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LAURA CHISOLM: AN ADVOCATE AND ALLY

B. Jessie Hill[†]

I worked with Laura Chisolm primarily in my capacity as Associate Director of the Center for Social Justice, of which she was the founding Director. Yet—as is probably true of many of my colleagues at the law school—I came to know and admire her most as a fellow faculty member, friend, and mentor. I will never forget the many kindnesses from Laura—not least of all the baby gift she sent me after my older daughter was born. It was a beautiful, fuzzy, hand-knit sweater that kept both my older daughter and my younger daughter warm for, literally, years. Where on earth such an accomplished and busy person found time to knit a sweater, I have no idea, but this sort of thing was typical, given Laura’s thoughtfulness, her overwhelming kindness, and her capacious talents.

Laura was a reliable advocate and trustworthy friend to her more junior colleagues, and she especially looked out for the other women on the faculty. Though Laura never went looking for a fight, you always knew which side she was on—that was the right side, and usually the side of the more vulnerable party. Though Laura was a warm colleague and a caring teacher, she was also a fierce advocate for women, for her junior colleagues, for students, and for the less fortunate.

I think many people associate me with Laura primarily because of the Center for Social Justice. The Center was a perfect fit for Laura, and she for it. She was extraordinarily energetic and committed as its leader, and among the many tragic aspects of Laura’s passing at an early age is that she never got to fully realize her vision for the Center—and we never got a chance to see where it would go under her stewardship. Yet she made her mark, and the Center’s work bears

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many indicia of her vision. Most of all, this is visible in the Center's primary focus on students. As Director, Laura was completely focused on what the Center meant to students and what it could do for them. For example, her expenditure of Center funds could be downright parsimonious, *except* in spending for students. She wanted to save every available penny for them—in particular to fund student summer public interest fellowships. Under Laura's leadership, I am proud to say, there was a time when nearly every eligible student with a qualifying summer job could receive some funding from the Center.

But Laura's vision stretched beyond enabling students to afford to spend their summer in public interest work; the Center's real mission, as she saw it, was to create a community. As she rightly recognized, there was no "home" in the law school for students who cared about, and wanted to work toward, social justice. In taking the reins of the Center, Laura did not care about empire building or flashy programming. She cared most about creating a community for students who—it turns out—were desperately seeking one. She wanted to create a welcoming space for a group that had long felt marginalized. Thus, it is not surprising that under Laura's leadership, an extraordinarily dedicated and vibrant student organization—Law Students for Social Justice—sprang up and sprang into action. These students continue to meet regularly and to arrange an impressive array of pro bono projects, speakers, and other social justice-oriented programs. Together with law students and the post-graduate Vista Fellows that Laura managed to secure for the Center, Laura oversaw the initiation of the Center's involvement with the Ohio Benefits Bank at the East Cleveland Public Library, where law students screen and assist community residents in applying for public benefits such as food stamps and heating assistance.

It has been gratifying for me to be involved in all of the Center's good work and to have had the opportunity to assist Laura with it. Ironically, though, I felt that I did not get the chance to work as closely with Laura on Center matters as I would have liked. For most of the time that Laura was running the Center, I was an untenured member of the faculty, and she was fiercely protective of me. (There it is again—that word "fierce." It is a word that fits her quiet but determined style particularly well.) Of course, Laura was not much of a delegator to begin with. She was exactly the opposite of the kind of leader who would saddle others with all the work and then take credit for it. She had difficulty taking credit for all she did—in fact, if there was any aspect of administering the Center at which she did not excel, it would have to be the nearly unavoidable but unsavory self-

promotion that nearly every administrator and leader has to engage in. Laura was humble. She rarely placed demands on me but always insisted on sharing credit with me, even when that credit was not exactly due.

Finally, a word about Laura as a fellow teacher. Laura confided to me once that, even after her decades as a law professor, she still felt nervous before teaching each class. At the time, I was a brand new assistant professor, and I remember finding this absolutely astounding, especially given Laura's reputation as a wonderful, skilled, but also laid-back and engaging teacher. Now, of course, I see that this admission, too, demonstrates her humility, as well as her profound respect for the students whose education was in her hands.

It is not hard to see why Laura was so admired. Her deep dedication to students, combined with her obvious smarts and genuine humility, are no doubt what made her an excellent teacher, an inspiring Center Director, and, of course, a treasured colleague. I will miss her.