

“WE WANT YOU HERE”: LESSONS FROM THE WELCOME OF RICHARD GERSHON

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I first met Richard Gershon as a name that I listed at the top of a cover letter. In 2021, I had decided to apply for a position as an assistant professor of law on the faculty at the University of Mississippi School of Law (“UM Law”). Around this time, Richard served as the co-chair of the Appointments Committee with Antonia Eliason. I addressed the letter to them—two pages of pouring out my love for Mississippi and the impact that I hoped I could make if I came back home. I ultimately accepted an offer to teach at Nova Southeastern University’s Shepard Broad College of Law (“NSU Law”) in Florida, where I lived at the time. I did not hear back from UM Law before it came time to take another offer, and I loved the faculty and community at NSU Law. But Richard and I crossed paths again, this time in person and as colleagues.

I came back to UM Law as a visiting professor in the fall of 2023. Richard had a fundamental impact in helping me find a home at UM Law and giving me a sense of how much Mississippi and the University of Mississippi had changed. His impact on me was inevitably shaped by the America we lived in together, by his position as an older white man in a position of leadership at the law school and my position as a younger, African-American man at the beginning of my career in the legal academy.

I knew Richard a short time, in the last two years before he passed away. So, I cannot tell stories about his career, his childhood, or his scholarship. I can share the impact that he had on me and my life in the brief time we knew each other, and how

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he played a role in where I am now. His impact has lessons for reaching across divides of race in professional settings. Indeed, I think the value of our story—particularly for readers of a tribute in a law journal—is how someone like Richard affects someone like me. That is an experience that needs to be replicated throughout the legal profession, America, and the world more broadly. Understanding his impact on me requires, however, understanding the context from which I came that made that impact possible and necessary. Without that context, the significance of my relationship with Richard and what he meant to me would ring hollow.

My story as an African American, particularly one from Mississippi, has a throughline of living in a world that constantly reminds you that you are not wanted. You are not the person this world celebrates. I ask my students in the first-year constitutional law course to read *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the case in which the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that Black Americans were not citizens entitled to bring suit under the Constitution. I urge them to think about the implications of the line that reverberates through the ages: the idea that, when the case was decided, Black Americans “*are not included, and were not intended to be included*, under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution[.]”¹ At the same time, if one is going to stay in and have the fortitude to become a leader in this hostile space, one of the hallmarks is learning how to stake a claim of ownership and remain engaged. The welcome Richard extended to me at UM Law was an example of the kind of support that I knew was essential for me to succeed, particularly in becoming only one of two Black tenured or tenure-track faculty at the law school, if I accepted an offer to join the faculty full time. “Mentoring, indeed patronage of any sort, will help Black professors, traditional outsiders within the legal academy, to overcome the presumption of incompetence held by others, the lack of credibility that Blacks suffer in general, and institutional isolation.”² The Black professor, however, also has to be prepared

¹ *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857), *superseded by* U.S. CONST. amend. XIV.

² Pamela J. Smith, *Failing to Mentor Sapphire: The Actionability of Blocking Black Women from Initiating Mentoring Relationships*, 10 UCLA WOMEN'S L.J. 373, 390 (2000).

to take ownership of that institution and to navigate a path toward having a positive influence. If I were going to accept the invitation Richard extended, I had to be prepared to learn how to insert myself. As I reflect on Richard’s impact on my decision to join the faculty at UM Law, I realize that my relationship to Mississippi and its flagship state university have evolved. My ability to engage with the reality of these places has also evolved—one of the most important evolutions of my adult life as an African American in America—in ways that made Richard’s welcome find me at the right time.

My story starts in Mississippi because my family decided to stake a claim in this place, coming back after an earlier generation had left. I grew up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, a small city about an hour north of the Gulf Coast and two hours north of New Orleans. I was raised in a low-income, African American family with roots in Mississippi that date back generations. My father’s family came from Wayne County, in east Mississippi. My mother’s family came from the areas around Vicksburg and Natchez. My grandparents moved north during the Great Migration, the years between 1910 and 1970 when millions of African Americans left the Jim Crow South and moved to northern and western cities around the nation in search of opportunity and true freedom.³ My paternal grandmother’s family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1930s. My maternal grandparents moved to Chicago around 1950. My parents met and married in Chicago, and they moved back to Mississippi in 1982, a year before I was born. Isabel Wilkerson, the author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, frames the Great Migration in the language of the immigrant story of many white Americans.⁴ Europeans left “the old country” and started a new life in America, some of them living in “exile,” never to be at home again in the world of their ancestors. In the Great Migration, the South is “the old country,” and the northern and western cities to which African Americans moved is “exile.” Like many exiles, the person often never feels fully at home in the new world but cannot return to the old world.

³ See generally ISABEL WILKERSON, *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS: THE EPIC STORY OF AMERICA’S GREAT MIGRATION* (2010).

⁴ *Id.*

I started life in Mississippi instead of Chicago, like all my siblings, out of a reclamation—the protest that involved coming back to the old country and out of exile.

My maternal grandmother, Rosie Randle, and I were born almost exactly fifty years apart. I was the first person in our immediate family born in Mississippi since my grandmother. She was born in November 1933 on a plantation near Harriston, Mississippi, an unincorporated community about twenty-six miles northeast of Natchez. The town was named for Nathaniel Harris, a former Confederate general who later became the first president of the Vicksburg & New Orleans Railroad.⁵ One of my favorite memories of my grandmother, who passed away in 2021, was traveling with her back to Harriston and her standing under a road sign designating the community, grinning, and holding her hands outstretched under the road sign, as if to say, “I made it!” She had built a life in Chicago, where she lived for over sixty years. Harriston had not kept her away. It had not stolen her joy, despite the opportunities Jim Crow Mississippi took from her and the rights it denied her. She was still coming back home.

