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LAURA’S CONTRIBUTIONS

Wilbur C. Leatherberry†

Those who participate in the activities of any enterprise contribute to it in various ways. Some contributions are major, some minor, and they have a positive or negative impact. In an academic enterprise like the law school, students; faculty; staff; and alumni all make contributions.

Laura made a major positive impact on the law school in her years as a student, alumna, and faculty member.

I first met Laura when she was enrolled in my Contracts class in her first year as a law student. She was one of many students in that class who were older than the average 1L. She began her college career at the University of Maryland but interrupted her studies for family reasons after marrying Mac. She resumed work on her degree as an undergrad here after Mac took a teaching position at Case.

Sometime early in her first semester in law school, I discovered that she was a bit ahead of her classmates in her understanding of the course materials. I cannot recall whether she impressed me when I first called on her for a case or when she asked a question or volunteered a comment. I suspect, though, that it was when I chose her to recite. She did not volunteer frequently, nor did she often ask questions. Some of the older students tend to dominate class discussions in the early weeks because they are not as intimidated as their younger colleagues. Laura was certainly not intimidated, but she probably did not have many questions—at least not many I could have easily answered—and felt no need to “perform” for the assembled audience.

I quickly found that she sometimes volunteered to help me undo confusion that I was causing. Although I had been teaching for several years, I had taught Contracts only for a year or two. Laura

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always intervened in a helpful, non-threatening way—never putting down fellow students or making me look or feel as confused as I often was. She had a way of cutting through the fog and helping us all see the important issues and arguments more clearly.

Those classroom experiences meant that I was not surprised to find her at the top of the class on the exam, at the top of her entering class that year, and still at the top when she graduated.

Given her exceptional record, Laura could have gone off to a major law firm where she would no doubt have impressed the partners with her brilliance, just as she had impressed her teachers. She chose instead to work for a nonprofit child advocacy group, sacrificing income and status to work for social justice.

Her commitment to the nonprofit sector continued when she came to the law school as a junior faculty member. She taught Property and Wills and Trusts—courses that a former colleague who taught those courses called “the law of the rich.” She also taught a nonprofit organizations course here in the law school, as well as in the Mandel Center’s Master of Nonprofit Organizations program, which prepares people to run such organizations.

When the law school established the Center for Social Justice, Laura was the natural choice to become its director. She was always dedicated to teaching and mentoring her students. The Center provided a vehicle through which she could guide, and find support for, students interested in pursuing a career path directed toward societal objectives like alleviation of poverty, ending discrimination, and protecting the environment. Sadly, her work with the Center lasted just a short time because of her illness.

As a teacher and a scholar, Laura’s contributions to the law school, the university, and the nonprofit organizations field were extraordinary. From the beginning, she was clearly one of our best classroom teachers. Early in her career, Dean Gellhorn asked me to read and give Laura comments on a draft of an article she was preparing to send out for publication. At that time she was teaching a course in legislation, a course I had taught for several years. I do not recall much about the article. It was probably about the tax treatment of nonprofit organizations. What I do recall is that as I read the piece, I came across a textual footnote that had the same effect on me that some of her classroom comments had had. The footnote had to do with how courts interpret—or should interpret—statutes. Because of the legislation course, I had done considerable reading on that subject. In that one footnote, probably not more than one page long, Laura clearly and cogently analyzed the issues and presented the best
treatment of that subject I had ever seen. When we consider academic work by colleagues in the tenure process, we ask whether the work makes a valuable contribution to the literature. That footnote alone made a contribution well beyond that made by the typical article. It was valuable both for the quality of the analysis and for the clarity of expression because Laura was both a deep thinker and an exceptional writer. Few law professors, indeed few people in any field, could match her ability as a writer.

On the other hand, few colleagues could match the clutter in her office. The offices of Jonathan Entin and the late Professor Junger come to mind, but even they did not surpass her on this score. Somehow, though, like everything else she did, she could find her way through the clutter to produce what she needed.

Laura served on numerous law school and university committees. We worked together on the law school’s Budget Committee during the last year or two before illness took her away. At that time and now, the school faced serious issues about how to match revenues to expenditures while maintaining or improving the quality of the students we attract and the teaching and scholarship we do. The faculty has struggled with these priority issues for many years. The committee dug into the budget data to present options to the faculty and the dean for reallocating budget priorities to align with strategic objectives. As always, Laura was practical, reasonable, and able to work with faculty colleagues with conflicting views. She was a calming force when disagreements deteriorated into conflicts. Her influence has been sorely missed since her illness prevented her from continuing her work.

Finally, allow me a word about Laura as an alumna. At graduation ceremonies, speakers always entreat graduates to seek opportunities to use their talents productively, to do quality work, and to strive to make an impact both where they work and in the community around them. Faculty and alumni take pride in the accomplishments of graduates as they enter practice and rise in their firms and fields. Rarely, as in Laura’s case, does an alumnus return to advance the interests of the school and the alumni so directly and so effectively. She taught many of those who graduated in the last quarter of a century and was an outstanding role model. Her brilliance, her work ethic, and her humor were well known to classmates and other alumni.

Laura lives on in the memories of alumni, faculty colleagues, staff members, and others whose lives she touched. She is irreplaceable,
but each of us can strive to work and live as she did. That would be the most fitting memorial.