

DEAN DEBBIE BELL: A MENTOR AND A FRIEND

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“The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order . . . : it is the continuous thread of revelation.” – Eudora Welty¹

In the sum total of the years of one’s life, my interactions with Professor Deborah Hodges Bell occupy just a sliver of time, likely shorter than is the case for some of the other contributors to this tribute issue. Notwithstanding their brevity, these moments carry a special significance in the “continuous thread of revelation.”² As I reflect on my time as a student at The University of Mississippi School of Law, the opportunity to get to know and work with Professor Bell was one of the highlights. She continues to be a tremendous role model and an inspiration, and I truly appreciate her mentorship and friendship.

Most of us in the Ole Miss Law School class of 2016 knew Professor Bell as “Dean Bell,” because she served as interim dean during our 3L year. All of us, myself included, admired Dean Bell for her skilled leadership, her wisdom, and her immense knowledge of the law. She literally wrote the book on family law in Mississippi.³ She also spearheaded major positive developments at the law school, including serving as a beloved professor and founding and fostering the law school’s clinical programs.

Not only is Dean Bell an individual of great caliber, but she is also genuinely kind and down to earth with a keen sense of humor. One of my earliest law school memories of interacting with Dean Bell was when a group of fellow law students and I won a lunch

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¹ EUDORA WELTY, *ONE WRITER’S BEGINNINGS* 93 (Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed. 2020).

² *Id.*

³ DEBORAH HODGES BELL, *BELL ON MISSISSIPPI FAMILY LAW* (3d ed. 2020).

with Dean Bell in the Public Interest Law Foundation (“PILF”) fundraising auction. During a lovely lunch at Bouré on the Square, we laughed and enjoyed a great conversation. Dean Bell shared stories of her experiences and sage advice about law school and life. Though she had achieved great success in life after her law school years, Dean Bell seemed to remember what it was like to be in a law student’s shoes. In the best way possible, she seemed to us like a wiser equal as opposed to a superior; she listened carefully and valued our opinions.

I later had the privilege of working with Dean Bell on multiple occasions while I served on the *Mississippi Law Journal* editorial board. She was always willing to offer her time and her words of wisdom on a variety of *Journal*-related matters. Dean Bell also provided valuable guidance and support in the *Mississippi Law Journal*’s planning for our volume’s Voting Rights Act Symposium. In particular, I recall meeting with Dean Bell early in the planning process to discuss how the *Journal* could bring the symposium to fruition. She actively listened, asked thoughtful questions, and shared with me the key takeaways from what she had learned while planning a symposium in the past. I came away from that meeting encouraged and eager to get to work with my fellow *Journal* members to make the symposium a reality.

Dean Bell played a pivotal role in another *Mississippi Law Journal* endeavor that year. My class’s volume of the *Journal* was fortunate to commemorate the centennial of the first woman graduate of The University of Mississippi School of Law in 1915: Bessie Young. To mark this milestone, we published an issue highlighting the progress that Mississippi women lawyers have made since 1915. In addition to an article by Kris Gilliland, Bette Bradley, and Ellie Campbell that delved into the stories of notable Mississippi women lawyers during the first half of the twentieth century,⁴ the issue included essays by such extraordinary women as Aleita M. Sullivan Fitch,⁵ Constance Slaughter-Harvey,⁶ Mary

⁴ Kris Gilliland et al., “Dared to Enter a ‘Man’s World’”: *Mississippi Women Lawyers, 1914-1964*, 85 MISS. L.J. 1479 (2017).

⁵ Aleita M. Sullivan Fitch, *My Journey in the Legal Profession*, 85 MISS. L.J. 1573 (2017).

⁶ Constance Slaughter-Harvey, *Tribute to Nausead Lyvelle Stewart*, 85 MISS L.J. 1577 (2017).

Ann Connell,⁷ Honorable Mary Libby Payne,⁸ and Honorable Lynn Fitch.⁹

In conjunction with the *Journal's* commemoration of the centennial, we had the opportunity to organize a panel during the 2016 Evelyn Gandy Lecture Series. The panel featured three women who each served as editor-in-chief of the *Mississippi Law Journal*: Susanna Moldoveanu, Honorable S. Allan Alexander, and Dean Debbie Bell. Professor Gilliland served as moderator. On a mild February morning in Tupelo, we participants gathered at the Bancorp South Arena to hear these remarkable panelists engage in a conversation about how the presence of women has changed the legal profession and helped shape the law in Mississippi.

In our planning conversations leading up to the conference, Dean Bell's enthusiasm for the topic shined through. She tossed out a variety of questions that the panel could consider, such as: Has the presence of women on the bench changed courtroom practice? Has the presence of women in the profession changed practice? Have we affected work-life balance in the profession as a whole? And have women in the profession changed the public narrative/view about lawyers?¹⁰ She reflected on the impact that women in the legal profession and on the bench have made on the law itself, as illustrated by the landmark Mississippi family law case of *Ferguson v. Ferguson* in 1994.¹¹

In this case, Justice Lenore Prather penned a thorough majority opinion formally adopting equitable distribution as Mississippi's system of marital property (one of the last states to adopt such a system).¹² Dean Bell also pointed out that women in the legislature and government have significantly impacted Mississippi's laws, citing new developments in the laws addressing

⁷ Mary Ann Connell, *Reflections upon My Life and the Law*, 85 MISS L.J. 1587 (2017).

⁸ Honorable Mary Libby Payne, *History of the Law and Women*, 85 MISS. L.J. 1599 (2017).

⁹ Honorable Lynn Fitch, *Evelyn Gandy's Desk*, 85 MISS L.J. 1607 (2017).

¹⁰ Email from Deborah Hodges Bell, Interim Dean, University of Mississippi School of Law, to author and other panelists (Feb. 18, 2016) (on file with author) [hereinafter Bell Email].

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *See generally* *Ferguson v. Ferguson*, 639 So. 2d 921 (Miss. 1994).

domestic violence.¹³ Her suggestions fueled the conversation and led to a lively panel discussion on the impact of women in the law.

Through her dedication and her authenticity, Dean Bell has not only mentored fledgling lawyers, she has become a friend to so many. For those of us graduates sworn in as members of the Mississippi Bar in September 2016, we will fondly cherish the memory of Dean Debbie Bell reading our names aloud at the admissions ceremony. As I reflect on life's "continuous thread of revelation," I will be forever grateful for the encouragement and support that Dean Bell has shown me throughout my law school journey and as I embarked upon the first steps in my legal career. I am so glad that my time as a law student coincided with Debbie Bell's term as interim dean.

¹³ Bell Email, *supra* note 10.