Our relationship to Mississippi is emblematic of the expression, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”⁶ My grandmother grew up in the dark years of Jim Crow in Mississippi, in a family of sharecroppers. Indeed, she was born on a plantation in part because there was no hospital that would treat Black patients near her home. When she was a child, an older sister died at the age of nineteen when her family could not find a doctor who would see Black patients to treat her in an emergency or a hospital that would take her.

I was born in October 1983 in a formerly whites-only hospital in Hattiesburg, thanks to the achievements of the modern Civil Rights Movement, which forced hospitals in the South to accept patients on a non-racial basis.⁷ Yet the hospital was called Forrest

⁵ MISSISSIPPI: COMPRISING SKETCHES OF COUNTIES, TOWNS, EVENTS, INSTITUTIONS, AND PERSONS, ARRANGED IN CYCLOPEDIA FORM 848 (Dunbar Rowland ed., 1907).

⁶ See, e.g., Mario L. Barnes, “*The More Things Change . . .*”: *New Moves for Legitimizing Racial Discrimination in a “Post-Race” World*, 100 MINN. L. REV. 2043 (2016).

⁷ See Joshua Herb, *Health Policy in Action – A Brief History of Hospital Desegregation in the United States*, ASS’N FOR ACAD. SURGERY (Feb. 27, 2025),

County General Hospital, bearing the name of Nathan Bedford Forrest, another former Confederate General and the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.⁸ Hattiesburg is named for Hattie Lott, the wife of William H. Hardy, the former Confederate officer who founded Hattiesburg after the Civil War.⁹

All throughout my childhood, the reminders of the Confederacy surrounded me. In my first job at sixteen years old, I was an intern for the Department of Urban Development for the City of Hattiesburg. A portrait of Nathan Bedford Forrest hung in City Hall. Every day I walked in, I passed the tall man with piercing eyes, standing proudly in his gray Confederate uniform, sword in its scabbard, looking down at me contemptuously. Perhaps his eyes were blue, but I was too unnerved to look at him for too long to be sure. When I registered to vote on my eighteenth birthday, my mother and I passed the Confederate monument on the lawn of the Forrest County Courthouse—just as we did when I went to the former location of the public library. My favorite place in the world was across the street from a Confederate monument.

<https://www.aasurg.org/health-policy-in-action-a-brief-history-of-hospital-desegregation-in-the-united-states/> [<https://perma.cc/G923-9MC6>] (crediting the anti-discrimination provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Medicare Act in 1965 and the federal government’s “desegregation campaign throughout 1965 and 1966” with integrating the vast majority of hospitals, although “[s]everal hundred hospitals in the deep South who did not receive federal funds chose to opt out of Medicare and remain segregated”); *Simkins v. Moses H. Cone Mem’l Hosp.*, 323 F.2d 959, 967-68 (4th Cir. 1963), *cert. denied*, 376 U.S. 938 (1964), *abrogated on other grounds*, *Modaber v. Culpeper Mem’l Hosp., Inc.*, 674 F.2d 1023, 1025 (4th Cir. 1982) (holding that federal law with provisions that tolerated “separate-but-equal” hospital facilities that received federal funding were unconstitutional and segregated facilities amounted to state action in violation of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution).

⁸ See, e.g., Robert L. Glaze, *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, BRITANNICA (Apr. 6, 2026), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nathan-Bedford-Forrest> [<https://perma.cc/D736-USLH>] (“Forrest’s notoriety only increased when, in 1867, he became the first grand wizard of the original Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a secret hate organization that employed terror in pursuit of its white supremacist agenda.”). He purportedly later called for its disbandment as his views moderated over the years. See *Nathan Bedford Forrest: Topics in Chronicling America*, LIBR. OF CONG., <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-nathan-bedford-forrest> [<https://perma.cc/MHA4-PFPY>] (last visited July 30, 2025). The damage, however, was already done: “[H]is prestige [had] served to expand membership rolls.” Glaze, *supra*.

⁹ *Hattiesburg Area History: The Beginning*, HATTIESBURG AREA HIST. SOC’Y, <https://hahsmuseum.org/hist.htm> [<https://perma.cc/VT6E-LHDE>] (last visited July 30, 2025).

After graduating from the University of Virginia, I came back to Mississippi to join Teach For America. Gwen Archard, a friend from college, joined me at the former Ella Darling Elementary School in Greenville, where I taught kindergarten for three years. Greenville is, and historically has been, the largest city in the Mississippi Delta, one of the few Black-majority regions in the United States. Shortly after court-ordered integration finally reached the Delta in the early 1970s, the white minority left the public schools for private schools, often referred to as “segregation academies.” During my tenure from 2006 to 2009, the formerly whites-only public school had approximately 240 students and they were all African American. There was one white child in those three years—a wonderful kid who was in my class for only a nine-week term.

