

Comments by Phoebe A. Haddon,
Chancellor, Rutgers University–Camden

Ruth Bader Ginsburg Lifetime Achievement
Award Ceremony

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During the past few weeks, I've received emails and phone calls from colleagues and friends across the country congratulating me on receiving this recognition. I appreciate hearing from them – but find myself candidly feeling such well wishes signal the final bending of an arc that defines my experiences in legal education promoting social justice.

“Gratification” for this recognition suggests “self-satisfaction” and that does not accurately describe how I feel about my selection by the AALS Section on Women, a coalition that supports and advances women in legal education. This network empowers many of us as faculty and leaders, sustains us, and most importantly, provides a foundation upon which we stand as we educate, mentor and support our students. The organization has given voice to many women leaders, enabling us to influence legal education, social policy and, through our students, shape society.

It is an honor to be included among winners of this most distinguished award, which

includes its namesake, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. We at Rutgers Law School hold the Justice in particularly high regard as a former member of our faculty. The incandescent brilliance of her life, a shining example of courage and fortitude, has and will continue to inspire young girls and women to live with courage, strength, and purpose.

RBG is an icon and role model for all of us – certainly for me. And joining me among many other supporters today are my husband, Frank McClellan from Temple Law, and our daughter, Cara McClellan, now an LDF lawyer, standing on the shoulders of this great woman like the rest of us.

The earlier recipients of this award are truly trailblazers. Catharine MacKinnon defined the role of feminism in the law. Herma Hill Kay was one of the first women to lead a law school and was certainly instrumental in defining what it means to be a strong leader. And my former colleague from Temple University, Marina Angel, challenged women to question the status quo and to speak forcefully about continuing gender inequality. Like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, these pioneers have shaped what it means to be socially conscious leaders committed to equality for women.

It is truly humbling to receive an award in her name joining these other great leaders in legal education.

In the past few weeks, Justice Ginsburg has confronted increasing challenges to her health. Please join me in adding our prayers to those of the nation for her recovery. America needs Justice Ginsburg and others like her now more than ever before.

A role model, Justice Ginsburg set the stage for my generation and altered the American legal education terrain. My attainment of positions of leadership in legal education was part of a surge that followed these remarkable women who preceded and

pried open the doors that had locked out women from deanships and other leadership roles.

In earlier times, women had achieved the role of associate dean, but seldom moved higher. These women were often the internal forces that powered our law schools, yet their advancements to full deanships were remarkably rare. Although numbers have increased, there are still far fewer women than men in positions of leadership. For deans, 30% appears still to be the tipping point.

I have no doubt that implicit bias – based on gender as well as race – continues to affect faculty hiring as well as dean selection

processes. But I also believe that we need to do a better job of providing professional development experiences that enable others to see women in leadership as well as to better prepare women to imagine themselves as leaders.

I might be less concerned about these issues if I did not confront tangible anecdotal evidence of continuing challenges in my role as chancellor.

>> Two years ago, I heard from a young woman who was in my Race and Law class at Temple who had learned that I had become chancellor. The message was titled “Thank you from a Temple Law Graduate (Class of 2005) Torts:”

“... I would like to thank you for being a shining example and the embodiment of the childhood fantasy of an impoverished, first-generation college student from the housing projects, who felt out of place and overwhelmed in law school... I was all but convinced that I did not belong, that is, until I met you. There you were ... not just fitting in but redefining the space! ... I just want to extend my thanks to you for being a role model at a pivotal moment in my life.”

In addition to the disadvantages that have been shown in studies about women, we know that race can also be a factor compounding our students' ability to imagine themselves in successful professional roles. We also now more fully

appreciate the subtle ways implicit bias affects even well-intended decision-making.

As chancellor of a diversity-promoting institution like Rutgers, I know it is important to be sensitive to the subtle ways that we can convey or leave a feeling of disconnection for some students, faculty, administrators, and other employees. It can have devastating effects on first-generation and diverse students but also adversely affects the well-being of staff and faculty.

