RWU Law News: The e-Newsletter Of Roger Williams University School of Law (June 2019)

Roger Williams University School of Law

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Making it Affordable

Just over a decade ago, as the Great Recession ravaged the legal education sector, RWU Law made several game-changing decisions that helped shape the institution it would become.

Focusing on affordability soon made RWU Law the best-priced ABA-accredited private law school in the Northeast.

Honoring Past, Present and Future
Commencement 2019

RWU Law graduates, family, friends, alumni, board members, faculty and staff celebrated Commencement 2019 with an inspiring keynote, valuable advice, and lots of memories.

Celebrating RI's 'First Women'

The dedication of a commemorative plaque at RWU Law, honoring the first 176 women to join the state bar, drew an overflow crowd celebrating strides made -- and recognizing the work still to be done.

Honoring Dorothy Crockett

In 1932, Dorothy Russell Crockett became the African-American woman admitted to the Rhode Island bar, and just the 7th female lawyer in the state’s history. On September 10, RWU Law will honor her achievement with a classroom dedication.

'The best decision I’ve made in my life...'
Christine Awe '19

Awe had arranged to spend her final semester at RWU Law in the D.C. Semester in Practice program, working with the FCC ...

Then the government shutdown happened.

Christine's Story

Congressman David Cicilline argues the importance of passing the LGBTQ-friendly Equality Act

Professor Nadiyah Humber, will direct Corporate Counsel and Gov'clinical Externship Programs.

RWU Law turned out for the Rhode Island PrideFest 2019 celebration and Illuminated Night Parade.

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Making It Affordable

How the Great Recession helped shape the institution that RWU Law has become at 25

As Roger Williams University School of Law celebrated its 25th anniversary over the past year, the school enjoyed the privilege of having become an integral part of the Rhode Island and regional legal profession and the community at large. Throughout the 2018-19 academic year, RWU Law e-newsletter examined different aspects of the school’s evolution over that period in the areas of diversity, experiential learning and public interest. In this final installment of the series, the focus is on affordability.

Just over a decade ago, as the Great Recession ravaged the U.S. economy across multiple industries, the bottom fell out of the nation’s legal education sector. Applications dropped precipitously; law schools from coast to coast struggled to make their budgets, and some law schools folded. Barely 15 years old at the time, RWU Law made several decisions during the downturn that shaped the institution that celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

“In a crisis, you have to do some real soul-searching and figure out what’s most important about your institution, and what genuinely distinguishes it,” explains Dean Michael Yelnosky. “When you can’t make investments willy-nilly, when you have to be careful and thoughtful about how you spend that next dollar – what do you spend it on? For us, setting those priorities produced some positive results.”
Broadly, the school prioritized: (1) ensuring affordability; (2) doubling down on experiential education; (3) expanding pro bono practice opportunities; and (4) broadening student diversity.

Many of these decisions built on existing institutional strengths and priorities.

“These decisions worked, in part, because they were not artificial; they were organically rooted in who we already were as an institution,” notes Professor David Logan, who was dean from 2003 to 2013, including when the recession hit. “Without those hard choices, I’m not sure we’d be what we are today – a financially stable school that’s going to last for a lot longer than 25 years.”

Affordable Excellence

In its most dramatic response to the changing landscape of legal education, RWU Law introduced its Affordable Excellence initiative, reducing tuition by 18 percent in 2014. In addition, the school guaranteed that tuition would not increase during a student’s three years of law school, and did not increase tuition for an incoming class until 2018. These moves made RWU Law the best-priced ABA-accredited private law school in the Northeast, with tuition and fees that are not just lower but, in many cases, much lower than peer schools.

“We were trying to address, in a very specific way, what the market for legal education was telling us,” Yelnosky explains, “which was that the value of a law degree was not in sync, in many instances, with the cost of that law degree; that the return on investment started to decrease when the recession hit. It seems an obvious adjustment to make in retrospect, but in real time it was unsettling because it was uncharted territory.”

The results were swift and tangible: enrollment stabilized and then began to creep up again. The move also won the school recognition in national media. The Wall Street Journal called out RWU Law as one of “a handful of U.S. law schools” that had successfully boosted enrollment in a down economy by reducing tuition. The New York Post added, “Good for these law schools for working to give their students more bang for the college dollar,” again singling out RWU Law for praise. “The smarter schools will follow.”

“It was a bold statement that we weren’t just like every other law school,” says Yelnosky. “We did something that virtually nobody else had done. And it gave us, I think, the sense that we could be more than just passive observers of our market. Instead of being back on our heels, we started to declare the other ways in which we were not like other law schools.”
Law Graduates Urged to ‘Help Bring Society Together’

RWU Law graduates, family, friends, alumni, board members, faculty and staff celebrated Commencement 2019 with an inspiring keynote, valuable advice, and lots of memories.

RWU Law celebrated Commencement 2019 on May 17 in Bristol, R.I. Image Credit: RWU Law/Andrea Hansen

May 17, 2019

Michael M. Bowden

BRISTOL, R.I., May 17, 2019 – A cool, cloudy day prevailed but the rain stayed away during Commencement exercises here Friday as noted legal scholar Lee Epstein urged the 130 graduates of the Roger Williams University School of Law’s Class of 2019 to use their newly minted legal skills to “help bring society and people together.”