During lunch one morning with my all-Black class, the students and I talked about their time in Head Start. The school was over 90 percent free and reduced lunch and nearly every child in the class participated in the federally funded preschool program for low-income children. I was thrilled to share that I was also a Head Start graduate. Gwen, a white woman from a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, suburb, nearly spat out her drink in surprise when I told the children I graduated from a place called Jeff Davis Head Start Center. Yes, the school that housed Head Start in Hattiesburg was given the nickname of the president of the Confederate States of America. The building was housed in a formerly whites-only public school, a Spanish-style brick building called Jeff Davis Elementary School.¹⁰ Despite the shift to hosting a program where the majority of preschoolers were Black, the building’s name stayed. I had never thought of how disconcerting the fact was until I saw her reaction. Over time, the names and

¹⁰ See *Hattiesburg Public Schools*, HATTIESBURG AREA HIST. SOC’Y, Winter 2015, at 1, 2; Karen L. Cox, *Me and Jeff Davis, Part II: Beauvoir, Catafalques, and Head Start*, POP S. (Jan. 18, 2015), <https://southinpopculture.com/2015/01/18/me-and-jeff-davis-part-ii-beauvoir-catafalques-and-head-start/> [<https://perma.cc/8VY4-K33R>] (a visitor to Hattiesburg in 1991 describing discovering the sign that read “Jefferson Davis Head Start Program” on the building: “something quite spectacular when [she] drove past a defunct elementary school that now headquartered a Head Start program, which served a population that was largely minority. . . . one of those moments when you do a double-take and rub your eyes”). I graduated from Jeff Davis Head Start Center in 1989.

iconography had faded into the background of my consciousness. As Michael Johnston, a white former Teach For America corps member who taught at Greenville High School in the late 1990s, recalled in his memoir, the students at the nearly all-Black Greenville High School casually passed the Greenville High School Hall of Fame from 1965 and saw photos in old, dusty trophy cases of the all-white classes of students at the formerly whites-only high school. The reminders of a segregated past and present—the names and faces of the people whose children and grandchildren were not there at school with them—were “ignored more than hated.”¹¹

As a child, the University of Mississippi was a place I tried to ignore more than hate. The lore of “Ole Miss” traveled four hours south to Hattiesburg. Perhaps my white peers knew a well-developed story of “Ole Miss.”¹² For my part, I only knew tidbits. From these, I pieced together a narrative. There was a Confederate monument on the lawn in front of the Lyceum, the main administration building. I recall thinking the monument was such an astonishing embarrassment and an embrace of the old South that was beneath the oldest state university. A monument in front of a courthouse was disgusting enough. In front of a university felt like a bridge too far. They staged a riot to keep James Meredith, the first Black student to attend the university, out in 1962. Even in the early 2000s when I was in high school, it was almost all white. While the state was almost forty percent Black, the University of Mississippi was around ten percent Black. Even the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg was about twenty-five percent Black. They had parties where white male students wore gray costumes that looked like Confederate uniforms and white female students wore hoop skirts, like Southern plantation mistresses. They played *Dixie* at the football games when the team scores a touchdown. They waved massive Confederate flags at the games. The mascot was Colonel Reb, a Confederate soldier. I thought in horror, “What

¹¹ See MICHAEL JOHNSTON, *IN THE DEEP HEART'S CORE* 150-51 (2002).

¹² Here, I have intentionally used the current nickname of the University of Mississippi to reflect the name by which I knew it as a child—a nickname whose history affects how I thought about it—not because I agree that it is an appropriate nickname to continue to use given its history. See *infra* note 13.

sort of place is this?" Oxford was similarly described as a white preserve. The white folk raved about how great Oxford is, and they drive up there for football games. They walk around on the Square. It is *their* little town, and they like it. Just. Like. That.

I learned rather early, as many African Americans in the state seemed to be aware, that the university's nickname, "Ole Miss," was a reference to a term some enslaved people used to refer to the white mistress of the Southern plantation.¹³ I learned, growing up Catholic, that the Catholic Church was the "bride of Christ."¹⁴ So, the logic made sense: Colonel Reb, the mascot, was the plantation master—"Ole Marse"—and Ole Miss was his bride. The reference was also a mimic of African American vernacular English, a taunt that grew out of minstrel image used to justify white supremacy and a joke at every African American Mississippian's expense.¹⁵

As one scholar explained in grappling with the history of blackface at the University of Wisconsin-Madison:

[D]ehumanization—whether through minstrelsy or other means—is both a tool of white supremacy and a product of its existence. Every act of dehumanization reinforces expectations of white supremacy and racial hierarchy in daily economic and social life. It is a constant reminder of who has power, who "belongs," and who gets to set those parameters.¹⁶

¹³ See Elliott C. McLaughlin, *The Battle Over Ole Miss: Why a Flagship University Has Stood Behind a Nickname with a Racist Past*, CNN (July 27, 2020, at 14:06 ET), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/27/us/ole-miss-university-mississippi-name-controversy> [https://perma.cc/2ADJ-B58V].

¹⁴ "The Church is the Bride of Christ: he loved her and handed himself over for her. He has purified her by his blood and made her the fruitful mother of all God's children." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CATH. CULTURE, https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/cat_view.cfm?recnum=3028 [https://perma.cc/A2N8-U5CA] (last visited May 16, 2026).

¹⁵ See *Ole Miss Takes Its Name from Darky Dialect, Not Abbreviation of State*, MISSISSIPPIAN, May 13, 1939, at 4 (quoting Elma Meek, the student who suggested the nickname in a contest to name the school yearbook) ("I had often heard old 'darkies' on Southern plantations address the lady in the 'big house' as 'Ole Miss,' I have never thought much about the matter, for I never dreamed, of course, that the term would grow into such popularity and favor.").

¹⁶ Kacie Lucchini Butcher, "Successful Beyond Expectation:" Blackface, Minstrelsy, and Racist Entertainment at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, UW-MADISON CTR. FOR CAMPUS HIST. (Oct. 26, 2020), <https://campushistory.wisc.edu/blackface-minstrelsy-and-racist-entertainment/> [https://perma.cc/2WCV-57FA].

