

RICHARD GERSHON: A CALMING FORCE AMIDST ANY STORM

*Michèle Alexandre**

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

— Attributed to Dr. Maya Angelou

Richard made people feel like they mattered. It is a simple thing, to stop and talk to others, to accept their offer of a conversation. Yet, in our busy world where people feel more comfortable with those who seem most familiar, Richard stood apart from the rest by his genuine kindness.

I first met Richard about fifteen years ago when he was a candidate in the University of Mississippi School of Law's ("UM Law") dean search. I served on the search committee then and had the opportunity, along with fellow committee members, to engage with Richard.

When we got to know him, many of us shared a similar feeling of connectedness with him that felt rare. As conversations evolved, this assessment remained. Richard Gershon had a natural emotional intelligence, combined with years of experience and acumen as a leader in legal education. He stood out because of his natural demeanor, his ability to connect across human difference, and, of course, his extensive experience in the decanal role at prior schools. Thus, it is no surprise that Richard was indeed selected to lead UM Law School.

Our law school was undergoing a transition at the time, and once selected, Richard stepped easily in the role of unifier-in-chief. UM Law School needed exactly what Richard offered through his compassionate, inclusive, and thoughtful leadership. Over the years, we thrived and came together as a cohesive group who

* Michèle Alexandre is Dean and Professor of Law at Loyola University Chicago School of Law. Alexandre served on the UM Law School faculty from 2008 to 2019.

learned to value each other's unique characteristics and distributed leadership and governance roles equitably. Under Richard's leadership, junior and mid-career faculty members were inspired to become more active, and divisive tendencies subsided. Leadership matters. And because Richard emulated inclusiveness, openness, and calm dialogue, we followed suit.

From then on, we developed a deep friendship and appreciation for Richard as a person in our law school community. Without fanfare, Richard routinely accepted invitations to lunch or dinner from us. Still in our old building, a group of us would walk over with Richard to the Student Union for a meal or would meet him on the Oxford Square for dinner. During those meals together, Richard put aside his decanal role and built community with us, with him serving as the peaceful and open-minded center of gravity. The walls we had built slowly lowered; and we openly loved and appreciated each other.

Oxford is a small town. It is a unique, dynamic, and integral part of Mississippi. The work undertaken at the university and the ability to serve the state of Mississippi are crucial motivators for moving there. Teaching in Mississippi is meaningful on numerous levels.

Still, life in Mississippi could be isolating for those of us who were transplants to the state. Being part of a faculty body where it was possible to forge close relationships was a significant difference maker. It contributed to retention of talent and helped us strengthen our bond for the benefit of our students and the school's.

Richard served as a model for navigating it all. He himself was a transplant to the state, and he would, unfortunately, sometimes be the target of ignorant stereotypes. Despite these hurdles, he always responded with grace and remained true to his commitment to serve all he encountered.

I think often of Richard, not only because of all he accomplished while he served on our faculty, but also because of his character. Richard strengthened the faculty, successfully innovated the curriculum, led the school through accreditation, and raised funds for transformative initiatives like the Mississippi Innocence Project and Clinic as well as the McArthur Justice Clinic. Among many more other beneficial initiatives, Richard also

started a radio program to connect the law school to the rest of Mississippi and the nation. The radio program with Mississippi Public Broadcast helped propel the reputation of UM Law across Mississippi and the rest of the country. We all became active guests, preparing novel and timely talks tailored for the hour-long program. By centering our work and our unique contributions, Richard reenergized the school's academic passion for sharing scholarly work, conveying his unshakable confidence in our excellence. Throughout, Richard maintained his teaching load and scholarship, thereby leading by example.

Richard's function as an opener of possibilities facilitated active governance across the law school. He named previously untapped faculty members to leadership roles and supported all in creating new initiatives. Through that engagement, a deep bench of leadership was developed at UM Law. This pipeline of leadership is a direct result of Richard's skills as a leader. The number of law school deans who have come from the University of Mississippi School of Law in the last decade and a half is a concrete illustration of this pipeline of leaders.

I still remember when Richard called me one afternoon to ask if I would be willing be part of a program with one of our Mississippi collaborators to help create a pathway for continuing legal education for Tanzanian lawyers. I had no idea what the project entailed. I trusted Richard, and I knew that whatever the project, it would be meaningful. I enthusiastically said yes. Through the contribution of a donor, I worked with our law school and helped support the continuing education of a cohort of Tanzanian attorneys.

Stories like this abound. Many of us fondly recall times when Richard tapped one of us for something that made a profound impact on us. He was willing to go the extra step of engaging across differences when others did not.

And Richard was no push over. Accounts of Richard raising up as the law school's protector, the guard of academic freedom and intellectual exchange, are also prolific. I experienced Richard's protective instincts first-hand. It confirmed our belief that having Richard as our dean made a tremendous difference. One afternoon, I was participating on a panel along with three or four other panelists when a heckler began threatening us. The

heckler expressed his disagreements with our analyses loudly and went as far as to threaten harm to the school and to us individually.

This was now long ago, but I have never forgotten it. Richard was there. He rose up, asked the person to talk with him separately a few steps away from the panelists. Richard then proceeded to tell the individual that the behavior was inappropriate and that they were out of line. With Richard handling the situation, I kept my attention on the educational matter at hand, and my soul was at peace. That was Richard—a kind, calm force, and a lion guard when the conditions required.

There are many more stories we all could share about our love and respect for Richard. It is significant to note that our love extended to Richard's family, his wife Donna and his daughters Eve and Claire. Donna, Eve, and Claire were generous with their time and opened their homes to us often. Richard beamed with pride watching his daughters grow up, and we did too.

On a personal level, I just miss Richard as a friend. Throughout my time in Mississippi, Richard, Donna, and their daughters became our friends. Richard and Donna were compassionate and a source of support and advice. They commiserated with me as we navigated vegan life in our small town. We loved them and felt fortunate they had chosen Oxford and the university community as their home. The meals we shared, the events we supported together, and the collective pride and support in seeing our children grow, were the most important milestones for us. Our friendship is what I will always cherish.

Richard's passing leaves a big hole in our hearts. My UM Law colleagues and I have been changed because he was our friend and our leader. I know that I have been impacted by Richard's grace and compassion and carry a deep love for him, Donna, and his family. That is why, well after I left Mississippi, I would reach out to Richard periodically to hear from him and learn from his perspective.

We are all familiar with the adage attributed to Mahatma Ghandi that we "must be the change we want to see in the world." Of course, this is often easier said than done. Our friend, Richard Gershon, lived that adage.

He leaves a significant and indelible legacy. He ushered in equity in access and opportunity at a time when that practice was not standard, he nurtured active leadership and governance at all levels of faculty ranks, he renewed our faith in our collective power, and he helped propel UM Law to where it is today. And Richard did it all with tenderness and fidelity to his core values.

We miss you, Richard. Rest well.