Epstein, the Ethan A.H. Shepley Distinguished University Professor at Washington University in St. Louis, focuses her academic work on law and legal institutions, and especially the behavior of judges. She has authored or co-authored more than 130 articles and essays and 18 books, including The Choices Justices Make.

To loud applause, Epstein began by taking a selfie with the graduates, noting that they hailed from around the country and the world, and citing some of their impressive statistics: "Together you have completed the equivalent of 11,800 semester hours, taken 2,640 exams, written papers of 726,000 words, and devoted a stunning 14,000 to law-related pro bono work. Wow!"
Epstein observed that in the current political climate, judges appointed by Democrats and those appointed by Republican presidents are making very “different decisions on many hot-button issues of the day, like abortion, guns, campaign finance and capital punishment.” That makes the courts complicit in a deepening societal rift that has manifested in “fear and loathing on both sides,” she said.

But a legal education, Epstein added, provides “exactly the right tools and sets of skills” to break this “devastating cycle.” These include:

1. Respect. “Either side can make good arguments. Good policies can come from either side of the partisan divide.”
2. Communication. “Every successful and effective interaction – in the classroom, in the courtroom or in the clinic – is two-way. We all value our freedom to speak. But without listening, we’re in a perpetual shouting match, always talking past each other.”
3. Collaboration. “When we come together we are stronger. As a lawyer, you now have the skills to unite us in common purpose, to bring us together.”

Epstein closed with a reference to Shakespeare’s well-known line, “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers,” from Henry VI, Part 2, noting that its contextual meaning is widely misunderstood.

“The characters in Shakespeare’s play who proposed eliminating all the lawyers wanted to provoke widespread civil unrest in the hope of destroying the ancient rights of the English,” Epstein said. “They wanted to promote chaos and disorder, but they knew that the lawyers would stand in their way, because they understood that lawyers unite not divide. The lawyers were a threat precisely because of their great power to bring people together.”

"Law matters and our students know it." ~ RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky

During Commencement ceremonies, honorary degrees were also presented to Ashbel T. Wall, II, retired director of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, and veteran Providence trial attorney Peter A. DiBiase. (Due to illness, Wall was unable to attend the ceremony. At his request, Assistant Attorney General Michael W. Field ’97, accepted the degree on his behalf.)

To underline the importance of public interest work to the community as well as legal education, Dean Michael J. Yelnosky read heartfelt notes from prisoners who were helped by students participating in RWU Law pro bono programs. "Law matters and our students know it," he said.

It was a year to mark milestones as well. Yelnosky paid tribute to the university’s 10th president, Dr. Donald J. Farish, who passed away unexpectedly last summer, and its 11th, Dr. Ioannis Maioulis, who will take the reins this summer – as well as interim president Andrew Workman, who admirably performed the "unsexy but exceedingly important" work of directing the university between administrations. Yelnosky also remembered Class of 2019 member Mordechai Smith, who died near the end of his 1L year. Both Smith and Farish were honored with a moment of silence.
Yelnosky awarded the Dean’s Distinguished Service Award to Chelsie Horne, longtime director of RWU Law’s Office of Programs & Events. He also noted the impending departure of Deborah Johnson, the law school’s Director of Diversity and Outreach, who helped the school exceed 30 percent ethnic and racial diversity during her eight-year tenure.

Chosen by the graduating class, Professor of Writing Justin Kishbaugh was honored as Best Full-Time Professor; and Visiting Assistant Professor of Business Law Andrew Spacone was called out as Best Adjunct Professor. For this year’s Best Staff Member award, the class selected Brittany Raposa, the school’s Associate Director of Bar Support, for the second year in a row.

The Honorable William E. Smith, Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island and chair of RWU Law’s Board of Directors, called the school’s future “enormously bright” and urged graduates to “do good as you do well.”

Valedictorian Nicole Rohr, a native Missourian who already holds a Ph.D. in biological science, and is a former Knauss Fellow and Capitol Hill legislative assistant as well as an assistant research professor at the University of Rhode Island, shared her broad perspective with her classmates. “Never fear changing your direction,” she said. “Ranging down a new path often requires leaving something behind, whether that is moving from familiar surroundings or letting go of a career choice that no longer fits your vision of the future. Take a risk.”

On Saturday, May 18, U.S. Senator Jack Reed will deliver the commencement address to more than 1,200 students at the Roger Williams University undergraduate commencement. The university will also present honorary degrees to civil rights leader Clifford R. Montiero, who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and served as president of the NAACP Providence branch for a decade, and to Marcia Morris, Vice Chair of the RWU Board of Trustees and a Presidential Search Committee co-chair who served in executive management and chief legal officer roles during her career.
Celebrating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island

The dedication of a commemorative plaque at RWU Law, honoring the first 176 women to join the state bar, draws an overflow crowd celebrating strides made - and recognizing the work still to be done.

A group shot of the First Women Lawyers of Rhode Island who attended Thursday's dedication event.