It seemed that everything possible was done to communicate that Black people did not belong at the University of Mississippi. White people don't want you there. They want you to stay out. They like it just the way it is. And you should just let them have it.

I became more curious, however, when I learned about the Croft Institute for International Studies at UM when I was a sophomore or junior in high school. A white student on the Hattiesburg High School debate team whom I admired very much told me that she had gotten into the Honors College at UM and would participate in the Croft Institute. Students in the Croft Institute were required to study abroad and study a foreign language. I imagined myself studying French and visiting French-speaking West Africa. I resented the fact that the state's flagship public university did not have selective admissions, and I wanted to be someplace where I was chosen, considered to be among the best. I thought maybe—just maybe—I would apply to “Ole Miss” and go, but only if I could be in the Honors College and only if I could be in the Croft Institute. But then I thought about the Confederate monument on the lawn and walking around, feeling unwanted and out of place. I spat at the name “Ole Miss.” The feeling of not being wanted at my state's flagship public university burned inside.

I ended up applying to the University of Virginia (“UVA”) after attending a summer program after my junior year of high school for students of color interested in careers in business at the Darden School of Business. (I was never invited to any such program at “Ole Miss”.) I applied Early Decision and was admitted by October of my senior year in high school. So, I did not have to struggle with the emotionally fraught dilemma of applying to Ole Miss. I figured, “It's not selective or highly ranked anyway. If they [white people] wanted it, let them have it.” It burned less to imagine that attending “Ole Miss” was a hollow prize. Now, I realize that I chose another flagship, public university in another Southern state—one that did maintain a selective admissions policy and that I viewed as more progressive—for a reason.

I grew and learned many lessons at UVA, however, that ultimately led me back to the University of Mississippi, and to Richard. I also learned that some of the same problems I might

have had at “Ole Miss” found me anyway at UVA. Many of my Black undergraduate classmates from Virginia grew up hearing similar things about UVA and Charlottesville as I had heard about “Ole Miss” and Oxford. They recalled their parents and grandparents describing it as a “plantation,” a place where the years of exclusion proved that Black people were not wanted at their flagship state university. Sometimes, their family and Black friends questioned their decision to go, and they felt like they were there on their own—but at least all of us had the argument that it was ranked one of the top public universities in the nation and in the top 25 among all universities. I also did not have the same, long-running local narrative about UVA in my mind that they did, so I came optimistic and with fresh eyes. Still, the effort by UVA’s administration to give Black students a sense of belonging resonated with me, too.

At the start of every school year, the UVA Office of African American Affairs (“OAAA”) had a celebration called Harambee.¹⁷ OAAA “pull[ed] together” the Black first-year students in a reception space at the student union to welcome them to UVA. Sylvia Terry, the former associate dean of OAAA, would hold up a small model of the Rotunda in her hand at the front of the room. The Rotunda is a half-scale model of the Roman Pantheon that served as UVA’s original library. It sits at the head of the Lawn and the Academical Village, UVA’s original campus designed by Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and UVA’s founder. It remains UVA’s most iconic symbol and the heart of the university. Dean Terry would say, “This is *your* university.” She implored students to make UVA their own. We were invited to become part of that community, to make our mark on it, and to make it better.

That engagement, however, was easier said than done. Many Black students were very involved in Black student organizations and were devoted to the Black student community. Many of them congregated in a small set of residence halls after first year. It seemed like we all knew them: Gooch, Copeley, Faulkner. They

¹⁷ “Harambee” comes from a Kiswahili word meaning “all pull together.” Mwende Mutuli Musau, *Harambee: The Law of Generosity That Rules Kenya*, BBC (Oct. 5, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20201004-harambee-the-kenyan-word-that-birtherd-a-nation> [<https://perma.cc/9AV9-Y4PY>].

made a world within a world at college, and those relationships made UVA special for them. Very few, however, were involved in majority student organizations. Even fewer were involved in *both* Black student organizations and majority organizations. M. Rick Turner was the dean of OAAA at the time, and he is a former president of the Charlottesville chapter of the NAACP. He used to implore Black students with words that still ring in my ears: “We *have* to get involved.” We must be at the table when important decisions get made. We must be in the room as a voice. Otherwise, decisions will be made about our university and our future without us.

I took those words to heart. I was elected president of the Webb House Council my first year. Webb House was one of three residence halls reserved for students in the Echols and Rodman Scholars Programs, the honors programs for UVA’s College of Arts and Sciences and School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, respectively. As I recall, there could not have been more than five or seven Black students in the entire building, which had about 160 students residing there. Chapman Snowden, the person elected vice president, and I were among them. I was the only Black member of the First Year Judiciary Committee, a division of the University Judiciary Committee comprised of seventeen first-year students who enforced the student Code of Conduct in cases involving first-year students. I was the only Black student who joined the University Guide Service in my first semester, first year of college. I remained a member all four years and developed the tour on the history of African Americans at UVA entitled “Slave to Scholar,” started by Erin-Marie Burke, a Black student member who graduated my first year. I was one of three Black first-year students who joined the Jefferson Literary and Debating Society, one of the country’s oldest college debating societies, dating back to 1825. During my second year at UVA, the Black Student Alliance gave me a special award for “Leadership in Majority Organizations.”

