MY CHICAGO LAW MOMENT: THE IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES THAT CHANGED US

BY BECKY BEAUPRE GILLESPIE
The Law School touches people in different ways. Some alumni carry memories of hard-fought moot court victories, while others remember classmates who bolstered their spirits at a critical time or a classroom debate that pushed them to think and argue in a new way.

Four years ago, we began asking alumni to tell us the stories of their “Chicago Law Moments”—the ideas, experiences, and other intellectual souvenirs they have carried with them since leaving the Law School. During videorecorded interviews—often held at the annual Law School Reunion or during daylong “My Chicago Law Moment” events in downtown Chicago—more than 40 alumni have shared stories about the off-the-beaten-path research topics their professors encouraged them to explore, the clinics that inspired their future careers, and how their Bigelow Teaching Fellows taught them to write like lawyers. A library of stories and videos of Chicago Law Moments are available on the Law School’s website at https://www.law.uchicago.edu/story-series/my-chicago-law-moment.

Here, we share just a few of the stories from alumni ranging from the classes of 1966 to 2014.

MICHELLE MBEKEANI-WILEY, ’14, on the Connection between Financial Incentives and Police Accountability

In her day-to-day work, Michelle Mbekeani-Wiley, ’14, most often draws on two pieces of her Law School education, one experiential and one doctrinal.

The first—her experience on the Civil Rights and Police Accountability Clinic’s Youth/Police Project—seems obvious, given that Mbekeani-Wiley spent several years focusing on criminal justice reform and youth/police relations as a staff attorney at the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law and now works as a policy advisor for the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office.

The second is perhaps less so: the 1L Torts class she took with Saul Levmore, the William B. Graham Distinguished Service Professor of Law.

“Torts seems very different from police accountability, but actually they tie in to each other fairly perfectly,” Mbekeani-Wiley said. In Torts, she learned how financial incentives can be used as a form of enforcement—a strategy that has factored into her policy work.

“I frequently think, how is this going to be implemented and enforced? What financial incentives can we put in place so the law enforces itself?” she said when she worked at the Shriver Center. “Even though Torts seems very distant from the public interest work that I’m doing now, those theories definitely come into play in the work that I do. [We ask ourselves]: Is the implementation practical? Who’s going to be in charge of implementing it and sustaining it and ensuring that the policy is efficient and sustainable?”

Often, this means identifying the stakeholders with the most power. In her February 2017 report, Handcuffs in Hallways, an in-depth analysis on the use of Chicago Police Department officers within the Chicago Public Schools, Mbekeani-Wiley emphasized the need for the police and CPS to work together to establish systems of accountability and ensure that officers are adequately trained. “It really puts onus on both the police department and CPS to collaborate with each other on reform,” she said.

Mbekeani-Wiley’s work on the Youth/Police Project, which involved in-depth interviews with students from Hyde Park Academy, taught her how critical it is to listen to the communities one is serving and taking the time to develop relationships. The project highlighted how routine interactions with police can affect minority urban youth—and it led to an emotional, and well-attended, two-day conference that brought Mbekeani-Wiley back to the Law School the spring after her graduation.

“I really believe in listening to community stakeholders before making any policy recommendations,” she said. “I try to connect with community organizations that are in the trenches . . . and that is a method that I learned at the University of Chicago Law School. You need to engage with the community if you want to find solutions to the issues that they are encountering . . . And once you’ve identified the issues and collaborated with the community on solutions, how do you make those solutions sustainable?
Fortunately, the class turned out to be a winner: “It really forced us to think,” Ruiz said. It also introduced Ruiz to Plyler v. Doe, a 1982 Supreme Court ruling that gives all children a right to a public education regardless of their immigration status.

Fast forward a dozen years and ISBE Chairman Ruiz found himself thinking of Plyler after an Elmwood Park school district refused to enroll an Ecuadorian teen who had only a tourist visa.

“I said, ‘Time out. I studied this. I know for a fact that there’s a Supreme Court case that says you can’t do that,’” Ruiz said. The ISBE voted to cut off the school’s state funding, a move that could have barred the district’s athletes from competing in an upcoming basketball tournament.