My path to consciousness about these effects started long ago. Like other black families during what Isabel Wilkerson describes in ***The Warmth of Other Suns, The Epic Story of America's Great***

Migration, my parents migrated from South Carolina and Virginia to New Jersey.

Consequently, more than 50 years ago, I attended public schools in New Jersey in Passaic, a town with nearby factories that prospered because of union wages and surrounding commercial growth. My father, a dentist, established a thriving practice because he was the only black dentist in the area and because union members, white and black, came to his office through local professional contacts.

My mother, who had been a mathematician at Langley Field in Virginia – she was one of the Hidden Figures (I'll get back to that) – taught science and then math in one of two junior high schools – where the black and Latino and more generally, recent

immigrants attended. My brother and I attended the other predominantly white one in the area.

Our homes in Passaic were in neighborhoods where the homeowners had never previously experienced living near blacks. The school system was integrated in name, but racially segregated because of realtor steering. In short, my family had moved from the segregated South to the North which was also segregated by housing patterns, school attendance boundaries and neighborhood zoning. After my father threatened to sue, the realty agent showed my parents homes located near some of the best schools but in an area where no other blacks lived. Our

choices, however, continued to be limited and we settled in a mainly blue collar, white part of Passaic that was not far from a well-respected elementary school. My brother (also here today) and I were two of only a handful of blacks attending that school. With the exception of a Jewish neighbor who had also been steered, neighborhood families were not college-educated.

As she did for her students at Wilson Junior High, my mother would encourage neighborhood children to apply to local colleges and think about careers. Our high school, the only public one in Passaic, was richly diverse but highly tracked to create honors programs and other opportunities

for some students who were almost all white.

After high school, I attended Smith College at a time when African Americans were just beginning to be accepted more than one or two at a time at the Seven Sisters. Some Ivy League institutions were not formally open to women until a year or so later. My undergraduate school and, later, professional school education and training reflect both the breadth and limitations of opportunities available to blacks and women at the time.

My views on the importance of role models and inclusion were shaped by my being mentored by diverse leaders in higher

education and law. My role models have truly been diverse in terms of gender, age, life experiences, and leadership styles.

While applying to law schools, I was recruited by the dean to attend Duquesne Law School; Duquesne Law was one of the first majority white law schools led by a black dean. After law school, I clerked with Judge Joseph Weis, a judge on the Third Circuit Court of Appeals. Judge Weis, a Catholic and conservative jurist in his political views joined other judges in the region who felt the time had come to include significant numbers of women as clerks.

Following my clerkship, I was recruited by major law firms which also were beginning

to more forcefully articulate and act on commitments to outreach. I chose to accept a position at a nationally known Washington, DC firm that at the time had recently hired two other black lawyers and a woman but who also had an earlier history of diversity hires. The Wilmer Cutler and Pickering firm supported social justice in their nationally celebrated pro bono commitments and had been highly recommended by my colleague and now husband, Frank McClellan, because he had an earlier positive experience with the firm. My law firm experience was extraordinary because of the rich diversity of powerful thinkers with whom I interacted. They had founded a firm that was committed to both doing good and doing well.

Several years later, I was hired to teach at Temple Law School by another socially conscious dean, Peter Liacouras, who was committed to changing the predominantly male and white culture of the legal profession. I chose to stay at Temple for almost 30 years because it provided me with a supportive community. During that time, it was more racially and ethnically diverse than almost any other law school, included a significant number of women faculty and administrators, and was committed to addressing issues of social justice through its clinics.

After Temple, I had the honor of serving as dean at the University of Maryland School

of Law. I was attracted to Maryland Law, in substantial part because of its longstanding commitment to diversity in faculty and leadership. There were over half a dozen faculty of color and senior white women faculty who chaired important committees and held other leadership positions. There were other women deans among the UM schools located in Baltimore.