Image Credit: RWU Law/David Silverman

April 12, 2019

Michael M. Bowden

BRISTOL, R.I., April 12, 2019– Nearly 300 attendees turned out Thursday evening when Roger Williams University School of Law hosted a special event commemorating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island, which featured the dedication of a plaque listing the names of these 176 pioneers in the law.

The plaque, prominently mounted in the law school’s second-floor Atrium, includes the names of the 176 known First Women, “and others unknown,” along with the preamble: “Roger Williams University School of Law honors the pioneering First Women of the Rhode Island Bar (1920 to 1979). Their efforts helped establish the rightful place of women in the legal profession and a foundation upon which a more fully inclusive legal profession can be built.”
The plaque was officially unveiled with a ribbon-cutting by Judith E. Hodge, Esq. Admitted to the bar in 1965, she was the earliest (23rd of 176) of the First Women attending the event.

“At RWU Law, we believe the profession should reflect the population it serves,” said Dean Michael J. Yelnosky. “We owe these women a debt of gratitude.”

Yelnosky added that the school plans on creating opportunities to celebrate these pioneers. “That’s one of the roles of a law school — to be a convener,” he said. "And I can tell you that the positive energy that I’ve felt when a group of these women have gathered to talk about the project is powerful.”

‘Glass-Ceiling Breakers’

The plaque dedication event, sponsored by Adler Pollock & Sheehan P.C., featured comments from Professor Emily Sack; RWU Law student Christine Awe, president of the school’s Women’s Law Society; Rhode Island Superior Court Judge Netti Vogel; and Nicole Verdi ’14, president of the RWU Law Alumni Association.

“It’s been obvious from the start, and from the number of people here today, that this issue has resonated with many, many people,” Sack noted in her introduction. “This is truly a powerful moment for our legal community, for our law school, and most especially for our students as we focus on the continuing need to achieve gender equity in our profession.”

As the past has impacted the present, so will the present impact the future.

Appreciating that progression makes us recognize the vital need to remain active and vocal, and gives us the optimism to know we’re making a difference.

~ Judge Netti Vogel

Addressing the First Women present for the event, Awe cited Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s observation that, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” She added – to laughter and applause – “Thank you all for misbehaving. The marathon continues.”

In her comments, Verdi stressed the enormity of the strides made by the First Women, often while also managing households and raising large and busy families.

“The effect and impact of Rhode Island’s First Women is massive,” she said. “There is no way I can adequately articulate how monumental these women were and are. They epitomize the phrase, ‘glass-ceiling breakers.’ These women have broken so many barriers, and they did it at a time when breaking barriers was not only frowned upon, but also ridiculed and criticized.”

She emphasized that the struggle is ongoing.

“It’s on us, as women of the legal profession, to ensure we use our status to extend that same invitation to the next generation of female firsts – a generation that promises to be more diverse,
and that will shatter the most stubborn ceilings and kick down the most stubborn doors that remain,” Verdi said.

Speaking for the First Women present, Judge Vogel (admitted to the bar in 1975) opened her comments by evoking the tear-jerking final scene from the 1992 film *A League of Their Own*, when the players in later life visit a modern exhibition about pioneering women in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

“This is kind of *our* Hall of Fame,” she said. “I think that’s awesome.”

Vogel added that, in addition to the better-known pioneers on the First Women list, recognition was due to the unknowns among them.

“Some of these women may have abandoned their journey to join the legal profession before they reached any level of success,” Vogel said. “I cannot say that they hit a glass ceiling because they never entered the room. They weren’t invited. Certainly, any effort on the part of these women to compete equally with their brother lawyers would have been met with virtually insurmountable opposition by the bench, the bar, and society.”

Even now, she noted, much work remains to be done.

“Women entering the profession today are themselves not free from some level of discrimination,” Vogel said. “As the past has impacted the present, so will the present impact the future. The importance of recognizing the so-called pioneers of the women’s bar goes beyond gender discrimination. It is also important because newer lawyers and those about to join the profession – lawyers of color, gender-nonconforming lawyers, lawyers with disabilities, lawyers whose first language is not English – are still breaking down barriers.

“The women who were the legal pioneers of yesterday can be the teachers and mentors of the legal pioneers of today,” she concluded, addressing the students in the audience. “As I stood on the shoulders of the earlier generation of women lawyers, you’re standing on the shoulders of my generation, and future lawyers will stand on your shoulders. Appreciating that progression makes us recognize the vital need to remain active and vocal, and gives us the optimism to know we’re making a difference.”

An Onerous Path

The genesis of Thursday’s event occurred in 2017 at RWU Law’s annual Women in Robes event, which brings together RWU Law students and members of the Rhode Island judiciary.

In response, the staff at the RWU Law Library, headed by Nicole Dyszlewski, began the task of compiling a definitive list of the first women. Dyszlewski soon discovered, to her surprise, that “no one in Rhode Island had been tracking members of the bar by gender in any holistic way.” Accordingly, “that made researching the history of women lawyers in our state a rocky and uncertain road,” she said.
Just over a year after the research began, a First Women Steering Committee was convened, co-chaired by RWU Law Board members Connie Howes, Esq., and the Honorable Patricia Sullivan, who worked to explore how these women might best be remembered and honored. The dedication ceremony on April 11 is the product of their work.