The tense, 24-hour standoff garnered media attention, but in the end the district backed down, and the state board held a news conference to announce that their funding had been restored.

That’s when Ruiz called on another Law School professor: Susan Gzesh, an immigration lawyer who’d taught an immigration class that Ruiz had taken his second year.

Gzesh, who is now the executive director of the University of Chicago’s Pozen Family Center for Human Rights, agreed to join Ruiz at the news conference.

“She dropped everything and came and was able to address a few questions that some of the reporters had on a specific issues of immigration law and the specific application of Plyler v. Doe,” Ruiz said. “I had the education that Barack Obama had given me a number of years beforehand, but I also had my immigration professor standing right next to me, supporting me in my service efforts to do the right thing by Illinois students.”

Jesse Ruiz, ’95

It was 2006, and Chicago lawyer Jesse Ruiz, ’95, then the chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education, had a problem to solve. Fortunately, Barack Obama had given him the answer 12 years earlier, when Ruiz was Obama’s student at the Law School.

It was a quintessential Chicago Law Moment: a high-profile crisis stemming from a hot-button political issue, resolved under the leadership of an alumnus who looked to his Law School experience for guidance and ultimately helped codify the solution in Illinois law. And it’s a moment that might never have happened.

Ruiz—who is now an Illinois deputy governor under Governor JB Pritzker—hadn’t initially set out to take Obama’s class, Current Issues in Racism in the Law. But the future president, who taught at the Law School between 1992 and 2004, had advised Ruiz during a summer job search and the two had developed a friendly rapport. So when Obama suggested that Ruiz take the seminar he’d designed, Ruiz figured, Well, why not?

“He wasn’t as widely known as he is today, so he had to recruit for students to take his course,” Ruiz said with a smile.

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Jesse Ruiz, ’95, on How Obama’s Class Helped Him Protect Immigrants

And that’s where the doctrinal information comes in to play. If you want reform, reform needs to be funded.”

The Law School also made it easy and natural for Mbekeani-Wiley to connect her clinical experience and doctrinal study. This has long been an emphasis at the school, where clinical and doctrinal faculty often collaborate and one type of education informs the other.

“That’s the beauty of the law—it’s not siloed,” she said. “Things mingle with each other.”

Professor Saul Levmore
Looking back, Ruiz is proud that the experience helped so many Illinois students—and proud of the ways in which the Law School prepared him to navigate it.

“Since then we’ve created regulations . . . Plyler is codified in Illinois law,” he said. “I knew [the Law School] was a special place that was going to teach [me] to think like a lawyer. It’s a bit cliché to say, but they did challenge me in how I approach problems and try to find solutions to problems, and it gave me great analytical skills. But it also gave me a real-world view—you’ve got these tools, so now what do you do with them?”

**PATRICIA LATHAM, ’66, Found Joy in Following Her Curiosity**

In the more than 50 years since Patricia Horan Latham, ’66, graduated from the Law School, she’s practiced corporate and securities law, worked as an arbitrator, taught business planning at a law school, advocated for students with learning disabilities, and written books on legal issues in education and employment.

She said she owes the diversity of her professional experience to the Law School, where she learned to challenge her own plans and remain open to new paths. When she first started law school, there were “possibilities that I hadn’t considered ahead of time,” she said.

For instance, she’d expected to prefer criminal law. Instead, it was contracts law that lit her up.

“I just loved it,” she said of her first-year Contracts class, which she took with then-Professor Malcolm Sharp. “It was absolutely fascinating to me—and not just because contracts law is very logical [and] very well put together. I also realized the importance of contracts law in terms of the functioning of a society, the functioning of an economy. Where would you be if you didn’t have a very well-thought-through contract law system? You wouldn’t get a lot done.”

After that, she studied corporations and taxation, courses she’d never expected to take. She found she was interested in shipping law, so she took a class on admiralty law, too.

By the time she graduated, she’d learned to revel in—and follow—her curiosity. And that became a guiding principle that opened up opportunity after opportunity.

