

## DEAN DEBBIE BELL: EXTRAORDINARY ADMINISTRATOR

*Jack Wade Nowlin\**

Dean Deborah “Debbie” Bell has had a brilliant career—as a classroom teacher, a scholar, a clinician, a lawyer, an administrator, and much more. She is an alumna of the University of Mississippi School of Law, class of 1979, and a true UM Law “Hall-of-Famer” — an exemplary representative of the very best that the school has had to offer to the profession and the world. She has served the Law School with the highest distinction, and her deep devotion to her alma mater has been evident throughout her career, including her more than thirty-five years of service as a law professor at UM.

As a professional and as a person, Debbie Bell is strong, kind, compassionate, humane, and empathetic—with a committed social conscience and a powerful drive to do the right thing. Debbie is also brilliant, with a tremendous amount of common sense and a graceful common touch. She has dual advantages of outstanding judgment and a wonderful sense of humor. Debbie was a tireless worker at the Law School who always put people first. Not surprisingly, she has been much loved by her fellow alumni, students, faculty, staff, and clients throughout her professional life. I am delighted that I had the privilege of serving on the UM law faculty with Debbie for seventeen years.

Debbie Bell has had a multifaceted career, and I will write about her primarily as an administrator, leaving for others the discussion of her work as a teacher, scholar, clinician, etc. I was fortunate to serve in administration with Debbie Bell, first as a fellow associate dean and later as a senior associate dean when

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Debbie served as interim dean. These were very memorable times at the Law School.

In 2013, Debbie was appointed as Associate Dean for Clinical Programs by Dean Richard Gershon, another very kind and talented administrator, who also appointed me as Associate Dean for Faculty Development the year before. The three of us worked closely together as a leadership team and developed a real camaraderie along with Associate Dean Matthew Hall as we all worked hard to advance a law school that we loved. Debbie was a model Associate Dean for Clinical Programs—bringing much-needed focus, enthusiasm, and energy to the clinics and a wide range of advice, insight, and good humor to the entire leadership team.

Then, in 2015, Debbie stepped up during a challenging time for the Law School to serve as the two-year Interim Dean while we continued to work through budgetary issues arising from the nationwide downturn in law school applications. It was a new era when older law school budget models no longer worked, and schools had to adapt quickly to new realities for enrollments, scholarships, staffing, and other expenditures. When asked to serve as interim dean, Debbie reached out to me, and I readily agreed to serve as a senior associate dean for her two-year tenure as interim dean. I knew Debbie would be an outstanding leader, and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to work with her as a “go-to” lieutenant during that extraordinary time. There was much important work to be done.

As Interim Dean, Debbie was just as outstanding as expected, and her administration was a great success in the face of many challenges. She shepherded the Law School through new budget realities and did much else to advance the school and its mission, including comprehensive strategic planning.

Debbie had all the qualities one would want in a leader. She was patient and understanding. She listened to everyone and made sure that all felt heard. She excelled at practical problem-solving, especially as we worked through the Law School’s finances. Debbie knew when to delegate and when to supervise closely. She was never afraid to roll up her sleeves and jump into a messy project. Debbie also had a good feel for when to be firm and when to let

something go. Her sense of humor also came in handy with all the things that come across a dean's desk.

Everyone, I think, wanted Debbie Bell to apply for the permanent deanship at the Law School, but that was simply not what she was called to do at that time—with her family, her other commitments, and her longstanding interest in stepping back from fulltime teaching after so many years of faithful and outstanding service to the Law School.

So, under Debbie's careful and energetic leadership, we all worked hard to improve the school and prepare the groundwork to successfully recruit a new dean. Our aspiration, as I recall it, was simple enough: solve all the problems we could so the school would be in the very best position to hire a wonderful new dean who could come to Ole Miss without undue worry over the school's finances or any other issues. With Debbie's leadership providing the foundation, the school did just that, and we were able to recruit an outstanding hire, Dean Susan Duncan, who took the school to new heights over her six-year tenure as dean.

Debbie Bell, in sum, was an extraordinary administrator—especially as the Interim Dean who, at a pivotal moment for the Law School, navigated real challenges to put UM Law on a great course forward to new successes. Significantly, Debbie is also an exemplar of the advantages of UM Law's ready willingness to hire its own alumni as faculty. UM Law faculty alums included not only Debbie Bell but many of the most engaged senior members of the law faculty when I was first hired in 2000 as an assistant professor, including Dean Sam Davis, Karen Green, Guff Abbott, Bob Weems, John Robin Bradley, and Larry Pittman. This has been a true strength of the Law School, which has carried on through today as a glance at a list of current law faculty confirms, and has conferred countless benefits on the school and its students. Debbie Bell's lifetime of service to the Law School alone has had an incalculable impact, and UM Law owes her a tremendous debt of gratitude for her work and leadership.

