

THE LEGEND OF DEBBIE BELL: A SKINNY ON SERVICE AND IMPACT

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As a first-year law student at the University of Mississippi in 1979, The Debbie Bell skinny¹ was the stuff of myth and legend – a pure distillation of legal reasoning and analysis for each course in the 1L curriculum. I had never seen it, but I had heard of it. Some claimed to have seen one, while others fabulously declared they possessed one. If you could lay your hands on a Debbie Bell skinny, you were golden–bound to repeat the same academic achievement rumored of its author – an Ole Miss Law alum who had just graduated three months prior who set the curve in almost every course in law school.

Professor Deborah Hodges Bell is a legend, not only as a law student and academic at her alma mater, the University of Mississippi School of Law, but also as one who sought to provide access to justice through pedagogy, scholarship, practice, and public policy.

Professor Bell graduated from the University of Mississippi School of law *magna cum laude* in May of 1979 after serving as the Editor-in-Chief of the *Mississippi Law Journal*. After graduation, she clerked for the renowned Judge Elbert P. Tuttle, Sr. on the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. She then began working as a staff attorney with the Atlanta Legal Aid Society before returning to Oxford in 1981 to become one of the youngest law faculty members in the history of the university.

On the law school faculty, Professor Bell taught Commercial Law, Property, Family Law, Housing Law, Lawyering Skills, and

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¹ At UM Law in the late 1970s and early 1980s, “skinny” was the term applied to notes taken in law school classes that had been distilled, edited, and organized to study for the fear-provoking three-hour sequestered closed book essay exams. The term survives, as students today continue to create, share, and covet the best “skinnies.”

Poverty Law. But her primary area of academic and scholarly expertise was family law. She literally wrote the book on family law in Mississippi.² *Bell on Mississippi Family Law*, first published in 2005³, and continuously updated since, is used by family law practitioners and chancellors alike. Additionally, she published numerous scholarly articles on a wide array of family law topics⁴ and presented annual practice-oriented family law continuing legal education presentations throughout the state for more than three decades.⁵

Thanks to Professor Bell, generations of University of Mississippi School of Law graduates have had the opportunity to develop practical skills and provide access to justice through clinical legal education. Beginning in 1992, she founded and directed numerous live-client clinics at the law school.⁶ Throughout her academic tenure, she was the Founder and Director of the UM Pro Bono Initiative, the UM Civil Legal Clinic, and the UM Housing Law Clinic. In 2013, she oversaw the reorganization of all the law school's clinics into a single operation and became the Associate Dean for Clinical Programs.

Additionally, Professor Bell became Interim Dean of the Law School from 2015–2017 and helped the law school stabilize after the precipitous national law school enrollment decline from 2011 through 2016.

Professor Bell has not been content to only provide learning opportunities for students and members of the bench and bar. She actively assisted all three branches of the Mississippi state

² See DEBORAH HODGES BELL, *BELL ON MISSISSIPPI FAMILY LAW* (1st ed. 2005).

³ BELL, *supra* note 2.

⁴ See Deborah H. Bell, *The Cost of Fault-Based Divorce*, 82 MISS. L.J. SUPRA 131 (2013); Deborah H. Bell, *Family Law at the Turn of the Century*, 71 MISS. L. J. 781 (2002); Deborah H. Bell, *Child Support Orders: The Common Law Framework- Part II.*, 69 MISS. L.J. 1063 (2000); Deborah H. Bell, *Child Support Order: The Federal-State Partnership - Part I.*, 69 MISS. L.J. 1063 (1999).

⁵ See UNIV. MISS. SCH. L., *Deborah H. Bell*, <https://law.olemiss.edu/faculty-directory/deborah-h-bell/> [<https://perma.cc/745X-NA7G>] (click the “Download CV” button below the picture of Professor Bell to retrieve a PDF of Professor Bell’s Curriculum Vitae, scroll to page 3 for ‘Selected Presentations’) (last visited Feb. 29, 2024).

⁶ See Deborah H. Bell, *The Law Clinic as a Regional Center: Looking for Solutions to Rural southern Housing Problems*, 42 WASH U. J. URB. & CONTEMP. L. 101 (1992); Deborah H. Bell, *The University of Mississippi Housing Law Clinic: A Local Law Office and Regional Law Center*, 61 MISS. L.J. 501 (1991).

government develop effective public policy. Professor Bell served as Counsel to the Mississippi Governor's Housing Task Force (1988-1989), as a member of the Mississippi Gender Fairness Task Force (1999-2002), and as a member of the Domestic Violence Task Force (2008-2010).

Professor Bell assisted the Mississippi Supreme Court Rules Committees in drafting the Amendment to Rule 503 of the Mississippi Rules of Evidence involving the waiver of medical privilege in actions involving children. She aided the Mississippi legislature in drafting the Mississippi Residential Landlord-Tenant Act,⁷ the Mississippi Home Corporation Act,⁸ the Mississippi Vulnerable Persons Act,⁹ the Domestic Violence Custody Presumption Amendment,¹⁰ the Sex Offender Registration for Child-Related Volunteer Activities Act,¹¹ Jurisdictional Amendments to the Mississippi Adoption Act,¹² and Amendments to the Mississippi Divorce Grounds statute in 2017.¹³

Unsurprisingly, Professor Bell's remarkable life of public service has been recognized with numerous honors and awards. She received the University of Mississippi Law Faculty Public Service Award in 2005, the Mississippi Bar President's Award and Outstanding Woman Lawyer of the Year Award in 2006, the Mississippi Bar Women's Association Susie Blue Buchanan Award in 2009, the Chief Justice Award from the Mississippi Supreme Court in 2017, and the Law Alumni of the Year award from the University of Mississippi School of law in 2017.

This year, Debbie Bell's remarkable contributions to legal education, the legal profession, and public policy are recognized through her induction into the University of Mississippi School of Law Hall of Fame. A professional life of achievement that began in law school, setting the standard by which subsequent generations of students would be measured, has now been recognized by this

⁷ See Deborah Bell, *The Mississippi Landlord-Tenant Act of 1991*, 61 MISS. L. J. 527, 564-78 (1991); see also, MISS. CODE ANN. §§ 89-8-1 to -45 (1991).

⁸ See MISS. CODE ANN. §§ 43-33-701 to -797 (1989).

⁹ See MISS. CODE ANN. §§ 43-47-1 to -47 (1999).

¹⁰ See MISS. CODE ANN. § 93-5-23 (2003).

¹¹ See MISS. CODE ANN. § 45-33-32 (2004).

¹² See MISS. CODE ANN. § 93-17-3 (2020).

¹³ See MISS. CODE ANN. § 93-5-1 (2017).

most prestigious honor the law school bestows on its graduates. The real Debbie Bell “skinny” is a life of service and impact.