I wanted more partners in the process of fully integrating student life at UVA. I was mentored by Black students who were ahead of me at UVA, and I mentored Black students who followed me. But I could understand the safety of staying in a Black student circle. UVA in the 2000s was not the most welcoming

place for Black students. Nearly every year I was a student—from 2002 to 2006—there was an act of racial harassment or violence toward one or more Black students. The year before I started, Daisy Lundy, a candidate for Student Council president who was set to become the first Black woman elected to the position, was attacked outside the Lawn. She went on to win that race, but her attacker was never identified. In the 2005-2006 school year, I was one of fifty-four students in a class of over 3,000 selected to live on the Lawn, one of the original dormitory rooms in the Academical Village when the university opened in 1825—an honor reserved for graduating students based on leadership and service to the UVA community. As I recall, five of them were Black, including the Head Resident, that year. My neighbor, Philip Jackson, was one of them. Outside of our rooms, we had white boards where friends who stopped by could write messages. Phil checked his board one day to find that someone had written: “Nigger/I hate Jesus.” Phil was involved in a Black Christian student organization. Around the time of this incident, early in the school year, there was a rash of acts of racial harassment—at least nine, according to the *Washington Post*. As I recall, a group of Black students were walking down Rugby Road, home to many of UVA’s largest fraternity and sorority houses, when a group of young white people yelled racial epithets at him out of a car window.¹⁸ According to the *Washington Post*, in September 2005, second-year student Kyle Miller walked to his Jeep after class and “found a note attached to the windshield It wasn’t a ticket; it was something hateful, racist, written in red ink, in all caps.” There was a “racist threat scrawled on a bathroom wall,”¹⁹ and as I recall, a group of Black women students arrived at their apartment to find a racist message scrawled on the front door.

During my final undergraduate year, I was co-chair of the Black Leadership Institute, a consortium of Black student

¹⁸ See David Zhou, *UVa Strikes Back After Wave of Hate*, HARV. CRIMSON (Oct. 6, 2005), <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2005/10/6/uva-strikes-back-after-wave-of/> [<https://perma.cc/2V4P-5U32>] (referring to an incident in which “[p]assing motorists yelled racial slurs at students”); Susan Kinzie, *Racist Incidents Unnerve U-Va.*, WASH. POST (Sep. 17, 2005), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/16/AR2005091601896.html> [<https://perma.cc/5KUT-TFEM>] (referring to “slurs shouted from cars”).

¹⁹ Kinzie, *supra* note 18.

organizations sponsored by the OAAA. In the midst of all these awful acts, many Black students felt surrounded, under attack, and furious at what was happening. Many felt confused and despondent. My co-chair, Aaron Jennings, and I both felt called to organize our group of Black student organization leaders to develop a response. We held meetings with UVA administrators. We planned a showing of student solidarity by encouraging students to wear black T-shirts for several days. We also addressed the media. I explained why to a reporter at *UVA Today*, the university administration’s news outlet, drawing on the message Dean Terry had given Black students about UVA being ours: the goal of those efforts, for me “was to make students feel comfortable, to take ownership of this community and confront people when they express those hateful views.”²⁰ It was at UVA that I learned what it meant to “take ownership” of a community in a setting where you repeatedly receive the message that you do not belong and you are not wanted. It prepared me to arrive at the University of Mississippi where I serve on the faculty today.

It took a long time, however, for me to translate these experiences into a level of courage and faith that would bring me back to Mississippi—the faith that Richard validated and sealed. Throughout my adult life, I have come to Mississippi and left, come and left again. I joined Teach For America after graduating from UVA in 2006. The only place I wanted to teach was in the Mississippi Delta. I was assigned to teach kindergarten in Greenville. I taught for three years, before starting law school at Columbia University in 2009. I also applied to enroll in the J.D. program at the University of Mississippi School of Law myself. I was admitted with a full scholarship. UM Law was the only law school where I was admitted, however, that never called after the acceptance or gave me a personal invitation to visit. Columbia admissions staff spent the day with me after I drove from Mississippi to New York City to visit and left me with a Columbia Law School t-shirt that I treasured throughout law school—but the law school in my home state did not even pick up the phone and call. Ironically enough, Richard became the dean of the

²⁰ Anne E. Bromley, *Jade Craig Leaves U.Va. Academically Strong and Socially Aware*, UVA TODAY (May 16, 2006), <https://news.virginia.edu/content/jade-craig-leaves-uva-%3Facademically-strong-and-socially-aware%3F> [https://perma.cc/2DLB-WTD8].

University of Mississippi School of Law in 2010, the year after I applied.²¹ I have been told that he made calling admitted students a regular practice. In early 2009, however, I suppose it confirmed what I had always heard: “Ole Miss” may let you in begrudgingly. They may throw you some money. But they really don’t want you there.

After graduating from Columbia Law in 2012, I served as a law clerk to Judge Carlton W. Reeves of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi in Jackson. He was passionate about me coming back home to Mississippi. My relationship to Mississippi became even more strained, however, as I had come out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community in 2009, before starting law school. But Judge Reeves convinced me that there was still a place for me in Mississippi. Living in Jackson for a year would give me a chance to test out that belief. And he was right. I had a wonderful year, felt successful in meeting other young professionals devoted to Mississippi, and made many friends who were all accepting of my full self. I sat for the Mississippi Bar exam and accepted a job at a law firm in Jackson. I was set. Then, another chance to pivot came—I accepted a position as a policy advisor in the Obama Administration, which took me to HUD’s headquarters in Washington, D.C. So, I stepped away again.

