

DEAN RICHARD GERSHON: MENTOR AND FRIEND

*Susan Ayres**

It is an honor to be part of this special tribute issue in memory of Richard Gershon, whom I met in 1999 when I came to what was then Texas Wesleyan School of Law. At the time, Richard was vice dean and, shortly thereafter, dean. I was hired to teach civil procedure as a visiting professor and was naïve about (or not privy to) law school politics. Richard became more of a family friend than a dean, because his wife, Donna, and I were in a writing group that met while the kids were in preschool. Donna and I also spent a lot of time together having playdates for our collective three children, then four, then five.

Richard might come home from work to find us making pizza or swimming in the neighborhood pool. We made pizza according to Richard's method from his days working in a small Italian restaurant: put olive oil on premade dough, add sauce with oregano and basil, and remember not to put any cheese (or soy cheese for the lactose intolerant) on top of the meat—just on top of the vegetables. Among us, we cooked for a variety of diets: lactose intolerant, vegetarian, and carnivore. In my memory, we often cooked dinner together at one of our houses as a last-minute event, throwing together whatever was in the fridge. Once, we decided that afternoon to spend New Year's Eve cooking together.

Richard might come home from work to find the children having a playdate, and he would pop in to "dry clean" a suit before his meeting for the late afternoon or evening. I did not even know that Dryel was a thing, but now I always have a box by my dryer. It impressed me that Richard was so self-sufficient and unfussy.

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I still use Richard's dark green watering can that he gave me when he left for Charleston School of Law. I think about him when I water my plants. How he had a wonderful, wry smile and bright green eyes. How he was authentic and was a calm mediator when a problem arose at the law school. How he loved to run and beamed when he talked about his children. How he was a natural leader and, unimaginably to me, thrived serving as dean and solving problems. How he did not offer unsolicited advice but freely gave it later when I would schedule a call after I became a tenure-track professor forced to navigate law school politics.

Richard gave me one of his best pieces of advice after I was tenured and wanted to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing. I was worried about whether my current dean would support my plan. How could I get buy-in to focus on creative writing instead of academic writing for a year or two? Should I even tell my dean? Richard listened to my neurotic fears and said simply and without pretension, "Deans like to be asked, not told." The next time I saw my dean, I asked what he thought about my enrolling in a low-residency MFA program. My mother had just passed away, and my dean felt it would be helpful for my grieving process.

Richard supported creative thinking and endeavors. When he finally stopped being dean, I remember wondering if he would be bored. Donna told me no. He enjoyed teaching (stepping up to prep a new course in family law and later sharing his materials with me when I was asked to teach the same subject). He also enjoyed hosting a local radio show, in which he made tax and other dry legal topics interesting.

Richard's enthusiasm was boundless; his spirit was generous and genuine. I count myself lucky to have been in his wide sphere of colleagues and friends.