While working at a law firm, she became interested in securities law. “So I spent some time at the Securities and Exchange Commission learning more about that,” she said. “Then I went out from there and practiced in the area of corporate and securities.”

Later, her husband mentioned that he enjoyed doing arbitration work, so Latham tried that, too. She now serves on the panel of arbitrators and mediators of the American Arbitration Association, handling cases in the employment and commercial areas, and serves as an arbitrator for Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA).

For a decade, she also worked as a lecturer teaching business planning at the Columbus School of Law at the Catholic University of America, where she discovered that she loved interacting with students. She also served as president of the Learning Disabilities Association of America and was a founding member of Beacon College, the first institution of higher education in the country accredited to award bachelor’s degrees exclusively to students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and other learning differences.

She also began writing books with her husband, Peter, related to learning disabilities, including *Special Education Law and Learning Disabilities/ADHD and the Law in Higher Education and Employment*.

“All these things that I tried I enjoyed enormously, and [my willingness to try so many things goes] back to my Law School days,” she said. “It was a tremendously broadening experience.”

**NELL MINOW, ’77, on Why Movie Reviewing and Corporate Governance Aren’t So Different**

If you’ve ever wondered how film critique is like corporate governance, just ask Nell Minow, ’77. She’s made successful careers out of both.

“I always say that both are just systems analysis,” said Minow, a leading expert on corporate governance and a movie critic who has been writing about media, culture, and values as “The Movie Mom” for more than 20 years. Her film writing can be seen on Rotten Tomatoes and rogerebert.com, where she’s an editor and critic. “Although my husband
David Apatoff, ’77] does say that I managed to find not one but two jobs where I do nothing but criticize people.”

Minow, a film buff who says her “passion for law is kind of a frolic and detour from my lifelong devotion to movies,” launched The Movie Mom, an online film review blog, in 1995. The endeavor led to a regular gig as Yahoo’s film critic for six years, as well as articles and regular columns in major publications across the country, a book, and more.

Meanwhile, Minow was also working to reform corporate America in a variety of roles—helping to improve corporate boards, advising shareholders, and tackling complex issues like executive compensation and corporate accountability. She authored more than 200 articles and coauthored three books, advised key government officials, and testified before Congress. She currently counsels investors on corporate governance as the vice chair of ValueEdge Advisors.

Both passions, she said, are about figuring out why things fail or succeed.

“I was always really interested in why things don’t work that everybody wants to work,” she said. “Everyone wants a movie to work—there are a lot of people involved: the director, the producers, the cinematographers, the actors, the screenwriter. If it doesn’t work, it’s really interesting to think about why. The same thing is true in corporate governance. Everyone wants the corporation to make money: the employees, the investors, the executives. Everybody wants it to work, and if it doesn’t work, it’s really interesting to think about why.”

Minow built much of her movie expertise before law school, as an avid consumer of films and a critic for school papers; she even studied film for a year in college.

During law school, Minow developed the skills she’d eventually apply to her corporate career. She honed her way of looking at the world, whether it was learning economic analysis or thinking through complex constitutional issues. “Geof Stone had a class that was really transformative for me,” she said. “He made up a set of legal problems, and then we as a group had to write Supreme Court-type decisions about them. I thought that would be fun because they’re all made up. But he really boxed you in. The first one seemed easy—and then in the next one you had to go (and maybe rethink) that first one. It really taught me a lot about the process and the way the law builds up over time. I thought that was just great.”

A comparative law class framed her thinking not because of what it taught her about foreign law, but because it sharpened her focus on American law.

And law and economics made an impact that is still evident in her argumentation today.

“I once was on PBS, on a news show, debating corporate governance issues, and the commentators said I sounded like a socialist,” she said. “And I said, ‘No, I went to the University of Chicago—I’m as free market as you can get.’ That really stopped him cold. I love using economic arguments, I love using the market-based arguments that I learned here.”