After several life changes, I started reassessing my life—during the pandemic, like many people around the world. I decided that I wanted to have a greater impact on the law and the legal profession, to make greater use of my Columbia Law School education. I enjoyed teaching as an adjunct professor while practicing full time and decided to pursue a position as a tenure-track law professor. The chance to go back to Mississippi emerged again, and I applied for an opening at UM Law, when my cover letter probably landed in Richard’s inbox. In the rather quick cycle of law teacher hiring after the end of the “meet market” hosted by the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), I did not hear back from UM Law before it came time to decide on another offer. Now, I know Richard and Antonia had been excited about me as a

²¹ See Paul Caron, *Death of Dean & Tax Prof Richard Gershon (Mississippi)*, TAXPROF BLOG (Dec. 11, 2024), https://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2024/12/death-of-dean-tax-prof-richard-gershon-mississippi.html [<https://perma.cc/3ZF7-APUR>].

candidate from the time they saw my materials. At the time, however, the phone not ringing a second time brought back the burning feeling about “Ole Miss” from childhood. A part of me thought that, perhaps it was not meant to be. Perhaps Oxford and “Ole Miss” are what they said it was, and I had dodged a bullet. Perhaps I should let it go—but in my heart of hearts, I really had not let it go.

I saw Ben Cooper, a professor at UM Law and the former associate dean for academic affairs, speak on a panel at a conference sometime in 2022 or 2023. When I heard he was from the University of Mississippi, I made a beeline for him after the panel ended. I rarely miss a chance to meet someone from Mississippi. I mentioned having applied to UM Law for a position, and Ben asked me if I was still interested. Despite how much I enjoyed my work and my colleagues at Nova Southeastern, I had to tell the truth: I was, because Mississippi is home. I said, however, that I wanted to do a visit before I could commit to pursuing a position, if I did so at all. I recall him suggesting a year-long visit, but I was more interested in one semester. With all my misgivings about Oxford and “Ole Miss”, if the place was as I had heard as a child, I did not want to be stuck there for more than four months. I accepted an invitation to visit in the fall of 2023. It was during that visit that I came to know Richard Gershon.

From my experience moving to Oxford to teach at UM Law that fall, I learned that coming back to Mississippi would require at least three things: (1) a personal spirit, on my part, that was committed to becoming part of a community and participating in the process of change; (2) a community that was willing to receive me as I was—Black, LGBTQ+, and all; and (3) people in my field in positions of leadership who wanted me there and who would do something tangible to give me an opportunity to thrive and succeed. Without all three of those things coming together, I did not believe it could work.

For the first ingredient, I had been preparing for this role my entire life. Around early 1984, I was baptized Catholic at Sacred Heart Church in Hattiesburg, a church that historically had an almost exclusively white congregation. My mother and I were among the few, if not the only, Black family that regularly

attended Mass there during my childhood. Coming in as a transplant from Chicago, alien to racial lines in Hattiesburg, gave my family a certain level of courage that was perhaps unique. I may have been one of the first Black children, if not the first Black child, baptized in that soaring Romanesque sanctuary. A special relationship grew between me and the white families that attended our church, and a special sense of ownership came from knowing that I was introduced to God as a baby right at that baptismal font to the right of the altar in front of me at Mass on Sundays. Despite what anyone else who came after that point thought of my mom and me being there, Sacred Heart was *my* church, and *that* person was brand new, not me.

My experience at UVA forged me in fire. One of the sayings among Black UVA alumni goes something to the effect of: “If you can make it at UVA, you can make it anywhere.” At Columbia, I was one of eight Black men in a class of about 400 students. Derrick Bell, the father of the study of race in American law and a founder of the Critical Race Theory movement, passed away the fall of my 3L year. I was the Editor-in-Chief of the *Columbia Journal of Race & Law* at the time. With Columbia Law professor Kendall Thomas, we organized a symposium honoring his work entitled “A Living, Working Faith.” The title came from remarks he gave to students in 1990 when he took an unpaid leave of absence and ultimately resigned his position as the first Black tenured professor at Harvard Law School in protest of Harvard Law’s failure to hire a Black woman to a tenure-track position. He said, “Your faith in what you believe must be a living, working faith that draws you away from comfort and security, and toward risk through confrontation.”²²

All of these lessons came together as I considered serving as a visiting professor at UM Law. The resentment toward “Ole Miss” that I felt as a child was still below the surface. If I was interested in change, however, I had to face facts. It is the oldest public university in my home state, founded in 1848. It is the flagship public university, and UM Law is the only public law school in Mississippi. As the flagship public school of the state I

²² See Caroline M. McKay, *Derrick Bell, First Tenured Black Professor at HLS, Dies*, HARV. CRIMSON (Oct. 7, 2011), <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/10/7/law-school-bell-black/> [https://perma.cc/V573-L8LB].

love and where my ancestors have roots dating back generations, it is also “my university”—as much, if not more, than UVA. Take the Rotunda out of Dean Terry’s hand, and put in a miniature Lyceum, and the call to action is the same.

The faculty at UM Law shape Mississippi’s leaders. Even now, I look at the faces on the wall in the atrium and see the faces featured in the Lamar Order, etched into silver plaques. It is a who’s who of Mississippi politics, the names of leaders from my childhood. Ronnie Musgrove, the state’s last Democratic governor. Thad Cochran and Trent Lott, former U.S. senators from Mississippi whom I met when I represented Mississippi at American Legion Boys Nation in Washington as a high school student. Barbara Blackmon, whose historic campaign to become the first Black woman elected lieutenant governor of Mississippi enthralled me in high school. Ronald Doleac, the lawyer whose family I grew up with at Sacred Heart Church, who helped my parents buy the home I was born and raised in, before he went on to become a chancery court judge in Forrest County.

