. He proposed naming it after Thomas Jefferson.

I was speaking in California on the day of the faculty meeting at which John and Jack proposed the program, so matters were reported to me secondhand. Apparently, the presentation—actually the reaction to the presentation—went very badly. One faction of the faculty saw this as a move by a different faction to bring politics into the law school, and they would have none of it. John and Jack had not envisioned it that way, and they were greatly upset by what they encountered. Considering the reaction, however, they withdrew the proposal without submitting it for a vote.

Debbie was very important at this time. She would have been associated with the faction that in general opposed the center, but she did not like what transpired. She told me it was as if Jack and John had been mugged, and they didn't deserve that. She also said that had the proposal been put forth for a vote, she thought it would have passed.

I knew that Jack's idea deserved to be heard, so I set up a meeting in the Lyceum. Chancellor Robert Khayat, Provost Morris Stocks, CFO Larry Sparks, and University Counsel Lee Tyner were there in the chancellor's office.⁷ They liked the concept and agreed to set the program up under the provost's authority under the name, *The Declaration of Independence Center for the Study of American Freedom*.⁸

The center limped along for some time without funding, but in late 2020, with encouragement from a number of faculty members, Chancellor Glenn Boyce determined that the university could benefit from such a center. Of course, starting a new program like

⁷ Stocks and Sparks would both later serve as interim chancellors. I commented at the time that it was the highest-powered meeting in which I had ever taken part.

⁸ Jack Nowlin served as director until he left to become dean of the law school at Texas Tech University in 2017. After that, I filled the role.

that can be tricky. Evolving an established entity presented fewer obstacles.

Today, *The Declaration of Independence Center for the Study of American Freedom* offers financial support for academic research into a wide variety of topics related to American freedom. It makes Freedom Studies Scholarships available to qualified students,⁹ and the university even offers a minor in freedom studies.¹⁰ That entire program might well not exist had Debbie not offered her thoughts about the law school faculty meeting.

Debbie also played an enormously important role, stepping up to serve as Interim Dean of the law school from 2015 to 2017. For an interim, she was extraordinarily active, traveling through the region, raising money, and overseeing an important era of growth for the law school. Her leadership abilities impressed even those of us who had high expectations. We were very lucky that she was there.

Debbie has left significant impacts on this law school, this university, this state, and all of us who came to know and love her. I am blessed to have spent most of my career with the ability to call her a colleague and friend.

⁹ *Freedom Studies Scholarships*, THE DECLARATION OF INDEP. CTR. FOR STUDY AM. FREEDOM, <https://independence.olemiss.edu/freedom-studies-scholarship/> [<https://perma.cc/D9K6-5H5Z>].

¹⁰ *Freedom Studies Minor*, THE DECLARATION OF INDEP. CTR. FOR STUDY AM. FREEDOM, <https://independence.olemiss.edu/education/> [<https://perma.cc/CCK9-294F>].