



10-28-2021

Professor Bonita K. Roberts—A Colleague and a “Conscience”

Victoria Mather

Saint Mary's University of San Antonio

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.stmarytx.edu/thestmaryslawjournal>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), [Legal Biography Commons](#), [Legal Education Commons](#), [Legal History Commons](#), [Legal Profession Commons](#), and the [Legal Writing and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Victoria Mather, *Professor Bonita K. Roberts—A Colleague and a “Conscience”*, 52 ST. MARY'S L.J. xi (2021).

Available at: <https://commons.stmarytx.edu/thestmaryslawjournal/vol52/iss3/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the St. Mary's Law Journals at Digital Commons at St. Mary's University. It has been accepted for inclusion in St. Mary's Law Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons at St. Mary's University. For more information, please contact sfowler@stmarytx.edu.



TRIBUTE

PROFESSOR BONITA K. ROBERTS— A COLLEAGUE AND A “CONSCIENCE”

VICTORIA MIKESELL MATHER*

I.	Introduction.....	xi
II.	The Women’s “Conscience”	xii
III.	The Student Writing “Conscience”	xiv
IV.	The Void She Leaves.....	xv

I. INTRODUCTION

I first met Professor Bonita (Bonnie) Roberts on a cold winter day in 1984 in an interviewing suite at a hotel near O’Hare Airport in Chicago. She was with the St. Mary’s interviewing team at the aptly named “meat market,” seeking new law school professors. The team was all male, all grey, all Texan, and all taller than me—except for Bonnie. Like me, she was short, young (by law professor standards), blonde, an Illinois native, and wearing the required matching skirted suit and bow-tie blouse. Bonnie was the only full-time female faculty member at the time.

When I came to San Antonio to interview on campus, Bonnie showed me around the city, introduced me to many of my future colleagues, and gave me a heads-up about what types of persons I might encounter at the

* Professor of Law, St. Mary’s University School of Law. The author would like to thank the *St. Mary’s Law Journal* for the opportunity to write a few words acknowledging the contributions of Professor Roberts to St. Mary’s University School of Law.

law school. It was useful information, both then and after I started teaching, and I still am grateful to her for it. In the intervening thirty-five years, Bonnie and I shared countless lunches, dinners, meetings, and office conversations. She helped me navigate some of the mysteries of professorial life, particularly when it came to tenured women in legal education.¹ We often took on the “social coordinator” role (retirement dinners, faculty retreats, student banquets, baby showers, etc.) which so often falls to female faculty members. She also listened and helped me during some difficult personal times, both as a friend and a co-worker.

To me, Bonnie easily fits the definition of a good colleague. Nevertheless, during her time on the law faculty, she also served as a form of conscience,² or little voice, that continuously reminded all of us that the law school benefitted from the presence of a significant number of female faculty. She also reminded us that we needed to require more written work from our students, even though neither students nor faculty particularly enjoyed the extra work involved in writing programs and courses.

II. THE WOMEN'S “CONSCIENCE”

When I joined the St. Mary's faculty in 1985, we doubled the tenure-track female faculty number.³ We also had a part-time clinical director and two visiting professors who were women. Bonnie was the first woman to be tenured on the St. Mary's law faculty. After I joined the faculty, we hired a few more women for full-time tenure-track doctrinal teaching positions, to the point where one of our male colleagues remarked that “we had enough damn women” (probably about five) at that point. For her part, Professor Roberts continued to serve on the faculty appointments committee and the student admissions committee. She regularly supported

1. Full-time tenured or tenure-track women in legal education were still relatively rare in the mid-1980s. Both professors and students sometimes reacted negatively to a female at the podium of a class, doubting her ability and openly questioning her competence. In the alternative, we had a few students who thought we might be interested in a date with them.

2. I refer to several of my colleagues as a faculty conscience. Some colleagues serve to remind us that we must be intentional in hiring professors of color. Others remind us to fulfill our obligation to the profession in the production of original and thoughtful scholarship. Still, others serve as reminders of the importance of service to the institution and the profession as a whole. A few are die-hard devotees of pro bono law practice. All serve to keep us focused on important issues as we move through faculty decision-making.

3. There were women on the St. Mary's University School of Law faculty before Professor Roberts was hired. However, none were tenured, and none served for an extensive length of time.

new female faculty, both professionally and socially, and she was conscious of the need to be available to, and model professional behavior for, our women law students.

She constantly reminded the faculty, including me, that we needed to be intentional about our search for female tenure-track colleagues. This feat is sometimes harder than one might think.⁴ She also reminded us that representation of women on key committees and in leadership positions at the law school mattered. She served as the first (and only) woman in our Associate Dean for Finance and Administration position at the law school.

Bonnie would schedule lunches for the female faculty. Eventually, it was a happy problem that the number of female faculty reached the point that we could no longer fit at a standard restaurant table and had to spread out. In the early days, though, it helped immensely to talk with the other women on the faculty about common problems that our male colleagues likely did not face.