In short, reaching the state’s future leaders requires starting early, teaching and mentoring during their time in law school, and having an impact that may shape the trajectory of their careers. These are the people who will change Mississippi—not me all by myself. The next Ronnie Musgrove or Barbara Blackmon could be in one of my classes at UM Law—but I would probably never meet them if I stayed in Florida. Likewise, the University of Mississippi will never change if those who love and believe in Mississippi do not get involved in making it the university Mississippi deserves. “We *have* to get involved.”

Getting involved, however, is much easier if the community will let you in. It is easier if the community is a sustainable place to live long term. I respect the wisdom of Shirley Chisholm: “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”²³ I, however, knew that the decision was an investment in my professional career, and I owed it to myself, as a junior academic, to be confident that Oxford and the university community would

²³ Tim Ott, *10 Shirley Chisholm Quotes That Show Her Determination and Fortitude*, BIOGRAPHY (Apr. 10, 2026, at 10:49 ET), <https://www.biography.com/news/shirley-chisholm-quotes> [https://perma.cc/U4TD-FV53].

accept me. During the visit, I said to Oxford and “Ole Miss”, arms open: “Just take me as I am/or having nothing at all.”²⁴

Oxford and the University of Mississippi exceeded my expectations. The first time that I ever visited Oxford was as an adult, when I took a road trip with Gwen to visit Rowan Oak, Nobel Prize-winning writer William Faulkner’s historic home. We both were history nerds and were curious about Faulkner, who also had a stint as a writer in residence at UVA, a visiting professorship that remains legendary in UVA history. We thoroughly enjoyed Rowan Oak, and it humanized Faulkner in a way that we found surprising. But we visited Rowan Oak and left—I was leery of Oxford and did not want to discover that what I had heard as a child was true, let it ruin the great visit to Rowan Oak, and get embarrassed in front of my white friend. So, it was unclear whether Oxford would be as surprising. In the fall of 2023, however, I had a similar surprise about the rest of the town outside of Rowan Oak.

Much of what I heard about “Ole Miss” was no longer true. The place had changed considerably from the school of my childhood. The Confederate monument on the Grove is gone. It is now in a historic cemetery in a less prominent part of the campus—not as good as toppled and buried itself, but in a more appropriate setting for those who need to see it. Now, the greatest part of visiting the Lyceum is seeing the magnificent monument to James Meredith and the integration of the university. A statue of Meredith walks toward a stone doorway between the Lyceum, the central administration building, and the main university library—situating Meredith between power and knowledge. There were no students in Confederate regalia or hoop skirts. I made sure to go to a football game myself and to take part in the tailgate at the Grove, thanks to my fellow assistant professor, Martin Edwards, a UM undergraduate alumnus who graciously shared his family’s tent and season tickets. There was a man in a Colonel Reb costume walking around, but he seemed to be treated like an oddity and a weirdo rather than celebrated. There was no *Dixie* when the UM team made a touchdown. There was not a

²⁴ See MARY J. BLIGE, *Take Me As I Am*, on *The Breakthrough* (CD, Geffen Recs. Jan. 1, 2005).

Confederate flag in sight. It was a lively, national-level college football game, on the whole a credit to Mississippi rather than an embarrassment.

I found community in friends and fellow academics. One of my newest friends, Afton Thomas, helped me plan my fortieth birthday party: an intimate dinner, drinks, cake with my new friends—and it was a perfect evening that made Oxford feel like home. The campus had interesting lectures on a variety of subjects, including frank discussions about race and class. Indeed, I attended the first annual James Meredith Lecture, which featured Dr. Ruha Benjamin, a sociologist and professor in the Department of African American Studies at Princeton University. She gave a talk on the intersection of race, technology, and justice. I met James Meredith himself, and we talked briefly about the fact that we both graduated from Columbia Law School. Everyone I met was accepting about the fact that I identified as queer. I was stunned to discover Violet Valley, a lesbian feminist bookstore in Water Valley, Mississippi, a town thirty minutes south of Oxford that is even smaller than Oxford—owned by a professor at the University of Mississippi! Jaime Harker, the owner of Violet Valley, also runs the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies—another space I did not expect to be allowed, much less thrive, at “Ole Miss”.

Some of what I had heard about Oxford was true. It is whiter than most parts of Mississippi, at around twenty-five percent Black rather than thirty-eight percent. It is one of the few conservative college towns, an oxymoron to many, that I have ever visited. There is still a Confederate monument on the courthouse lawn—a relic that many people have organized against, but have been unable to dislodge to date. Oxford did not need to be perfect, a racial utopia. The University of Mississippi did not have to be in the “right” place in terms of race relations. I was prepared to join everyone in the community that wants to make them better places. But it had to want to go in the right direction instead of the wrong direction—and I felt sure of that by the end of fall 2023, and I still feel that way after completing my first year teaching at UM Law.

Richard, however, was the highlight of discovering the third rail that would bring me home: a law professor in a position of

leadership at the school who wanted me there and who would do something tangible to give me an opportunity to thrive and succeed. Richard came by my office several times during my visit. In our most meaningful conversation, he looked at me intently, and he said, “We want you here.” He saw a need for me to be there, and a place in the future of the law school and the university. Richard, a former dean of the Law School who remained as one of the senior members of the faculty, making it clear that I belonged—at the University of Mississippi, the place I had thought would never want me there all of my life, meant the world to me. I was willing to push my way through and give it a try when I first applied in 2021. But Richard communicated that the door was open—that I was not going to have to push my way through.

