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## WCL Commemorates Founders' Day\*

by Dean Claudio Grossman

This year we celebrate the foundation of WCL a hundred years ago by two women, Ellen Spencer Mussey and Emma Gillett. We are the first law school in the country, and possibly the world, created by women. There is some magic in being the first. After all, our society promotes a very strong spirit of competition, and the need to excel. Being the first is as important in academia as it is in sports, in particular, when law school applications throughout the country are down. But the magic of being the first should not be allowed to completely capture our imagination. We are here to celebrate other important things, primarily the courage and commitment of our founders to create a society where there would be no artificial barriers between men and women.

Today, it is easier to talk about equality between men and women, but to understand the intellectual environment in which our founders lived 100 years ago,

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one may look to Justice Bradley's concurring opinion in *Bradwell v. Illinois*. Written in 1872, the case concerns a woman who had passed the bar in Illinois but nevertheless was considered incompetent to practice law. In commenting on the situation, Justice Bradley wrote, "The paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother. This is the law of the Creator. . . Man is, or should be, woman's protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and the delicacy which belong to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life."

In that environment, our founders not only opted out of this protected and delicate life but created a law school which defied these traditional notions. A sec-

ond value that we are here to celebrate today is the creation of opportunity. Allow me to tell you a story about our first commencement in May of 1899. The speaker was a Congressman from South Carolina



From left to right, Irene Klinger, Chief of the Office of External Relations of the Pan American Health Organization, Martha JP McQuade, President of the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia, WCL Dean Claudio Grossman, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Nancy Ladner, and American University President Benjamin Ladner at WCL Founders' Day celebration on April 8, 1996.

who had practiced law in DC. During his speech, the Congressman made it plain that he was very doubtful about women's ability to practice law. In fact, he seemed to be completely against the advancement of women, and he declared pointedly that the old-time woman was good enough for him.

When the speaker had finished, Dean Mussey thanked him for his talk. "But it is very evident," she exclaimed, "that the honorable gentleman is badly in need of information as to why women are studying law. I never had any doubt that the old-time woman was good enough for any man. In fact, she was too good, and the present-day woman is not studying law to be good enough for some man but to have the opportunities that men have." The creation of opportunities for those who could not traditionally study law has been a constant in the history of WCL.

**WCL was founded with an express recognition of the importance of examining the world and the role of lawyers in shaping and interpreting it.**

In addition, WCL was founded with an express recognition of the importance of examining the world and the role of

lawyers in shaping and interpreting it. If one reads the literature concerning law schools, one finds tributes to the struggle for facilities and the constant improvement of scholarly standards by faculty who strive for excellence under the leadership of powerful deans. But what is missing from most of those histories is the link with the outside world, the fact that law schools are related to the life and dreams of real men and women. What has happened with this law school can be compared to what has happened with poetry. Poetry should be not only about the poet whose lover has put him or her in a permanent state of anguish, or about roses that fade because they are denied the water of love, but also about real-life experiences. You have probably recently seen *Il Postino*. The

film is about life, the realities and expectations of all people. What makes the movie great is that it shows that poetry could be a central part of a person's everyday life. Poetry is about people who have fallen from scaffolds when working, who do not have money to pay their mortgage or who cannot find a job. That link to reality made a tremendous difference in

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the history of WCL. The founders wrote and fought for women's suffrage, women's estate rights, children's rights, education, and international understanding. For example, Dean Mussey was counsel to Sweden and Norway and the personal counsel and confidante of Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross.

That link with reality can be seen in the corridors of the law school itself. The testimonies of our founders show also a humane and personalized approach to students at the law school. Schools structure their own environment around the vision they have for society at large.

Today, we celebrate that the values of the founders live on at WCL. Our Women in the Law program asks important ques-

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tions about the role of women in society. Our Clinics make a contribution to society by defending the disadvantaged while, at the same time, educating students. Our international program attracts over 150 lawyers from all over the world and prepares them for work in business, human rights, environmental law and international organizations. Our scholarship continues to defy barriers and sets out to break down man-made distinctions.

