Louise McKinney: Advocate, Activist, Mentor

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Professor Louise McKinney has worked tirelessly for those without meaningful access to the courts—locally, nationally, and internationally. She is a powerful and empowering woman who has guided by example. As she retires, it’s important to reflect on her contributions to our law school and to her many communities.

Professor McKinney joined the clinical faculty in 1989 just after serving as the Director of the Clinical Education Programme, Department of Law of the University of Botswana. She’s the first member of the law school faculty to be named a Fulbright Scholar. She taught clinical methodology and co-sponsored a student-run legal aid project at the University of Nairobi in 1998–1999 as a Fulbright Senior Scholar. From 1996 to 2000 Professor McKinney served as a consultant for law schools in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania through the African Law Initiative-Clinical Partnerships Project of the American Bar Association. Again in 2007–2008 Professor McKinney was named a Fulbright Scholar and spent the year at the University of Botswana in Gaborone upgrading the mandatory Clinical Education Program in collaboration with others in the Law Department and in the legal community.

Professor McKinney began her legal career at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, first as a staff attorney in the Downtown Neighborhood Office and then as a staff attorney and ultimately director of the Bar Advocacy Project. She represented group homes and helped establish the right for disabled residents to move into neighborhoods with the highest quality of life. She participated in the lawsuit to address the horrendous conditions in the East Cleveland jail, again giving voice to the invisible and powerless. At the law school, she has championed loan forgiveness and worked to enable students with high debt to take public interest jobs. She worked with Eve Biskind to create the Biskind Fellowships, which also encouraged students to work in the public interest. She taught poverty law, making sure that focus was prominent in our curriculum. In recognition of these contributions, Professor McKinney’s former students chose her for the Law Alumni Association’s distinguished teacher award in 2006.

Professor McKinney has always taken a leadership role in numerous community organizations. Among many others are president of the board of directors of the YWCA of Greater Cleveland, vice president of the board of directors of the Deaconess Community Foundation,

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president of the board of directors of the Long Term Care Ombudsman of Cleveland, and member of the board of directors of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

The mission statement for the University of Nairobi School of Law clearly reflects Louise McKinney’s goals for legal education. It says that a world-class law school must foster an intellectual culture that bridges theory with practice; contribute to social, economic, and cultural development; and, through intellectual products, enhance the quality of life for the people of Kenya and for humanity. That’s the mission Louise McKinney set for us right here in Cleveland.

Louise McKinney is not just a lawyer, community activist, teacher, and valued mentor. Her impact on the law school has been immense. Our mission as she retires is to continue to hear her voice reminding all of us and our students that one of the most important roles a lawyer plays is to empower and give voice to the powerless.