Rhode Island’s earliest female attorneys trod an onerous path: the state was the last in the entire country to admit women to the practice of law. In the year 1920 — as the country finally ratified the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote — the Rhode Island Board of Bar Examiners denied the application of Ada Lewis Sawyer (1892–1985) to sit for the bar exam. Sawyer only became an attorney after taking her case to the state’s supreme court. The court ruled that the bar rules’ reference to “person” with respect to admission to the bar did indeed include women as well.

“For a state which is known for being to the left of center in many ways, I was surprised at how long it took for Rhode Island to allow women to become attorneys,” says Nicole Dyszlewski of the Roger Williams University School of Law Library. “It was so ingrained in the culture that women weren’t seen as professional equals. Hearing the Ada Sawyer story – about how she had to fight and fight and fight to become a lawyer; that surprised and saddened me.”

Though Sawyer fought to pave the way for Rhode Island women to become lawyers, the next several decades saw only a handful following in her path – but until recently, exactly how many remained a mystery. For much of the 20th century, there was simply no definitive record of these women anywhere.

“That posed a problem,” explains Dyszlewski. “There was no searchable database that was complete. There was no list saying, ‘Here, these are all the women!’”

So Dyszlewski and RWU Law embarked upon a vast and ambitious project that would take well over a year to complete: finding and documenting all of the “First Women” attorneys admitted to practice in Rhode Island from 1920 onward (it was eventually decided to cap the search at 1979). That task took on a new focus when Dyszlewski discovered a typewritten sheet among some papers donated to the RWU Law Library years earlier, listing around 50 female attorneys, beginning with Sawyer. It seemed to have been compiled in the 1970s. As research progressed, more and more names gradually emerged, eventually reaching the current total of 176.

Still, it was striking how slowly women became integrated into the Rhode Island bar. Though the first woman was admitted in 1920, it was not until 50 years later that the total number of women admitted to practice in Rhode Island reached 30.

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The First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island dedication event was a beginning, not an end. We next plan to gather a group of volunteers to identify ways to keep a focus on the issue of gender equity in the legal profession. If you would like to volunteer, please contact us at firstwomenlaw@rwu.edu.
The Amazing Dorothy Crockett

How an African-American woman from Providence became, in 1932, the 7th woman ever admitted to the Rhode Island Bar.

Dorothy Crockett in July 1937, five years into her Providence law practice.
Image Credit: Dianne Bartleson

May 14, 2019

Michael M. Bowden

From the May 2019 edition of RWU Law Magazine, now available!

Researchers for the First Women attorneys of Rhode Island project have unearthed many pieces of history that might otherwise have been lost forever – but none were more surprising than the story of Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson, an African-American woman admitted to the Rhode Island bar in 1932, to become just the 7th female lawyer in the state’s history.

Born in Providence on July 29, 1910, Dorothy R. Crockett grew up near what is now Roger Williams National Memorial, between the East Side and the Providence River. After graduating from Classical High School in 1927, she attended Boston’s Portia Law School, a women-only institution that has since become New England School of Law. Upon receiving her bachelor of laws (LL.B.) in June 1931, just a month shy of her 21st birthday, she returned to Rhode Island – still living with her mother on the East Side, on the site of what is now the Emery-Woolley Dormitory at Brown University – and secured an internship at the Providence firm of an
established lawyer and prominent voice in the local African-American community, James M. Stockett, Jr., Esq.

On March 1, 1932, Crockett filed an application for admission to the Rhode Island bar, certifying that she had “studied law more than three years in the country” at Portia, and completed a hands-on apprenticeship “in the office of an attorney and counselor in this state,” namely, Stockett, who in turn endorsed her as a person of “good moral character, and, in his opinion, a suitable person for admission to the bar.”

Crockett passed the written portion of the bar examination in April, and the oral portion in May of that year. When her application was approved, it was big news: “Colored Girl Passes RI Bar,” ran a front-page headline in the May 14, 1932 edition of the *Boston Chronicle*. “First Negro Girl in Rhode Island to Enter the Field of Law,” trumpeted the *Providence Journal* in another lead story. The *Chronicle* noted that Crockett was “one of the few women of any race entitled to practice law in the state.” (Indeed, she was the last woman admitted to the state’s bar in the 1930s – Rhode Island’s 8th female lawyer would not be sworn in until nearly a decade later, in 1940; no other African-American women joined the bar until the 1970s.)

Triumph and Trouble

Crockett maintained a busy practice in Providence for five or six years, concentrating on family law and debt collection. Some of her quirkier cases occasionally turned up in the local papers: for example, she once represented a tenant who had donated blood for his landlord’s wife’s surgery – only to be evicted when the wife recovered. The tenant sued to be compensated for his blood (he lost).

During this period, the 1935 Rhode Island census shows Crockett working just two doors down from her mentor, Stockett, on the third floor at 4 Weybosset Street, at what is now One Financial Plaza, home to the offices of Locke Lord LLP in downtown Providence.