We are not here to celebrate a past

that is stagnant. One hundred years ago WCL, like all other schools, did not admit black Americans. We cannot celebrate

Nothing could have been more important to the founders than to know that their message was so powerful that it continues to live.

the founders without recognizing the limits placed upon them by the social and legal structure of their time. The founders

could not fully attain equality and diversity. Our mission is to build on the opportunity that the founders established. Nothing could have been more important to the founders than to know that their message was so powerful that it continues to live. With the contribution of the entire WCL community, I am confident that we will continue to represent the values of human dignity for which they stood. ☸

*\* Remarks by Dean Grossman at Founders' Day Reception, April 8, 1996*

## ALUMNUS PROFILE

### Alumnus Litigates Human Rights Violation Before Inter-American Court

by Stephen Jacques

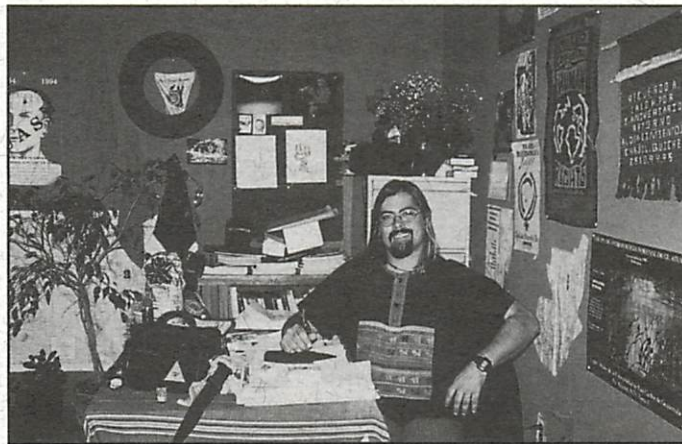
Like many lawyers working in human rights, WCL alumnus William Harrell did not chart his life's course in the direction it has taken him. He originally planned to make a career in domestic civil rights law. After graduating with his J.D. from WCL in 1990, Harrell worked as an attorney for the ACLU on the National Prison Project, a job that was exactly the type he hoped and expected to have after graduation. Yet after a year, he resigned from the ACLU, sold all his material possessions, packed his bags, and moved to Ecuador.

Despite having only a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish, Harrell obtained a job teaching at the Catholic University in Ecuador and another job working for an Ecuadoran international law firm. Doing civil rights work for the firm, Harrell used his expertise in prisoner's rights to begin an investigation of the Ecuadoran penal system. His association with Catholic University provided him with access to the prison system. Harrell's findings have resulted in the recent filing of a case before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. The case is actually a consolidation of many complaints relating to due process violations in the Ecuadoran penal system.

While investigating Ecuadoran prisons and developing the case, Harrell came in contact with various human rights organizations and professionals. He eventually accepted a position at the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CHRLA), an NGO permanently based in Guatemala

City, but with one branch operating out of Washington, DC. After working in Washington on Guatemalan human rights cases for one year, Harrell became the Center's legal director and moved to Guatemala where he currently works and resides.

Today, Harrell has abandoned his original desire to be a civil rights attorney for the ACLU, and has committed himself to a career in international human rights.



William Harrell at his office in Guatemala City.

With nineteen Guatemalan cases currently before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Harrell has argued a variety of human rights issues, from extrajudicial executions and police or military abuses of force, to relatively undeveloped areas of human rights litigation. "Land rights and the rights of indigenous peoples are critical matters right now in Guatemala, and we find ourselves dealing with them a great deal," he says.

Harrell notes that, as the only organization of its kind in Guatemala, CHRLA

cannot take every case that arises. "It tears the heart to have to choose only certain battles to fight," he says. Yet Harrell was recently back in Washington fighting two of those battles, attempting to obtain land rights and reparations for indigenous communities who were displaced over fifteen years ago. (*See Vol. 3, No. 2, Winter 1996, p. 2, for more information on the Los Cimientos case.*)

In addition to his work with CHRLA, Harrell serves as consultant to the United Nations Human Rights Commission on Guatemalan prison issues. Harrell also is currently developing an international human rights clinic at a Guatemalan university, remaining true to the WCL tradition of public interest advocacy. Harrell plans to stay in Guatemala to consult for the UN and to get the clinic up and running, but he will return to WCL in 1997 to obtain an LL.M., which he hopes will broaden his academic knowledge in the human rights field as well as increase

his effectiveness as an activist.

Although he stumbled into international human rights law, Harrell wants to pursue this field and guide others along this fulfilling career path. "As a politically conscious lawyer," he says, "I've learned that what I get in return from the people I struggle for goes beyond material gain and could never be translated into a salary at a law firm. It has changed my whole perspective on the world." ☸

Photo Courtesy of Will Harrell