

REMEMBERING A GIANT: I. RICHARD GERSHON

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The remarkable talent of I. Richard Gershon is revealed by this photograph. You'll need to take a moment to study the image to really appreciate that, though. Look closely. What you see is a decidedly inauspicious storefront, emitting an architectural vibe that misses Frank Lloyd Wright by a wide margin. The protruding roof overhang does a fine job of keeping the brightness out, aided in that task by the poorly trimmed palm tree just beyond the doorway. The structure is bookended, on one side, by another similarly unimpressive building and, on the other side, by an empty lot overgrown with shoulder-high weeds and guarded ominously by a rusting chain-link fence.



In this picture, the storefront is vacant. But back in 2003, it wasn't. It had a short-term tenant. Inside, past the bland

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overhang and the drooping palm, through the swinging, laundromat-issue glass doors, Richard Gershon was busily pitching prospects and their families on why attending law school in Charleston, South Carolina, was a thoroughly banner idea. This storefront was the launching point for the Charleston School of Law, soon to open with Richard Gershon as its inaugural dean.

The fact that Charleston Law opened at all from this beginning is a bit of a marvel. That the first entering class was sizable and gifted in both talent and motivation is just plain astounding. Charleston Law's inaugural student class came even though their first exposure to the new institution occurred in that dreary storefront next to an overgrown lot. They came without meeting a faculty (it was still being recruited). They came without a tour of the new school's classrooms, library, or common areas (those were still being built). They came without knowing if the school would earn accreditation from the American Bar Association. They came without an assurance that their education would ever entitle them to sit for a bar exam. They came on trust. Trust in Richard Gershon.

Richard served as the founding dean of Charleston Law until 2008, piloting the school successfully to its A.B.A. provisional accreditation in 2006 (the moment when that inaugural class finally learned that they would, indeed, be able to sit for a bar exam). Richard later left the new school and became dean of the eminently well-established University of Mississippi's law school in 2010. Three deans have now followed Richard in leading Charleston Law.

As the law school he founded now approaches its quarter-century anniversary, it reflects often on what Richard began: Charleston Law—fully accredited in 2011—has now graduated more than 3,300 law students who practice in forty-eight jurisdictions around the country; it annually receives far more admissions applications than it can possibly enroll, with entering class credentials that climb higher each year; its students lead more than thirty school organizations, including nationally-competing advocacy teams and four different legal journals; and it has hosted all manner of legal luminaries including two United States Supreme Court Justices, other distinguished jurists,

scholars, politicians, journalists, and legal icons. This is Richard Gershon's legacy. And by any measure, it is a resounding success.

Now, this is where Richard would insistently demur. Among his many defining attributes, Richard would often, and reflexively, deflect credit. No, it was Admissions Dean and dear friend John Benfield's ebullient personality that won over those prospective law students and their families. No, it was the prominence of the members of the founding board that gave the new school its traction. No, it was the irrepressible enthusiasm and talent of early faculty that galvanized student loyalty. No, it was the character of the students themselves and the energy in the classrooms that drew others to the school. All that is certainly true. There were many devoted and hardworking laborers in the field. But the whole endeavor hinged on Richard Gershon. He would become the public face of this new school—to prospective law students and their families, to its faculty and staff, to the Charleston community, to the South Carolina bar, and to regulators and accreditors.

Richard's ability to instill marrow-deep trust in people was magical. There was a manifest competence and inescapable authenticity to Richard. Meeting him for just a few moments would confirm that. Perhaps it was his humility. Asked, in some non-public, social setting, what he did for a living, Richard was just as likely to answer that he "worked" in education. Pressed further, he'd probably acknowledge being a "teacher" at the law school. Only when pushed still further would he concede he served as dean but one, he'd be lightning quick to add, serving alongside such a gifted faculty who were compiling a tradition of classroom excellence and exercising the honor of teaching such truly wonderful students. Credit-sharing came naturally to Richard.

Perhaps it was a laser-focus that few others could replicate; when you were in a conversation with Richard Gershon, you and he were all of life that existed on the planet. His attention was singular and undistracted. And every conversation was always mutual: Richard never "held court." Regardless of the topic, every discussion quickly turned to him asking you questions with unfeigned interest about you, your family, your professional and personal life, your interests, and your experiences. You knew he was listening too, because later, sometimes even years later, he'd

recount some kernel of information you had shared with him that he remembered so well.

Make no mistake, though—Richard was kind, generous, and inviting, but he was no pushover. He was blazingly intelligent, with a clear vision and both the ability and experience to pursue it. But he never led by his “say-so.” Instead, faculty meetings in Charleston were a model of democracy, and Richard would let deliberations play out organically. Yet Richard’s voice was always a deeply regarded one. When he interjected his perspective into a debate, it was never (as I recall it now) presented as an “ask.” Instead, the room would quiet as he spoke and everyone listened. Invariably, the power of his logic and the wisdom of his experience would form a consensus that carried the day.

I had the great privilege of a long friendship with Richard. It was a friendship I treasured. I remember one of our first meetings about twenty years ago. My wife and I, both lawyers from the north, were considering leaving our longstanding law jobs for a new adventure in Charleston so that I could pursue my quest to teach law. Richard set up a breakfast meeting for us in a cozy, quiet restaurant in the historic district of the city. Our conversation was informative and thoroughly enjoyable. After a while, my wife and I noticed that our breakfast had carried on far longer than we realized, and we both apologized for encroaching on Richard’s undoubtedly very busy morning as the law school’s chief executive. With a dismissive smile, Richard said that this time with us was the most important commitment on his calendar and ordered more coffee. After breakfast, my wife and I walked away convinced. This was the place—and the culture—we wanted to join. We remained close friends with Richard and his wife Donna throughout the years that followed.

Charleston Law’s second dean was also a close friend of Richard’s. Reflecting on the law school’s creation, Dean Andy Abrams remarked that the goal back then had been to build the law school we all wish we had attended. What a wonderfully perfect pursuit.

The nondescript storefront at 560 King Street is gone today. In fact, the whole block has long since been replaced by a sprawling, 300-room hotel. But the law school is not far, in a three-story building down the street, four blocks away from where

it all began, still in the heart of the stately, historic city of Charleston. It brims with law students whose daily, lived experiences convince them that they are part of something distinctive, learning their future profession at a special place imbued with a rare educational culture.

Perhaps, then, it is fair to say that Richard Gershon never really left us.