From the start, she seems to have been an outspoken voice in the black community: a 1932 article from the *Newport Mercury* finds a 21-year-old Crockett already addressing a large gathering of women, passionately advocating for the Republican presidential candidate, incumbent Herbert Hoover – whom she endorsed as “a careful, firm man and a great leader” as well as “the greatest power in our great land since the Civil War” – over the upstart Democratic challenger, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

A few years later, she turns up in the *Journal*, delivering an address to the “Juliette Derricotte Club” of Providence, named for an educator and political activist whose 1931 death in Tennessee, after being refused treatment by a whites-only hospital following a car accident, had sparked outrage in the African-American community.

Trouble struck in July of 1937, when a “sweeping grand jury investigation into the activities of collection agencies” resulted in indictments against a dozen defendants, including Crockett and three other attorneys involved in collection work, on a range of charges. All entered not guilty
pleas, and the charges were ultimately dismissed – “wiped off the books in open court,” in the words of a contemporary Journal article – and never resurfaced.

Still, the experience would have been traumatic and frightening for Crockett: at the age of 27, she was arrested, jailed – at least overnight – and indicted, along with the other attorneys charged. But the case quickly disappeared from the headlines, and those involved went on to enjoy long, successful careers in Rhode Island (Frank Wildes, the senior attorney among those charged, retired at age 90, and his glowing obituary a few years later notes only that he had been Brown’s oldest living alumnus, and that his tenure in the legal profession spanned 67 years).

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1938, Crockett married one Irving “Abe” Bartleson. Though living in Providence at the time, he gives his occupation as the “hotel business” in Los Angeles on their marriage license application. The following year, the couple would pack up and move to San Diego. But as late as December of 1938, Crockett was still practicing law in Providence– when she appears in a Journal legal roundup (alongside Wildes, once again), winning a routine default judgment for a local dairy.

From Attorney – to Maid?

That case, however, may well have been one of her last jobs as a lawyer.

A few years after Crockett’s move to the West Coast comes a sobering revelation: 1940 U.S. census records show Abe employed at a country club in La Jolla, a wealthy seaside suburb of San Diego. And Attorney Dorothy Crockett? She’s listed as a “maid”; another local history describes her as a “domestic” with a private family. Whether that position was permanent or long-term is unknown. But there is no evidence that Crockett ever practiced law in California or even tried to take the bar exam – indeed, such a course seems exceedingly unlikely: records reveal that the first black woman admitted to the bar California, in 1929, could not find legal employment in the state until 1939.

“Despite her incredible achievements, we cannot forget the time in which Attorney Crockett was living,” notes Deborah Johnson, RWU Law’s Director of Diversity & Outreach, explaining that race and gender certainly played a role in changing her career trajectory. “The fact that it was an African-American male attorney who sponsored Attorney Crockett’s admission to the bar in Rhode Island suggests that was likely the only way she could have been admitted to the bar at that time. It stands to reason that, without a similar contact in California (this is admittedly an assumption, but one that seems to be supported by the evidence), practicing there as a ‘colored’ woman in the 1940s and 1950s would have been out of the question.”

Johnson adds, “While we don’t know the facts, it seems fairly safe to assume that, given the time and era, and the blatant and subtle discrimination that African-Americans and other people of color and women were facing, Attorney Crockett’s ability to practice was probably severely limited. There is no reason to believe the discrimination of the time did not extend to the legal profession, which to this day remains one of the slowest to diversify.”
Crockett and her husband seem to have thrived nonetheless, purchasing land in La Jolla Shores area of San Diego (Crockett occasionally turns up in quasi-legal guise in city records, arguing for an easement or objecting to a city paving project) and setting up a household. A photo from those years shows Crockett in her garden, wielding a hoe and wearing a broad smile. A second depicts her out on the town, stylishly dressed in a fashionable hat and sunglasses. In yet another image, she poses with a large group of black women outside the vast Art Deco façade of the then-brand-new Radio City West building in Hollywood. Had she continued her role as an outspoken voice in the African-American community? It’s an unanswered question – and one that may ultimately be beside the point.

“What Attorney Crockett achieved is amazing – then and now,” Johnson says, “I have been fascinated learning about Dorothy R. Crockett, and pieces of her life and career. I am also mesmerized by many of the photos of her that I have seen. She was clearly a woman of education and intellect, style and grace, and also one of grit and tenacity. Knowing the struggles and hurdles I have faced and had to overcome as a black woman attorney in the 21st century, I can only begin to imagine what her experiences were as the first black woman attorney in Rhode Island in the 1930s. I am in awe of and have tremendous respect for her.”

A Living Legacy

In 1947, Crockett gave birth to a daughter, Dianne Bartleson, her only child. But just seven years later, on February 27, 1955, she died of cancer at the age of 44.

This year, First Women researchers at RWU Law located Bartleson, now 72, in Surprise, Ariz. Only seven when Crockett passed away, she regrets being unable to shed much additional light on the mystery of her mother’s life: “I did not even find out she was a lawyer until later in my own life,” Bartleson says. She had been told, however, that her mother was a “very elegant and very nice person,” and that she looked just like her.