Notably, however, the state of Maryland (and the University of Maryland itself) had an earlier deeply troubling history of both formal racial segregation and post-segregation-era practices that resulted in continued racial effects of segregation that still are the focus of ongoing federal and state lawsuits. While appreciating the

University commitments, I was also made aware of the continuing effects of discrimination experienced by law alumni/ae of color. These students had been steered away from attending the flagship and denied other opportunities to thrive because of their race. Notably, Wendell Freeland, a brilliant lawyer and colleague from Pittsburgh while at Maryland had been one of these students. He became an outstanding lawyer and advocate despite these experiences.

In each step of my journey, I have had the support of others committed to offering opportunities increasing diversity and broadening perspectives on race and gender. I was not always the pioneer but often benefited from those with decision-

making power who were prepared to provide opportunities for outreach and engagement to others. For me, this shaped a path not previously often available to women of color and not generally available except to those who come from a position of white privilege.

Notably those who have made possible new pathways for me – including those that I have already briefly discussed but also the president and chancellor at Maryland, and the president of Rutgers – were all white males. But I also want to recognize here M. Pat McPherson, who was chair of the Smith College Board while I served as college trustee and became one of her vice chairs. We have served together on other

committees and interacted on other boards and leadership ventures since our Smith days. An alumna of Smith, she became president of Bryn Mawr and a lifelong advocate of diversity at the Mellon Foundation and elsewhere.

In addition to the importance of having role models – people who can help you to see your future self by their cultivation and example – I want to convey the value of mentoring – having someone who can listen, give positive as well as critical feedback and, most importantly, encourage your own self-reflection. Mentoring takes time and I also know it is valuable to be both “mentee” and mentor. Mentors come

in a variety of forms but the relationship must always build on trust.

For me, a mentor often has been someone who can help me to form the words or give me permission to say aloud that I aspire to take on a role of leadership or otherwise undertake new risks. Mentors need not be of the same gender or race. Unlike role models, which can be a one-way relationship, mentors are engaged and engaging.

The book and movie, ***Hidden Figures***, made me think about the differences between role modeling and mentoring. I should confess that my mother was one of them, a Hidden Figure. She's highlighted in the book

as is Pearl Bassette, a cousin. I grew up knowing that she had been a mathematician at Langley Field Air Force Base. I knew a number of the women with whom she worked and who are included in Margot Lee Shetterly's book. She was best known to the world, however, as a science teacher at the mostly black and Latino Woodrow Wilson Jr. High School in Passaic.

At Langley Field, her influence on her team of mathematicians she supervised was important but her impact on Passaic students was profound. Few of the parents of these children or friends had attended college. Many of the students she taught and later guided as a high school counselor – both black and white – did go on to

college and graduate schools. So did our white neighbors on the blocks where we first lived in Passaic. In some ways her “coming out” as a teacher, role model, and mentor became her highest achievement. My mother has been my role model.

Why has *Hidden Figures* been so popular? I think it struck a nerve – particularly for many white women as well as people of color – because their story was simply not widely known. It underscored why, even as we have been promoting STEM in our schools, we continue to face glaring disparities in the number of girls who succeed in these fields. Women comprise nearly 60 percent of all U.S. college undergraduates but are not as widely

represented as graduate students, particularly Ph.Ds.

I now serve on the Board of HERS (Higher Education Resource Services), an organization which supports women who may have an interest in higher education leadership. At one of our recent sessions, a faculty member/student stayed behind to chat and confessed that she was not only not able to see herself as dean, or as chancellor; tearing up, she confessed that she could not imagine herself as an associate dean.

Many of our colleagues may similarly not find the opportunity to be in tune with and articulate their aspirations. We MUST learn how to listen and to better support one

another. I urge you through your mentoring, advising, or interactions with faculty administrators and students that you find opportunities (particularly for first-generation women and people of color) to consider their leadership potential. Find ways to promote their development. Higher education opportunities improve and depends upon this engagement.