

TRIBUTE TO RICHARD GERSHON

*Antonia Eliason**

“You’d be a great dean, you know,” Richard told me more than once when we were serving together as co-chairs of the faculty appointments committee. I always laughed and told him that I would never want to do anything administrative. I think of him often these days. When I was asked this past year if I’d be interested in being associate dean, I remembered his words. I said yes. I don’t think I would have said yes if it weren’t for Richard’s confidence that this was something I should be doing. Sometimes, when I’m sitting in my office, stuck over how to phrase something, or what approach to take to address a problem, I’ll have one-sided conversations with him. I wish I could talk to him in person, now more than ever.

Richard Gershon was the dean who hired me when I joined the faculty at the University of Mississippi School of Law. He was a mentor as I navigated the first part of my career. And most importantly, he was a friend.

Coming out of the cut-throat world of corporate finance and Big Law, I wasn’t sure what to expect from leadership in academia. From the beginning, Richard was warm and supportive, and made me feel welcomed, wanted, and heard. My very first email interaction with him was on an email chain with David Case when I was scheduling my on-campus interview, flying in from the United Kingdom. Both David and Richard were incredibly friendly and approachable, and Richard offered to come and meet me at the airport. I forwarded that email chain to my parents with a note that said, “Nicest people ever. Talk about feeling wanted . . .” That was October 2012 and accepting the job after it was offered to me that December was the best decision I ever made.

I had never experienced such kind and compassionate leadership as Richard’s before in my professional life, and I initially took it for granted that this is how legal academia operated. It took me several years of conversations with colleagues at other

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institutions to realize that the atmosphere of collegiality that Richard had built at the law school amongst faculty and staff was not a universal condition, but perhaps more of an exception.

Richard was one of the kindest people I have ever known. Genuinely kind people are rare. And genuinely kind leaders are the rarest of all.

My family's friendship with Richard and Donna grew around food. Cooking is my love language, and when I realized, early on in my time here, that Richard was vegan, as was our colleague and friend Michèle, and that Oxford had very limited vegan food options, I made it my mission to cook elaborate vegan dinners. From curries to homemade lentil loaf, from vegan mac and cheese (I'll leave that one to the vegans) to zucchini fritters, the excitement that my little vegan crew had for my cooking brought me such joy. Donna and Richard would regale us with stories that had everyone at the table crying from laughter, their love for each other so palpable that it practically radiated from them. His love for his children and his wife animated him and was reflected in the gentleness with which he handled colleagues as well as students.

When Richard stepped down as dean and became a regular faculty member, he took on many of the most thankless tasks without complaint. Co-chairing the faculty appointments committee with Richard, I was happy to foist the unpleasant job of turning down candidates on him. "You've got more experience giving folks bad news than I do," I told him. I learned a lot from how he worded those emails, his kindness present even when acting as the bearer of bad news.

When Richard shared the news of his diagnosis with me, I didn't want to believe it. He was so positive and optimistic, it was easy to believe that everything would be fine. That he'd overcome this like he'd overcome so many other things. I struggle with the unfairness of it to this day.

I am where I am today because of Richard's mentorship, and because of his many kindnesses. When I have my one-sided conversations with Richard while sitting in my office, I hear him in my head, modeling grace and strength, joy and optimism. I think about the world I want to live in, and it is a world full of Richards. And the only way I know to keep his memory alive is to try to be the person he always thought I could become, which is a version of myself that tries each day to be a little bit more like Richard. In a

world that wants us to believe that you have to be ruthless to be successful, we should all try to be a little bit more like Richard and prove them wrong.