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## On Being a Mentor

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# ON BEING A MENTOR

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*Verna L. Williams\**

Twenty years ago I was a first-year student at Harvard Law School ("HLS"). Even then, Charles Ogletree ("Tree") was something of a legend. Coming from Washington, D.C., and having friends who clerked at the Public Defender Service, I knew of his reputation as an attorney of unparalleled skill. But even in the frozen North, the land of the "T," the frappe, and the broad "a"—a strange land to one hailing from "Chocolate City"—the buzz around this young professor and his Introduction to Trial Advocacy course was so universally great that by the end of the first semester that year, I had resolved to become one of his students. That was one of the best decisions I made during my three years at HLS, but not for reasons that I originally envisioned. In my third year at Harvard, Charles Ogletree was more than just a great professor who pushed me to see my potential through his eyes; he was a brotherly mentor, whose courage, generosity, and wisdom have informed my professional and personal life ever since.

I served as president of the Black Law Students Association ("BLSA") during my third year of law school. Every spring, then, as now, BLSA sponsored a conference that featured African American Alumni. During my tenure at HLS, this event also included a meeting with the Dean to discuss issues of concern to African American students. At that time, HLS did not have an African American woman on the tenure track faculty. As BLSA president, I met with then-dean Jim Vorenberg to express our disappointment with that fact and advocate for more diversity on the faculty. That spring, the issue gained currency as BLSA members grew frustrated with the administration's failure to formulate concrete solutions. The African American Alumni meeting with the dean afforded me the opportunity to share our concerns. I viewed my address to the gathering as a chance to win support from lawyers now in the "real world."

After a greeting from the alumnus who was serving as the informal chair of the gathering, I gave my report. I talked about how there recently had been several openings, both in administrative and faculty positions, that could have been filled by African Americans but the administration had let those opportunities pass. I talked about how, lacking African Americans in such positions, the administration had actually called upon me, as BLSA president, to assist another African American student who was in emotional distress, an additional responsibility my white counterparts did not have. Then, I asked the Dean to explain why HLS had such difficulty

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hiring persons of color. He responded by saying that he could not find anyone who was qualified. And then I lost my temper.

How could he say that in front of these esteemed alums? How was it possible that HLS could not attract *any* qualified persons of color, particularly since it graduated significant numbers of African American attorneys year after year? Surely, he could come up with a better reason. In the "real world," I thought, this was the stuff of Title VII lawsuits. I sat back and waited for the alums to pick up the baton that I had thrust to them in my rage.

Imagine my embarrassment as the baton exploded in my face. The alums were horrified by my outburst. They apologized to the Dean for my impudence; some even apologized *for* the Dean, asserting that in the past, admission of older African American students ensured that younger students had the mentors and role models that they needed. My head was spinning. I was ashamed that I let loose my passion. I disappointed the very people I was hoping to enlist in our efforts. And, worse, they seemed to be taking the Dean's side. How had I so colossally miscalculated?

Then, Professor Ogletree spoke up. "Still, Verna makes a good point," he said. Were my ears deceiving me? Professor Ogletree then went on to press the Dean to give a better explanation as to the paucity of diversity on the faculty. In addition, he moved the discussion along, urging the Dean to work with students and others to develop a strategy for securing a African American woman, in particular, on the tenure track. To my great astonishment, the Dean agreed and said he wanted to meet with me and others to figure out how to move forward. In addition, the Dean said he appreciated my having raised the concern.

Now, the point of this story is not to say that after the meeting, the Dean led the charge to hire a woman of color that very summer, which, of course, did not happen;<sup>1</sup> rather, it is to highlight the courage, generosity, and wisdom of Tree in this particular situation. As an untenured minority faculty member, pursuing a non-traditional route to teach at an elite institution, Tree easily could have—and maybe should have—kept quiet under those circumstances. But he had the courage to speak up, even when associating himself with one of the many divisive issues at HLS could have come at a cost to him. Moreover, he was generous in giving a third-year student credit for voicing concern about minority hiring, albeit not in the most diplomatic manner, when he certainly could have pursued the issue on his own. And finally, he was wise, moving beyond the Dean's manifestly fallacious rationale to push for a concrete next step, which, in turn, pushed HLS closer to recruiting and hiring a woman of color.

As angry and humbled as I was by that encounter at the time, it is an occurrence for which I am now grateful. How was I to know that my experience would inform my later professional life, both in practice and now in the academy? Working with Tree has shored up my courage, enabling me to show my anger, where necessary, in advocating for what I be-

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1. Much to the dismay of Dean Vorenberg, BLSA students, impatient with the glacial pace of change, took direct action later that semester. One of the conditions for ending the protest was development and implementation of a fellowship program designed to increase the pool of minority scholars, which we insisted be called the Charles Hamilton Houston Fellowship.

lieve is right. It reminded me to be generous with my colleagues and my students, and granted me the wisdom to remember that the struggle for change requires patience and persistence.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to learn from and work with this gracious man. How lucky HLS is to have him. How lucky we all are.