“Then one day I was at a funeral and an old woman who’d been a friend of my mother told me, ‘You know, Dorothy was an attorney’ – which was a really big deal,” Bartleson recalls. “Finding this out made her so much more human and real to me — and made me sad. I am so sorry that she died so young.”

Bartleson and her husband, Harold Lewis, were both born in La Jolla.

“This was a very small, tightly knit community of African-Americans who were maids, chauffeurs and butlers,” Lewis explains. But while such jobs provided a comfortable, middle-class living in those days, Lewis recalls his parents’ generation as being comparatively tight-lipped about their personal lives, though they always stressed the value of learning.

Bartleson finished high school near the top of her class and went on to graduate from the University of California, Berkeley. Both she and Lewis became public-school educators. “If there’s such a thing as a gene of intelligence, Dorothy must have passed it down to Dianne,” Lewis says.
Nicole Dyszlewski of the Roger Williams University School of Law Library, who led the team that first researched Crockett’s story, agrees that education seems to have been one of her defining principles.

“It seems so clear that education was important to Dorothy Crockett,” she says. “She seems to have had an amazing impact on her daughter, without even knowing it. And that is a great legacy.”

Johnson adds, “In fact, she created an indelible impact that aided the paths of black women, women of color and, indeed, all women attorneys through her monumental feat of ‘rising to the top’ and becoming the first black woman and the 7th overall – which still blows my mind! – to be admitted to practice in Rhode Island.”

Bartleson echoes her sentiment.

“I would like my mother to be remembered as a pioneer, a trailblazer,” she says. “Any time a black person is the first to do something it is important, because all of the advances that are possible for us in this day and age — they all rely on what our ancestors have done in the past. Becoming an attorney is an accomplishment, and to have become the first black woman in the state to do so, that’s an accomplishment. So I’m really glad this research is being done.”

Still, her sense of loss is palpable.

“I wish my mother had lived long enough to influence me,” Bartleson mused. “I probably would have been encouraged to obtain a law degree myself. I think I would have become an ACLU style lawyer; and I can see my mother taking that direction as well. I just wish I could talk to her about it – to find out how it all happened, what motivated her. But there’s nobody to ask. That part is kind of sad.”

Johnson, however, is confident that Attorney Dorothy R. Crockett’s influence will endure.

“Although I am not a member of the Rhode Island bar,” she says, “I have to believe that my legal education and admission to practice in three states, including California, were possible because of Attorney Dorothy R. Crockett and the other First Women, who paved the way. I am privileged and honored to be a part of Attorney Crockett’s legacy, and I am indebted to her success and her willingness to champion the rights of others.”

This September, RWU Law will honor Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson and her groundbreaking legacy by naming a classroom in her honor. Dorothy’s daughter Dianne Bartleson will be present for the dedication. Watch law.rwu.edu for details.
Christine Awe '19

Christine Y. Awe, RWU Class of 2019

Juris Doctor
When Christine Awe ’19 decided to spend her final semester at RWU Law taking part in the school’s D.C. Semester in Practice program – she’d been placed in an externship with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) – she was ready for a firsthand, real-world legal experience.

She got more than she bargained for.

Just as Awe was preparing to leave for Washington, President Trump declared a federal government shutdown, effective at midnight on December 22, 2018. Suddenly the FCC was, for all practical purposes, closed.

“I needed the hours at this specific externship for graduation,” she said. “So it was a bit like, ‘What’s next? What are we supposed to do?’ It was frustrating because we really wanted to jump into our externships.”

Seeking solutions, Professor David Zlotnick, director of the D.C. program, and Laurie Barron, director of RWU Law’s Feinstein Center for Pro Bono & Experiential Education, reached out to Washington-area alumni.
Sarah Lim ’12, chief counsel for the Natural Resources Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, came to the rescue for Awe and one other student. But with the furlough dominating the national dialogue, Democrats making final preparations to take over as the majority party, and some untimely office flooding, the House was in turmoil.

“I was a little worried that they were going to have a horrible experience,” Lim said. “But I think what they ended up getting was a much harder, more intimate and up-close view of real politics, versus just doing run-of-the-mill legal tasks. And it was easy to teach, because we were all learning, too.”

Awe’s first job was to help research and draft a memo on executive privilege.

“I figured that was the broadest-scope sort of thing that they could work on,” Lim explained. “It also seemed like a great sort of hot D.C. topic, working with an administration that doesn’t want to give us answers, that doesn’t respond to our requests. We were preparing to test the practical boundaries of some of those legal ideas you learn in theory.”

Awe was impressed.

“It wasn’t quite what I was expecting, but it was so rewarding,” she said. “It opened my mind and my eyes to a different side of the legal field. We attended briefings and meetings, for instance on global warming, listening to witnesses testifying on how urgent the situation was becoming, and I thought, ‘Wow, this is much bigger than what we see on the television and what is reported.’”

The shutdown finally ended on January 25, and Awe – a native New Yorker of Nigerian descent – completed the semester as planned, working at the FCC’s Office of Workplace Diversity.

