Tribute to Professor Sharon E. Rush

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Many years ago, when we were both undergraduate students at Cornell University, I had the pleasure and suerte (great fortune) of meeting Professor Sharon E. Rush. At that time, and throughout her career, her singular focus has been on social justice. Indeed, we met during college while doing fieldwork in connection with a Juvenile Justice class. While that story is for another time, Professor Rush’s commitment to working diligently and indefatigably for a better world for all people, but in particular for those who are vulnerable or marginalized, has been her unique and defining mark. In this short space, it is my honor to share who Professor Rush is and to celebrate her legacy.

Professor Rush is a first-generation college graduate—the daughter of a father who was a Pearl Harbor survivor and a mother who forwent college to serve in the war effort. She graduated *cum laude* from Cornell Law School in 1980 and practiced law with a Wall Street firm in its Washington, D.C. office. She started her teaching career in 1982, joined the University of Florida, Levin College of Law faculty in 1986, and retired from being a full-time academic on November 30, 2018. In her 32 years at the College, she has done as much for the institution as anyone could possibly do. Truly a committed institutional citizen, she first agreed to serve as Associate Dean from 1988–1989 under Dean Lewis. In 1996, after much diligent, difficult, but nonetheless energizing work, Professor Rush and Professor Kenneth Nunn, with the help and support of colleagues and the administration, co-founded The Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations (CSRRR)—a University Center that focuses, as its name reflects, on intersectional concerns surrounding race and race relations. Under the dynamic leadership of its director, Professor Katheryn Russell-Brown, CSRRR’s programs are far-reaching and diverse, including not only academic and intellectual events, but also community centered programs that promote education and equality.

In her last years at the Levin College, from 2012–2017, she was Associate Dean for Faculty Development under Deans Jerry, Dawson, and Rosenbury—a challenging, multifaceted position in which she championed faculty advancement, collegiality, and productivity. She set a high bar for those who come after her as she truly focused on the different needs of each faculty member with whom she worked. She was faculty members’ best cheerleader as well as strong advocate. Professor Rush had the uncanny ability of bringing the best out in all of us by caring and compassion as well as strong and high standards. The College and the University have both recognized her outstanding service and her awards are indubitably well deserved.

In addition to her extensive service, Professor Rush also is an outstanding teacher and scholar. Her work, not surprisingly, centers on justice. Her teaching preferences coincided with her scholarly interests and included such courses as constitutional law, federal courts, and comparative constitutional law. She relished the challenge of trying to convey complicated concepts in meaningful and clear ways. And she was
remarkably successful! Known as the professor who “draws law,” her diagrams are legend. Perhaps that is why the most salient memory of her legion of students is her teaching excellence. Her thousands of students adore her—I know this personally, having had an office next to hers for the last 19 years. It is always full of students with questions, excited to learn how to figure out the answers. Not surprisingly, she received the Outstanding Teacher Award six times during her career. She aptly described the classroom as her “natural habitat.”

And, typically, she has been generous with sharing her special teaching talent. To be sure, she has mentored students and new faculty alike. She visited at several other law schools, including her alma mater, Cornell. She even has exported her talents, having taught in Italy, Germany, Poland, South Africa, Mexico, and France. In 2015 she, with other faculty, won the Online Education Excellence Award 2015 (for MOOC: The Global Student’s Introduction to U.S. Law).

In her groundbreaking book, LOVING ACROSS THE COLOR LINE (2000), she details the painful process of gaining awareness about privilege and experiencing the harm of racism from a mother’s perspective. Loving received a nomination for the NAACP Image Award. In her next book, HUCK FINN’S HIDDEN LESSONS (2006), Professor Rush courageously confronts and explains the reasons why the book causes “emotional segregation”—her term—in the classroom.

Racial injustice is at the heart of Professor Rush’s scholarship, but it is not her only concern. She is well-aware that to achieve true equality, the systemic inequality that affects many different groups of people must be addressed. Accordingly, all of her scholarship focuses on justice—procedural and substantive. Her latest article analyzes complex issues at the intersection of Article I, and the Tenth, Eleventh, and Fourteenth Amendments. She was absolutely thrilled when our own Law Review offered to publish it as the lead article in Volume 71, Issue 5. She told me it was the perfect “official” ending to a perfect career because the article reflects the lessons she learned from teaching her beloved students over the years.

These achievements are significant, as she has had a stellar career in all the spheres on which institutions and history both evaluate faculty: service, research, and teaching. But what is different about Professor Rush is that in her achievement of excellence across all three spheres, she not only taught, researched, and promoted social justice, she lived her social justice beliefs. This takes us full circle to how I met Sharon—as college juniors offering advice to 17-year-olds in the justice system.

Today, we both wonder—and often chuckle—about the wisdom of 19-year-olds providing advice to 17-year olds. But the true wonder of it all is how she stayed on the path, surmounted numerous obstacles and challenges, and crowned a glorious career dedicated to the goal of social justice.

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