Laura Chisolm: Colleague, Peer, Friend

Jonathan L. Entin

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/caselrev

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/caselrev/vol62/iss3/3
TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR
LAURA CHISOLM

LAURA CHISOLM: COLLEAGUE, PEER, FRIEND

Jonathan L. Entin

Laura Chisolm and I joined the faculty of Case Western Reserve University School of Law at the same time. She was my oldest and one of my closest friends on the faculty. Our friendship dates back to before we officially started teaching, when Laura and Mac welcomed Carol and me to Cleveland during our house-hunting trip. For our first couple of years, Laura and I held each other’s hand as we learned how to teach Property. I’ll never forget our first day of teaching. We had decided to begin with Johnson v. M’Intosh, an 1823 Supreme Court case in which the basic issue was who owned a large tract of Eastern Illinois. One party traced his claim to the U.S. government and before that to the British crown; the other traced his claim to the Illinois Indian tribe. You don’t have to know any law to figure out

1 Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, School of Law, and Professor of Law and Political Science, Case Western Reserve University. This is a slightly revised version of the remarks that I gave at the celebration of Laura’s life in May 2011.
2 21 U.S. (8 Wheat.) 543 (1823).
3 See id. at 560 (“That the lands described and granted in and by this patent, are situated within the State of Illinois . . . purporting to be granted and conveyed to Louis Viviat . . . and that William M’Intosh . . . entered upon these lands under and by virtue of his patent, and became possessed thereof before the institution of this suit.”).
4 Id. at 543–44, 559–60.
5 Id. at 550–54.
who won,\(^5\) but the opinion addresses many significant legal issues that have continuing relevance nearly two centuries later.\(^6\)

About an hour before class, Laura stopped by my office to tell me about her dream the night before: that she had asked her class who the plaintiff was in the Johnson case and nobody knew! We had a good laugh, then went our separate ways. Laura, having had her nightmare, knew better than to ask who the plaintiff was. I, on the other hand, did not. The student I called on to state the complex facts did well enough until, without thinking, I asked, “By the way, who was the plaintiff?” Laura was right—not one of my 120 students could identify the plaintiff. We had another good laugh after class when I told her what had happened, but, loyal friend that she was, Laura never, by word, gesture, or even arched eyebrow, said, “I told you so.”

As we gained confidence, we began to discuss teaching in more sophisticated ways. Not only did we talk about Property, but we also explored topics in our other courses. Laura taught Nonprofit Organizations and Legislation, and I taught the First Amendment and Administrative Law. Her courses and mine dealt with similar questions but from different perspectives. Our teaching and our scholarship benefitted enormously from years of conversations in which we probed, challenged, and helped each other sort out such questions as what kinds of restrictions the government may put on political activities by nonprofit organizations and how courts should interpret complex and frequently ambiguous statutes.

As we began to write, we shared drafts. This was an uneven, almost an unfair, exchange: I always got a lot more help from Laura’s comments on my work than she got from mine about hers. That was because, from the beginning, it was apparent that Laura was a star. She was astonishingly intelligent—colleagues who taught her still use her as their standard for evaluating students—and she wrote elegantly. It was no wonder that she had a huge impact on her field from the appearance of her first article.\(^7\) I only wish that she had written more than she did. But she was active in a wide range of professional activities where she had a significant impact, including the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws,

---

\(^5\) Lest there be any confusion, the party claiming through the U.S. government prevailed. Id. at 604–05.

\(^6\) Among those issues are the legal status of American Indians and the relationship between courts and the government of which they are a part. The case also featured some influential figures: Chief Justice John Marshall wrote the opinion, id. at 571; Daniel Webster argued on behalf of the party claiming through the Indian tribe, id. at 562.

the American Bar Association’s Tax Section, the National Center on Philanthropy and the Law, and the Nonprofit Forum. Further, she played a pivotal role in the university’s Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations. Most recently, she was the founding director of the law school’s Center for Social Justice.

Laura was never into ego games or other superficialities. She had keen, tactical shrewdness that enabled her to avoid confrontation while making her point. For example, because of the law school’s convoluted office-allocation formula, Laura did not get a window office until two years after she got tenure. That long-standing formula did not accommodate people like her who had interrupted their education for an extended period. Laura never directly challenged the formula, but she did suggest that we allocate offices through a bake-off. Anyone who ever had the privilege of eating anything she prepared will understand that she could have gotten any office anywhere under such a system.

Then there was her service on the university’s Library of the Future Committee about fifteen years ago. The administrator who chaired that committee believed that books and traditional scholarly journals were (or soon would be) obsolete, so he wanted to establish a campus-wide fiber optic network that would ultimately replace what he derisively called “the warehouse for books.” At one committee meeting, this man proudly announced that the law school was now the first fully wired building on campus. Afterward, Laura told him that she could not access the new network, to which this bureaucrat replied, “That’s a lie.” Laura politely asked him to help her learn what she was doing wrong, so he went to her office and discovered that he too could not log into the network. Things got fixed in a hurry after that.

Still, behind her typically placid demeanor lurked a caustic wit. For instance, Laura once sent me a note about a silly memo from the dean: “You don’t suppose,” she had written, that some obvious fact “had, to use perhaps too lofty a term, slipped the dean’s mind?”

Often her humor was more subtle: her office contained several art works depicting cows—a homage to a Property casebook that we used for several years, which began with a series of cases involving cattle eating crops on adjoining farmland.  

My last conversation with Laura will stay with me. I called to let her know that some of the leading scholars in the law of nonprofit

---

organizations had heard that she was having medical problems and wanted to commission a series of tributes and articles in her honor. She was overwhelmed that anyone would do such a thing for her. Those papers appear in this issue of the *Case Western Reserve Law Review*. It has been a labor of love for all of us.

On behalf of the students you taught with such dedication, the faculty members you supported so strongly, and the law school you served with such grace, thank you, Laura. We’ll miss you, but we won’t forget how much you’ve meant to us.