“In a sense, it was like getting two very real, practical experiences for the price of one,” she said. Returning to Rhode Island to graduate in May, she had no regrets about her decision to spend her final semester in the nation’s capital – or her law school career at RWU Law.

“Attending Roger Williams was the best decision I’ve made so far in my life,” she said. “I was raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. and East Orange, N.J. – so coming to Rhode Island was a culture shock at first, but it was exactly what I needed. From my first day, I could tell that the school, the professors, the administration, everybody was invested in my success.”

'Hate and Bigotry Have No Place in America'

U.S. Congressman David Cicilline delivers RWU Law's 2nd Annual Stonewall Lecture, focusing on the importance of passing an LGBTQ-friendly Equality Act
BRISTOL, R.I., April 18, 2019 – RWU Law recently welcomed Congressman and former Providence mayor David Cicilline (D-R.I.), who delivered the school's 2nd Annual Stonewall Lecture, focusing on the importance of passing an LGBTQ-friendly Equality Act.

As the longest-serving “out” member of the U.S. House of Representatives and co-chair of its LGBT Equality Caucus (as well as chair of the Democratic Policy and Communications Committee, and member of the House Judiciary Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee), Cicilline brought a powerful and informed perspective to the event.

He opened his lecture with praise for President Barack Obama and a strong indictment of the current administration.

“We saw incredible progress in the fight for full LGBTQ equality during the eight years of President Obama,” he said. “I'm still really proud to have served in the United States Congress with a president who valued the dignity of the LGBTQ community.”

Under President Donald Trump, however, the situation has darkened, Cicilline noted.

"We find ourselves at a really critical moment in our nation's history,” he said. “It seems difficult sometimes to remember a time when the partisan divide was so serious and so vast. Rather than embracing the beauty that is the melting pot of America, that made us so strong for centuries,
more people would rather wall themselves off from their neighbors – simply because of the color of their skin, the God they pray to, or who they love.”

Progress Undone

Cicilline related the current political moment to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

“While millions of Americans marched for civil rights across the south and right up to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, hate groups and segregationists did everything they could stop long overdue progress from being made,” he said. “But they couldn't. Hate and bigotry have no place in America. It had no place in America then. It has no place in America today.”

Nobody gives you your rights. You have to fight for them, demand them, be persistent – and advance equality for our community all across this country.

Cicilline narrated several real-life stories of present-day discrimination against LGBTQ individuals, and bemoaned how much ground has been lost since the Supreme Court’s landmark 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which established full marriage equality to same-sex couples.

“For the last two years, the right wing in this country has tried to return members of the LGBT community back to second-class status,” he said. “They found a president willing to help.”

Cicilline laid out the current situation on LGBTQ rights.

“Right here in our own country, in 2019, in a majority of states, you can still be fired from your job, or kicked out of your apartment, or denied service in a restaurant simply because of who you are and who you love,” he said. "This is dead wrong and un-American. While the efforts of the LGBT community and [its many] advocates helped to bring us so much progress over the past few decades, we've seen just how easily progress can be undone in such a short period of time.”

The Equality Act

One of the main problems, Cicilline explained, is that federal law does not provide consistent non-discrimination protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The need for these protections is clear, he said, noting that a majority of LGBTQ Americans report having experienced discrimination in their personal lives. The patchwork nature of current laws leaves millions of people subject to uncertainty and potential discrimination that impacts their safety, their families, and their day-to-day lives.

“The fact is that a majority of people in our country still live in states where this kind of discrimination is legal,” he said. “That reality really strikes at the very foundation of what it means to be American and what we mean in terms of equality.”
As a solution, Cicilline offered a detailed discussion of the Equality Act, legislation that he authored with 240 co-sponsors – “every single member of the Democratic Caucus with exception of one, and three Republicans,” he noted.

The Equality Act would provide consistent and explicit non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people across key areas of life, including employment, housing, credit, education, public spaces and services, federally funded programs, and jury service.

The Act would amend existing civil rights law—including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Housing Act, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, the Jury Selection and Services Act, and several laws regarding employment with the federal government—to explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected characteristics. The legislation also amends the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination in public spaces and services and federally funded programs on the basis of sex.

“The passage of the Equality Act is really the only way to achieve full equality for the LGBTQ community and end discrimination once and for all,” Cicilline said. “We will bring that bill to the floor before June, so that it will pass the House in time for Pride Month, so that, all across America we can celebrate the passage of the Equality Act out of the House. And then [we’ll] get to work in the Senate.

Opposition Ahead

Getting the bill through the Senate, however – especially in its current form – is going to be a problem.

“Even as I speak, conservatives and the far-right of our political parties in this country are [doing] everything they can to kill this bill, and to block its passage,” Cicilline said.

The principal lines of attack involve conflicts with religious liberty, and assertions that transgender use of restrooms poses a threat to women and children.

“These are terrible arguments, they are intended to belittle the serious challenges that LGBTQ people face in this country,” Cicilline said. “But opponents of equality are going to pull out all the stops and do everything they can to stop progress on this issue, and they will use fear and these specious claims to really try and distract from the core issue: that every single American is entitled to full equality.”