How a Dollar Bill, David Currie, and a Long-Settled Debate Shaped

AJIT PAI, ’97

It started with eleven words, all caps, on a US dollar bill. Eleven ordinary words that appear on every Federal Reserve note, to the left of the presidential portrait, where they largely go unexamined and unconsidered—except by people like Ajit Pai, ’97, who noticed them in law school and got to thinking.

THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE.
Interesting words, Pai thought as he studied the bill he’d pulled from his wallet. Where did they come from? And what process had landed them there?

The words weren’t particularly relevant to Pai’s life beyond the status they conferred upon the paper in his billfold, but the Law School had instilled in him an appreciation for off-the-beaten-path inquiry. Soon he was in the library, reading an article that mentioned the Civil War-era battle over legal tender.

It had been quite the battle, Pai learned: the congressional act authorizing greenbacks helped finance the costly Civil War but ultimately led to a years-long controversy that played out in both the 37th Congress and the courts. “During the Civil War, this was a really big deal, the battle over legal tender,” Pai said. “There was a big constitutional debate about it.” Congress had wrestled over whether the power to make legal tender was “necessary and proper” to the execution of enumerated legislative powers. In 1870, the US Supreme Court declared this paper currency to be a violation of the due process and takings clauses of the Fifth Amendment in *Hepburn v. Griswold*—a case that was overturned the following year in the *Legal Tender Cases*. All told, the issue took about a decade to resolve.

Reading references to these skirmishes, however, served only to stoke Pai’s curiosity. And so he went to see Professor David Currie, a noted constitutional scholar whose paper on the Constitution in Congress was among the articles Pai was editing as a member of the *University of Chicago Law Review*. Currie encouraged Pai to read through the *Congressional Globe*, a mid-nineteenth-century record of congressional debates, and Pai happily followed through. “I opened up those musty pages to try to find out what it was that the congressmen and senators were debating,” Pai said. “I ended up writing a paper about the constitutional debate over the Legal Tender Act.”


“When it got published, I remember sending it to Professor Currie, and he signed it and sent it back to me—and I still have this in my library at home—[he wrote]: ‘In remembrance of our joint labors in these vineyards,’” Pai said. “It was such a nice capstone to this intellectual experience.”

Looking back, Pai chuckles: it’s funny, he said, that important lessons sometimes emerge in the most unexpected ways.
and trying to create something that didn’t exist before—that’s something I find very relevant in my current work.”

Today, Pai is the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. He encounters new topics all the time—and his approach is very much a product of the Law School, and one shaped by experiences like the one he had with Currie. He revels in opportunities to learn something new or bring novel thinking to an issue. Pai might meet with Facebook executives to learn how the next generation of virtual reality gaming could thrive with 60-to-70 gigahertz spectrum or talk with experts who can explain how and why stringing fiber through the Louisiana bayou is technically difficult.

“These are the kinds of things I didn’t know before, but I love learning about them,” Pai said.

“And that,” he added, “is a gift Professor Currie gave me.”

**TASNEEM KHOKHA, ’02, on the Little Moments that Build a Life—and Can Help Build a Business**

Looking back, Tasneem Khokha, ’02, sees law school as a constellation of moments—little beads of light that ultimately illuminated a defining revelation: people and relationships are everything, in life and in law.

In the beginning, those moments were the building blocks of friendships that emerged quickly and intensely amid the growing pains of 1L year: Khokha and her classmates forged bonds as they absorbed hundreds of pages a night, anticipated their first cold calls, and learned to swim in what felt like the deepest end of the pool. Later, there were one-on-one conversations with professors, debates with her peers in Green Lounge, and small acts of kindness and camaraderie that provided an emotional girding as she stretched herself intellectually.

When her dad got sick, her Law School friends offered her their notes; they knew she’d had a good reason for missing class. “Those relationships really showed themselves in those moments,” Khokha said.

When she became a lawyer, Khokha became convinced that interpersonal connection wasn’t just the key to learning, but the key to professional success. Ultimately, she came to love teaching these values and skills to others, too, and made it the focal point of her career, moving into marketing and then business development coaching. Now, as the managing director of GrowthPlay, a sales effectiveness consulting firm, she helps lawyers and other professionals grow their revenue by building relationships that are rooted in genuine care and concern.

