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Louise McKinney: Mentor and Friend

Ann McGowan Porath†

It doesn’t seem that long ago that Louise McKinney began her career as an attorney at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. In fact, the year was 1978 and Louise was in the downtown Legal Aid office working with the Bar Advocacy Project, providing representation and support for people with mental disabilities. Lucky for me, when I began my placement at Legal Aid as a Heber Smith fellow, Louise was already a supervising attorney, and I was assigned to her charge. The impact Louise has had on my career, both then and now, cannot be overstated. Her confident dedication to the needs of low-income people and to giving them a voice still resonates with me today and is very much the reason that I have continued my career in public interest law at Legal Aid.

When I think of Louise, I can’t help but recall a cold, damp Cleveland day in May 1981 when Louise and her husband invited the law clerks to their home for a cookout. As the grill was fired up, we gathered around the TV to cheer on the Indians in what turned out to be quite an exciting match-up with the Toronto Blue Jays. Two things stand out in my mind from that day: Ed McKinney’s perfect mint juleps and the Indians’ Lenny Barker securing his place in baseball history by pitching a perfect game!

Those early days were just the beginnings of a close personal and professional friendship that Louise and I still share. I have often looked to Louise for guidance and support and have admired her ability to successfully balance the components of her life as a female attorney and a mother. Since Louise is the mother of two sons, as am I, she became an obvious role model who never lost sight of the importance of family. In fact, family has always been most important in Louise’s life.

In 1988, Louise’s husband received a Fulbright Scholarship to teach at the University of Botswana. As her husband left for Africa, Louise stayed behind for a short while to make sure her son got off to college, to sell the family car, and to take care of other affairs. Because the McKinneys had already rented out their family home, Louise came to live with us in University Heights before leaving to join her husband. My boys, Matt and Brendan, were still young and quite pleased with the adventure of having a new housemate. Even as

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many years have passed, the boys still affectionately refer to the back room of that house as “Louise’s room.”

Louise’s professional energy and dedication to bringing the rule of law to help low-income individuals truly know no boundaries. While accompanying her husband in Africa, she took the initiative to begin a clinical program required for undergraduate law students at the University of Botswana. Not only did she help repair an old trailer, which was the clinic’s location, but she also developed a system of supervision, summer externships, and seminars to benefit the students for years to come.

As the constant adventurer, Louise returned to the University of Botswana on a Fulbright Scholarship in 2007. She worked to augment the same clinical program she had begun nearly a decade before and helped to set up Botswana’s first legal aid program. To do so, Louise accessed United Nations program funds, which were used to organize a workshop, hire a consultant, and develop a plan for legal aid. As many of us know, travel helps put our own lives in perspective. Louise’s experiences in Botswana surely broadened her view of the law and upheld her appreciation that each individual is important—no matter their education, economic means, or on which continent they reside.

Back in Cleveland, Louise brought her caring, thoughtful manner and her abilities as a teacher to Case Western Reserve University School of Law. Her goal was to educate top-rate lawyers and to instill in them the importance of public interest work. I see those as the same qualities she inspired in me. When you worked with Louise, you knew she was not just helping you with the legal issues but also teaching you how to become a better, more caring attorney.

Louise continued to maintain a strong connection with Legal Aid while at CWRU. One of her first initiatives at the law school was to start a health law clinic, a perfect outgrowth of her disability law experience at Legal Aid. She taught her students about the importance of public interest law and of their responsibility as attorneys to provide pro bono work. Louise strengthened the relationship between Legal Aid and CWRU School of Law. Today the law school is a valuable partner with Legal Aid because it accepts case referrals for the clinic and sends us outstanding law clerks and volunteers.

In her online CWRU bio, Louise is quoted as saying, “Most law students come to law school wanting to ‘do good and do well.’” Louise is a true example of that passage. She has certainly done “well” as an outstanding attorney, and she has done plenty of “good” for our Northeast Ohio community and for people across the globe. Her legal career has been an answer to a question most frequently asked by those at Legal Aid: “How can I help the most vulnerable?” By example and mentoring, she has taught me, as well as countless others, how to best serve clients by responding with both empathy and firmness.
My thoughts of Louise often reflect on her grace, dedication, warmth, humor, and humanity. She is one of the most positive people I know. She refuses to let naysayers get her down. Louise McKinney is one of a kind, and she is now the first female professor and first clinical professor to retire from the Case Western Reserve University School of Law. Her time spent as an attorney, teacher, ambassador, advocate, mentor, and friend is much like the ballgame we cheered on together in May of 1981—perfect!