

TRIBUTE TO DEAN RICHARD GERSHON

*Deborah H. Bell**

Dean Richard Gershon had a talent for gently leading—people and institutions—to find their best path. When he began as dean, the law school community felt fractured to many of us. The faculty's attempts to resolve various issues facing legal education had consumed considerable time and drained vital energy. At times, our differences seemed larger than our commonalities. I imagine (without knowing, since I've spent my entire career at Ole Miss) that all institutions go through periods like this. I'm grateful that in my forty-one years of teaching at UM Law, those periods have been rare.

I settled in to listen to candidate Gershon explain why he was the right person for the job. But instead, he told us why *we* could resolve whatever issues faced us and how *we* could build the program we chose. He talked about our strengths, not his. It was what I needed to hear at that moment. He was the perfect person, at that time, to step in as dean.

Richard was dean from 2010 to 2015, coinciding with our first years in the new Robert C. Khayat Law Center. In those five years, his encouragement and vision sparked an impressive array of new programs. Creation of the Business Law Institute and the related Negotiation Board and Business Law Network drew national attention to the business law curriculum. The individual clinical programs combined into an integrated program and added the MacArthur Justice Clinic, a state-wide impact litigation clinic, and the student-driven Pro Bono Initiative. The new two-week Skills Training Program, with its emphasis on Contract Drafting for first-year students, enhanced the curriculum with a variety of courses in lawyering skills. The adoption of concentration

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programs allowed students to graduate with special recognition in business law, criminal law, and sports and entertainment law. Appointment of an Associate Dean for Faculty Development to lead writing workshops and retreats boosted faculty productivity. The school's competition teams won an unprecedented eight national titles during the five years he was dean.

His magic worked at the individual level, too. He led faculty by asking the right question—what do you want to accomplish? I have him to thank for an additional ten years at the law school and one of the most gratifying teaching experiences of my career. In 2011, after thirty years of teaching, I was feeling uninspired. I had moved out of the Civil Legal Clinic, which had consumed much of my energy since the early nineties. I emailed Dean Gershon about working with me on a plan for moving toward retirement.

I left his office a few days later, baffled that my retirement plan had morphed into building a pro bono program for the law school—something I had always wanted to do. Working with students to build a pro bono program turned out to be one of the highlights of my teaching career. He just asked the right question—*if you stayed and could do one thing you always wanted, what would it be? And what would it take to make that happen?* A dozen other faculty members would probably tell a similar story. I will always be grateful for what he did for the law school and the turn my career took because of him.

One of Dean Gershon's favorite projects was the radio show that he pioneered, *In Legal Terms*. Once a week, he invited a lawyer or professor onto the show and engaged them in an hour-long discussion, complete with answering call-in questions from the public. He talked about criminal law, family law, tax law, corporate law—you name it. It was a perfect vehicle for someone who was endlessly curious and adventurous enough to run a live show on unfamiliar topics. And, predictably, it was a project that put him in the position of asking someone about themselves and their work.

Tributes to someone who is gone often read like a resume—degrees, accomplishments, awards, memberships. Richard certainly had an impressive resume—dean at three law schools, well-known tax scholar and expert, outstanding teacher. But what

a memorial it is that people most often want to share how Richard Gershon encouraged them to be their best. And then supported them while they worked to accomplish it.