Richard also used his position to give me an opportunity and a platform. Richard served as the co-host of *In Legal Terms*, a radio program and podcast hosted by Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB). Every week, Liz Gill and he invited experts in different law-related topics to sit down for an interview to educate the public about that issue. Richard invited me to come on for an episode entitled “Urban Governance.” We talked about state and local government law, my research interest. He also opened the door for me to discuss House Bill 1020, a proposal which the Mississippi Legislature passed and signed into law, that expanded the so-called Capitol Complex Improvement District. The expanded district encompassed the small number of sections of the city of Jackson, the state capital, with a significant white population. It assigned them a separate police force and created a separate, unelected court system—outside of the elected judiciary in the majority-Black city. I wrote an op-ed about the proposal in *USA Today* in February 2023.²⁵ Richard did not shy away from the frank conversation about race and power, which was broadcast to the cars, phones, and homes of many, including the officials that created and ran the district.

²⁵ Jade A. Craig, *In Jackson, Mississippi, How Can a Separate Criminal Justice System Be Equal?*, USA TODAY (Feb. 26, 2023, at 14:59 ET), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2023/02/26/proposed-jackson-mississippi-unelected-court-separate-unequal/11258297002/> [<https://perma.cc/4GWZ-D9C2>].

In that interview, we also discussed his experience growing up Jewish in Atlanta. Perhaps he understood to a greater degree the sense of welcome and belonging that I needed as someone who grew up as an outsider to some extent, at the margins of whiteness, in the racially divided South.²⁶ I think, however, Richard’s interest in connecting with me had a variety of motivations, largely from his spirit as a person. It felt real and genuine. With the MPB show, *In Legal Terms*, Richard gave me a platform to share my work, a separate opportunity that he did not have to create for me and that fell outside of my work at the Law School. He signaled that he believed what I had to say was important and should be shared broadly, and he would do what he could to open doors. That was the kind of colleague I knew I needed to succeed as a junior scholar.

While in theory, a marginalized person can push their way into an institution, they may not thrive or survive there for long. When I was a law student, I was a summer intern at a law firm in New York City. I met a longtime Black partner of the firm privately. He gave me advice I found to be critical to my success at later jobs: “At a firm, you have to have a family.” Inside of that organization, you must have a small group of people who will support you and give you opportunities. They will point you in the right direction. They will be a sounding board for questions and stand by you when you make a mistake, as nearly every young professional will do because we are human, or you have a hard time. At UM Law, if I was going to join the faculty full time, I needed to have a family. Richard was my opposite in many ways: he was older, and I was younger. He was white, and I was Black. He was toward the end of his career, and I was at the beginning. But all family members are not the same in every respect, and they do not all look the same. As my Black peers would say, borrowing a phrase often attributed to Zora Neale Hurston, “all

²⁶ See, e.g., Leonard Rogoff, *Is the Jew White?: The Racial Place of the Southern Jew*, 85 AM. JEWISH HIST. 195, 195 (1997) (arguing that, in the Jim Crow South, “Jews were accepted as white, but their precise racial place was not fixed”). For some white Americans connected to the experience of discrimination that they or their ancestors from white ethnic groups have experienced, this experience can be an entrée into understanding the struggle with racism people of color in the United States experience. See, e.g., Jade A. Craig, *The Trafficante Route: Fair Housing Law and the Road to Racial Reconciliation*, 60 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 821 (2026).

my skinfolk ain't my kinfolk.”²⁷ Richard was going to be my family.

For me, Richard set an example of what I hoped to find in other colleagues. He convinced me that I would have other supporters in addition to him. I ultimately decided to come back to Mississippi and teach somewhere I thought I would never be because I believe I have found a family in my other colleagues. Richard's example is one that professionals can all follow to make their institutions more diverse, equitable, and inclusive—a human connection that law cannot shut down. I felt that the significance of race in our positions was not lost on me or Richard, even if we rarely if ever addressed it directly. I knew he got it, and he knew that I got it.

My story of coming back to Mississippi is really a metaphor of racial reconciliation and social unity. What Richard did for me and what it meant to me, in the context of all of my life experiences, is about the larger process of ensuring that professionals from diverse backgrounds find a home in the legal profession—in the legal academy, in the practice of law, and in other spaces. During Richard's life, he was appointed by the dean of UM Law as a board member of North Mississippi Rural Legal Services (“NMRLS”) in accordance with NMRLS's bylaws, which grant the dean of UM Law or the dean's designee a permanent seat on the board. NMRLS provides legal services for indigent and low-income individuals in north Mississippi, in part with funding from the federal Legal Services Corporation. When Richard passed away, the dean appointed me to take Richard's place on the board. Richard is once again giving me a platform to make a difference in

²⁷ See, e.g., *Black Kos, Tuesday's Chile: Remembering Zora's Words and Wisdom*, DAILY KOS (Jan. 28, 2020, at 14:00 PT), <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/1/28/1914021/-Black-Kos-Tuesday-s-Chile-Remembering-Zora-s-words-and-wisdom> [https://perma.cc/3CES-LYAH]. It appears that the phrase was taken out of context from a passage in Hurston's autobiography. She writes, “When somebody else eats fried fish, bananas and a mess of peanuts and throws all the leavings on the floor, [college-educated Black people] gasp, ‘My skinfolks but not my kinfolks.’” ZORA NEALE HURSTON, *DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY* (1942). My use here is purely about the fact that people who are not Black can be a professional family for a Black professional, rather than the respectability politics to which Hurston alluded in the original iteration of the phrase.

Mississippi, the state we both believe(d) in—past tense for him,
present tense for me.