“The Law School taught me that law is a relationship-driven business, and that is the underlying principle that informs all the work I do,” Khokha said.

She often advises her clients to operate from a place of generosity, building real connections with people before they want something from them.

“The only thing I wanted out of [my Law School classmates] was their camaraderie during those late nights—that and lots of coffee and pizza,” she said. “We had that purity of relationship that we were able to create through a shared experience, and I often advise my clients to do that very thing in their relationships. . . . In showing people that you’re committed to their well-being, to their success, [you] build loyalty, [you] build trust—and ultimately it’s that loyalty and trust that supports the creation of a business relationship.”

As for her Law School friendships, Khokha said they have strengthened over time.

“The further away from the Law School we get, the tighter those bonds . . . become,” she said. “We’ve gone through life events together: having children, getting married, having parents get sick and die, all of those kinds of things. We’ve done life together. . . . [In some cases], they’ve become not only personal relationships but . . . business relationships—and it’s always fun to do business with old friends. They’ve really continued to be a strong presence in my life.”

**JIM FRANCZEK, ’71, Met People Who Would Become Key Figures in His Life**

The way James C. Franczek, Jr., ’71, tells it, his Chicago Law Moment started more than 48 years ago and has been unfurling ever since.
That’s how long it’s been since he graduated from the University of Chicago Law School, a place that once felt like an improbable leap for a kid from Harvey, Illinois, whose parents had never gone to college. It’s a place that fostered his first brush with Illinois and Chicago government, enabling him to meet people like Richard M. Daley, Harold Washington, and Michael Madigan, who would become familiar figures as he grew a successful practice handling high-profile contract negotiations and complex labor and employment litigation for the City of Chicago and numerous other public and private entities.

“The Speaker of the House at that time was a guy named John Touhy—he was a very gruff, very old-school Democrat,” Franczek said. “So [on my first day,] I report to John Touhy, and I said, ‘Speaker Touhy, I’m here from the University of Chicago . . . where do I go, what do I do?’ And he took one look at me and he said, ‘University of Chicago?’ And he sent me over—and I’ll never forget, he pointed— to all the mavericks. And the mavericks at that time were Harold Washington, Adlai Stevenson III, a guy named Tony Scariano, Paul Simon. I ended up being a gofer for all of those people. That ended up affecting, impacting, resonating for literally decades in my life.” (In 1969, Washington and Scariano were members of the Illinois House of Representatives, Simon had recently become the state’s lieutenant governor, and Stevenson was the state treasurer.)

The next year, Franczek was a law clerk for the Bill of Rights Committee for the Illinois Constitutional Convention in 1970—incidentally, the Committee’s legal counsel was Dallin H. Oaks, ’57, a former Law School professor and Utah Supreme Court justice who is now a top leader in the Mormon Church—and met Michael Madigan, who would later become the longtime speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives, and Richard M. Daley, who would become the longtime mayor of Chicago.

As Franczek’s career unfolded, he began to see how valuable those early encounters had been. Scariano, a state lawmaker and attorney, hired Franczek to work in his firm and help on some of his campaigns. Franczek represented the City of Chicago in labor negotiations and disputes when both Washington and Daley were mayor, and he continues to do so under Mayor Rahm Emanuel. And Stevenson—although not intentionally—provided the venue for Franczek’s first date with Deborah: the future husband and wife attended a fundraising picnic together on Stevenson’s farm.

“At the time, I didn’t quite appreciate it,” Franczek said of his clerkships. “It was an exciting experience, it was a wonderful experience. But little did I know that I would be looking back now having represented the City of Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools, [having] done a lot of relatively big things in labor.”

It’s the Law School, he said, that made those opportunities possible.

“As you look back on the course of 45 years, first of all, you appreciate how quickly that time goes by. Secondly, you end up appreciating much more than you did when you were here,” he said. “The Law School is not only important to me professionally, but it was also important to me personally. It was incredible.”