The biggest obstacle to the bill’s passage, in fact, is the assumption that the Equality Act’s protections are already in place.

“Most Americans actually think this is already the law,” he said. “There's wide support for this,” and “it's a priority of the Democratic Caucus. Nobody gives you your rights. As we've learned through our history, you have to fight for them and demand them, and be persistent – and I'm really proud of the coalition we've built that's going to advance equality for our community all across this country.”
The lecture was followed by an extended question-and-answer session that covered issues from the Mueller Report to the crowded field for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination.

RWU Law’s 2nd Annual Stonewall Lecture took place on the 50th anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, which marked a critical turn in the fight for LGBTQ rights, serving as the impetus for the formation of several gay, lesbian and bisexual civil rights organizations. It is held in honor of the numerous individuals who have fought for LGBTQ equality and justice and the many contributions they have made to advance this modern day civil rights movement.

Welcome, Professor Nadiyah Humber

RWU Law welcomes the newest addition to its faculty

Assistant Clinical Professor Nadiyah J. Humber

Image Credit: RWU Law/Charlie Abrahams

May 20, 2019

Michael M. Bowden

Roger Williams University School of Law is pleased to introduce the latest member of its faculty.

Effective this July, Assistant Clinical Professor Nadiyah J. Humber will join RWU Law as director of the Corporate Counsel and Government Clinical Externship Programs.
Professor Humber joins RWU Law from Suffolk Law’s Housing Discrimination Testing Program, where she was director of investigations and outreach and a clinical fellow. She was also a lecturer at Boston University’s Questrom School of Business, where she taught law for business students.

Earlier she was Senior Assistant Director of Admissions at Northeastern Law. She has served as a trial attorney with the Committee for Public Counsel Services in Worcester, Mass., as well as a volunteer attorney for the Housing Unit of Greater Boston Legal Services, and on the steering committee of the Boston Bar Association’s Commission on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties.

Professor Humber earned her B.S. from Vanderbilt and her J.D. from Suffolk.

Please join us in welcoming Professor Humber to our community!

Roger Williams Celebrates Pride

The School of Law joins record crowds celebrating Rhode Island PrideFest in Providence.

RWU Law’s contingent in the Pride Parade.

June 17, 2019

Michael M. Bowden

The RWU Law and Roger Williams undergraduate communities turned out in force Saturday for Providence’s 2019 Rhode Island PrideFest celebration, culminating in a unique and spectacular Illuminated Night Parade.
Drawing heavy attendance from across the state and around the country, this year's Pride event—themed “Live Your Truth”—was billed “a celebration of love, respect and joy.” It has come to be considered one of the city’s signature events.

RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky, who marched in the parade alongside law students and staff, said the event reflected the values of the school.

“It was a special opportunity for the law school to publicly declare its belief in the fundamental dignity of all people, and particularly our support for the right of all individuals to follow their hearts and openly love without fear,” Yelnosky said. “As current and future lawyers, we have an obligation to think about the ways law can be used to help establish and protect that right. This was also a way for us to come together as a community around our shared values—an act that binds us closer together.”

Michael Donnelly-Boylen, RWU Law’s assistant dean of admissions, and a leader on issues relating to the inclusion of the LGBT population in legal education, also marched with the RWU Law contingent, organized by 2L Blake Johnson.

“It was a really special night,” Donnelly-Boylen said. “Providence was so alive and the crowds were unbelievable. The world has been a lot less friendly to the LGBTQ+ community lately, and so this year’s outpouring of love felt particularly special. This was RWU’s first time in the parade and I was so thankful to be included, and to march alongside so many of our amazing students. They make us all so proud.”

“Roger Williams undergraduates from the Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) marched alongside the law students. Gabby Porcaro, assistant director of Queer and Trans Initiatives at RWU’s Intercultural Center, shared why PrideFest is important for the Roger Williams community.

“This year marks 50 years since the first ‘Pride’ [event] in this country, which took place at the Stonewall Inn in New York City,” she said. “Fifty years later, we still have significant hurdles in the way of achieving true equity in this world. Pride is important because it is a time where queer and trans folks can, as they are able, boldly state that our existence is not a crime and it is something to be celebrated.”

In terms of sheer numbers, this year’s Pride event was Providence’s largest ever—a massive shift from the first parade held in 1976, which required a federal court order and met heavy opposition from city police. Over the ensuing decades, the celebration gradually grew, but still remained largely within the local LGBTQ community.

“Then, it was gay,” one participant told The Providence Journal. “Now, it is everybody.”

Banks and other corporate establishments hung out rainbow flags; Democratic politicians mixed and mingled with celebrants. Many speculated that the large turnout and high enthusiasm were in part a reaction to a recent statement by Roman Catholic Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Providence
that Catholics should not support Rhode Island Pride, as well as Washington’s more hostile stance toward people of non-traditional sexual orientations in recent years.

“I feel like because of what’s happened and the climate this year, everybody is more open, smiling, welcoming than usual,” another long-time participant told the *Journal*. “People are feeling put upon, and to lessen that, the best thing is love.”