

IN HONOR OF PROFESSOR RICHARD GERSHON

*Matthew R. Hall**

It was around fifteen years ago when I met Richard. He came here to interview for the Dean's job. We were in a weird little room at the old law school that overlooked the library. Richard spoke. Intelligently, of course. Pragmatically. But, afterwards, we all commented on how kind he seemed. And that is, I think, my most enduring thought about him. Although maybe "attentive" is a better word. He seemed to want to speak to each of us with genuine care.

I got to know Richard much better as we drove around the state. To meet with attorneys at a law firm. To attend a gala. To bring the MPB radio show, *In Legal Terms*, to a law applicant recruiting event at Jackson State or Southern Miss. During these drives, Richard and I would swap stories. He'd regale me with tales of the colorful characters at his previous law schools. We'd discuss the 2012 presidential campaign. He'd talk about running or learning to play goalie for his ice hockey team. Occasionally, I could even coax him to explain tax law to me. We'd talk about our dogs' personalities. We'd talk about sports – him mostly about the Atlanta Falcons. And, if I ever exhausted him talking about Kentucky basketball or European bicycle racing, he never let it show.

But what he loved the most were stories about his family. The stories that made him the happiest were about Donna; about

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Claire and Eve; about Ben and Michelle; and about his, or Donna's, siblings.

Richard's kindness to others sometimes had a self-effacing side to it. And I saw that during our travels, too. When we arrived at a law firm, I'd have to rush to get to the reception desk first. If I didn't, Richard would arrive and say very earnestly, "This," gesturing to me, "is Matthew Hall . . . he is a professor at the University of Mississippi School of Law . . . and he is also the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs." The receptionist would look at me, rather baffled, because my name was nowhere in the appointment book. So, I would have to jump in and say, "This is Richard Gershon, Dean of the law school, and we've got an appointment with . . ."

But there was another side to Richard. Maybe a less public side. But a part of him that figures largely into who he was. And that's his courage. Maybe I should really say "fearlessness."

In Richard's first couple of years here in Oxford, he needed two heart procedures. He returned to work almost immediately after each one. But, after a year or so, he inquired of the then-Provost if there was any chance that he could step down from the Dean's job. The answer came back that there were too many ongoing Dean searches and would he please stay on a few more years. Richard took that news in stride — with courageous optimism about the challenges facing the law school.

One of those challenges was the plummeting of the law applicant pool nationally. The legal economy had contracted and the New York Times ran a series of articles about law school debt. Along with every law school, our applicant pool dropped 30%. Richard dug in. He knew we would have a smaller incoming class, but he wasn't going to let this crisis hurt the law school. He could not let it diminish the quality of our students or the future of the profession in this state.

So, he made sure that our admissions offers came with scholarships generous enough to keep the law school where it needed to be. He did this fearlessly, knowing the consternation it would cause administrators across campus. And with no regard for himself. And then, when the applicant pool dropped for a second year, he did the same thing again.

The law school is what it is today because of Richard's fearlessness.

Turning back, though, to Richard's kindness, I want to illustrate how dramatically he touched people through a surprising prism – email.

I can't tell you the number of people – colleagues, lawyers, students – who commented on Richard's grace in emails. He would write back often within twenty minutes. If two hours passed before you received Richard's reply, it was a surprise. But what was remarkable was how he made people feel heard and cared for. I remember one professor coming into my office and saying, "Richard just wrote back. I know he can't solve the problem. I suspect he doesn't even agree with me. But he made me feel like he was on my side anyhow." Richard made people feel cared for.

Of course, he did the same thing in person. I saw a student talking with Richard for ten minutes in the atrium. He had a look of earnest, almost grave, concern on his face. Later, I asked her if everything was okay. "Yes, it seemed like a large problem to me at the time," she said, "but now I'm embarrassed about how much of his time I took up talking about my car battery."

That was Richard. Focused on the person in front of him. Wanting to make sure that person felt seen and heard.

With his memory in mind, I hope that we all try to show the kindness and the courage that we saw in our friend Richard Gershon.