Some might question the value or the need for an intentional female faculty presence in the law school today. Depending on the academic year, about one-half of our law students are women. Many clients are women, many judges are women, and of course, many attorneys are women. The woman's experience is different in the professional context. I was the first full-time tenure-track woman to have a baby while on the faculty. Some of my male colleagues also had children during this time, but the student and collegial perceptions are very different when you are the one with the baby bump in the classroom. Generally, expectations about appearance, demeanor, and competencies are very different for men and women, even today. Our students need role models of different types, our future clients need attorneys with different skills, and our colleagues and community need women in legal careers.

Professor Roberts was also involved in the formation of the Bexar County Women's Bar Association. The group grew from a few individuals interested in moving women into leadership roles in the profession to hundreds of men and women who serve the community in various ways, including raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for local charities geared to meeting the needs of women and children. As a reflection of that group,

4. For example, I remember one year we made offers to about seven highly qualified female candidates for a tenure-track professor position here at St. Mary's. None of them were able to take the job. Most had a professional spouse who would not find suitable employment in our community, and others had offers from other schools that better suited their situations.

women in the law school also founded our Women's Law Association, which has grown more and more active over the years and raises thousands of dollars for similar charities. Professor Roberts served as the group advisor for all of her time at St. Mary's, keeping it active, productive, and on track. She also was a constant, willing listener and advisor for our female students, assisting them with everything from interview attire to law firm politics.

While I address Professor Roberts's teaching interests in the next section, I want to note that it is no surprise that when she was able to step out of her exclusive role as a director of Legal Research and Writing and teach other courses, she chose (1) Gender and the Law, and (2) Employment Discrimination as her topics of interest. At heart, I think Bonnie is an old-school feminist and is truly interested not just in the philosophy of feminism but the practice of it in real life.

When Professor Roberts retired at the end of the 2019–2020 academic year, we had ten full-time, tenured and tenure-track female faculty members and six female clinical professors, out of a total of thirty-eight faculty members. Unfortunately, three of our female faculty members recently retired (including Professor Roberts) and one moved to a position with Texas Tech Law School. On the other hand, we were able to hire Patricia Roberts from William and Mary Law School as our new dean, making her the second female dean at St. Mary's School of Law.

III. THE STUDENT WRITING "CONSCIENCE"

Professor Roberts received a master's degree and began a doctorate in English, but made the very practical decision to switch to law sometime during graduate school. She pursued her commitment to effective legal research and writing after law school (she was a librarian with a large law firm in New Orleans) and into her professorial career. Professor Roberts was one of the first tenured legal writing professors in the United States. She directed first-year St. Mary's legal writing program for over thirty years, continuously revising the format to meet students' needs.

Bonnie was an advocate for taking legal research and writing seriously in law school. In many programs in the 1980s and '90s, Legal Research and Writing was not a graded course. Not surprisingly, many students did not take the subject as seriously as their graded doctrinal courses. Thanks to Professor Roberts, St. Mary's was an early adopter of a graded Legal Research and Writing course. Bonnie also encouraged the faculty to require

an upper-level writing course, even before the ABA required it of all law schools. Bonnie resisted any efforts to dilute the writing program, to reduce required writing credit hours, or to allow shortcuts around the requirement. Today, I believe most law professors and lawyers would agree that students need more writing experiences, particularly in the areas of practical legal writing. This is reflected in the more recent ABA requirement that law students complete six hours of “experiential” learning—classes requiring practice skills training in interviewing, counseling, writing, negotiating, discovery, trials, and appeals.

IV. THE VOID SHE LEAVES

I believe that the former first-year Legal Research and Writing program, now called LCAP (Legal Communication, Analysis and Professionalism), is in good hands. I think most of the faculty believe in the value of consistent and continuous training in legal research, writing, and related skills. It seems that Professor Roberts’s legacy in this area is secure.

As to the role of women at the law school, I think those of us who are women on the tenured, tenure-track, and clinical faculty need to step up and remember that: (1) women law faculty are important for the law school; (2) women faculty still face different issues and challenges than our male colleagues; and (3) we should not ignore the numbers and women in leadership roles at the law school and the legal community. It is easy to assume (as sometimes our students do) that the need for intentionality in hiring, supporting, promoting, and tenuring women in the legal academy is in the past. But any quick review of women’s status in the legal profession will show that while women represent about half of all law graduates, they remain a small percentage of law partners (particularly in Big Law) and fully tenured law professors.⁵

I want to thank Bonnie Roberts for her friendship and the use of her voice to advance the interests of women in the law and the practical skills of our students at St. Mary’s. She will be missed.

5. A quick look at the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession website provides a number of articles and resources, focused on the issues facing women and women of color in the profession. *See generally Women in the Profession*, ABA, <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/women/> [https://perma.cc/9NBZ-Z66C]. The National Association of Women Lawyers 2020 Survey on the Promotion and Retention of Women in Law Firms at NAWL.org is also useful. *See generally The National Association of Women Lawyers 2021 Survey on the Promotion and Retention of Women in Law Firms*, NAT’L ASS’N OF WOMEN LAWS., <https://www.nawl.org/page/nawl-survey> [https://perma.cc/G5SD-S26B].