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## DEAN LIMELIGHT: RACHEL VAN CLEAVE, GOLDEN GATE UNIVERSITY LAW

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BY MARGOT SLADE



If perseverance, selfless service and a can-do approach to personal growth are Rachel Van Cleave's watchwords – as even brief conversations with the [Golden Gate University School of Law](#) dean confirm – then the veterans of the Bay Area and their military values are her touchstones and guides.

"Veterans bring with them a wealth of leadership knowledge, particularly in the face of great adversity," Van Cleave said in e-mails and a telephone interview. "Through them I've come to recognize that mindfulness, humility and grit are what generate true leadership adaptability. Because of them I'm continually working to apply this lesson in my own small way."

One result? "I've learned that we can't always have the answers, but with the right mindset and an excellent team, we can find some pretty good – maybe even very good – solutions," she said.

That she has such a team in her faculty, staff and advisers, she said, enables her to see what are arguably troubled times for law schools including Golden Gate as a "transformative opportunity for legal education that can only benefit students."

For Van Cleave, it has already become a transformative opportunity for veterans. She established the Veterans Coalition of Northern California, which brought to campus veterans enrolled at area law schools as far north as the University of California-Davis to coordinate their efforts in giving back to less fortunate comrades. She then championed a veterans' law clinic at Golden Gate, the first of its kind in the Bay Area.

It was an outgrowth, she said, of the loss of her classmate and friend Christopher Stevens, U.S. Ambassador to Libya, who died in the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi. That kind of sacrifice, she said, demands recognition and repayment.

A graduate of Stanford University with a B.A. in history, Van Cleave earned her J.D. at the [University of California, Hastings College of Law](#) and her JSM (Master of the Science of Law) at [Stanford Law School](#). As a Fulbright Scholar, she studied changes to the Italian criminal justice system and, later, reforms in Italy's rape laws.

Van Cleave has been a Golden Gate law professor since 2004. She became associate dean of academic affairs in 2008 and interim dean in 2012 when she led curricular reform that more broadly integrated legal research and writing with real-world applications and needs.

With time out for a clerkship at Baker & McKenzie and then as a federal clerk for former Fifth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Sam Johnson in Austin, Texas, Van Cleave has spent her career in legal academia. "It's where I always wanted to be," she said, "and what I love to do."

**LAWDRAGON: What drew you to law school and then into legal academia?**

**RACHEL VAN CLEAVE:** Growing up, I absolutely loved the classroom. My mom is a historian, a professor at the University of Southern California, and I loved history enough to be a history major myself. Mom said, "Oh great, you can get a Ph.D. and teach." To my own surprise, I said, "No" and went to law school instead. For me, pure history wasn't enough – I wanted to delve into its relevance for today.

That's what law became for me: an engaging application of history to the present. It was actually fun! I loved law school enough, despite the hardships I faced, that I wanted to teach. When I got my first shot in the classroom, teaching legal writing, I was thrilled as I could lead students to engage in the nature of analysis, the nature of texts, and that as a team we



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could enjoy intellectual exchanges while they came to an understanding of what the law can do.

I certainly recall these “ah-ha” moments in my own life when I “got it,” whatever that “it” was. As a teacher, I realized that I’d be part of those moments for my students. It happens in large classes and also in small writing seminars, where my approach is to have students become experts in the area they research and then they teach the rest of us.

A perfect example was my Hurricane Katrina and disaster law seminar. One student from San Francisco wanted look into “soft structures,” or homes atop garages that collapsed in earthquakes. She pursued it and together we worked to have her paper published, pointing to laws that encourage people to make these homes earthquake-proof. Another student wanted to assist volunteer lawyers going to Louisiana to help people establish a chain of title and published a primer on the subject.

After graduating, I clerked for a judge and I was made an excellent offer by a law firm in San Francisco, but I politely declined so that I could return to the classroom. I immediately began teaching legal research and writing at two Bay Area law schools while pursuing my JSM at Stanford.

I enjoyed it so much that I sought increased responsibility and accepted an offer to teach wills and trusts. I later agreed to teach property as well. My experiences teaching were so profound that I decided to remain in education for the rest of my career. I have to say that teaching has also been humbling in that it’s placed me in constant awe of the power that we, the people, have to create such a dynamic system of laws.

**LD: Why uproot to teach in Texas?**

**RVC:** Getting into the tenure-track teaching market is a challenge – and a tenure-track position is what [Texas Tech University School of Law](#) offered. After enough time and work, I made it, teaching legal research and writing, wills and trust, and property. At the time, I saw myself teaching criminal law and criminal procedure. But my first-year property class – I loved it.

**LD: Given your tenure track, why return to the Bay Area and Golden Gate?**

**RVC:** I loved the Bay Area from my own student days and had long thought of returning. Leaving a tenured professorship at Texas Tech Law was a frightening prospect, but I’ve always believed in the power of pursuing one’s dreams with tenacity, so with my family’s support, we moved back to the Bay Area.

My husband is from New York. He practiced as a lawyer for five years, and then wanted to follow his passion teaching high school social studies, which he still does. At the same time – this was 2004 – my mentor, a contracts professor from Hastings Law named H.G. Prince, knew that Golden Gate had a visitor position open and suggested that I look into it. I did and ended up teaching criminal law and property. Later that year the law school was looking to hire. I applied – and didn’t get the job. It was difficult to accept at first, but I believed in the school and in the community it held, so I knew I would make working at GGU Law my goal.

Meanwhile my mentor told me that Hastings law school was looking to fill a visiting professor’s position – someone who would teach property, wills and trusts, and a comparative criminal justice seminar. The timing was great; the subject was right and I was delighted to take that on. This was 2005. The next year, some people on the Golden Gate law faculty encouraged me to apply for a teaching position again. I did, got the job and have been here, happily, ever since. You see, resilience and a growth mindset paid off.

**LD: You so clearly enjoy teaching, why become an administrator and then dean?**

**RVC:** Fred White, who was dean at the time, came one day to tell me that the then associate dean was stepping down and that he thought I’d be really good at the job. I said “yes” because I figured that I could stretch myself by spearheading curriculum reform, by meeting with people who wanted to be adjuncts here and learning to gauge their energy and classroom abilities, and that I’d learn a lot about the school from a perspective different from that of a full-time faculty member.

I laugh about this now, because I had friends who said, “You’re on the track to be dean.” And I remember saying, “Absolutely not.” Then my immediate predecessor as dean stepped down and asked me to be interim dean for one year. Then people asked if I’d agree to be dean. I said “yes” because, just like stepping into a classroom, I knew that I would love this job, the one platform from which I can see the entire school. To me, taking the position was more about service than any kind of career growth. I wanted to give back to GGU Law in a meaningful way.

I enjoy working with a faculty who care so much about the students, the curriculum and the community here. I’m invigorated speaking with students and hearing about their needs and perspectives. I relish meeting alumni – they express so much gratitude for their education and so much support for what they see can be improved. It’s energizing being with them. I also worked to meet with each and every student at the law school to learn more about them and about their experience. This really opened my eyes to the student community, and how I must be constantly aware of their strengths and their hopes so that the institution can grow and, frankly, so that I can grow as its leader.

In addition, as a dean I can create change. My friend Chris Stevens’ death was accompanied by a tremendous feeling of loss. It was at his vigil at UC Hastings that I met some law students who were veterans, and I realized that I would channel my loss into service to those who had similarly suffered – veterans.

Now we have our Veterans Legal Advocacy Center, whose mandate is to open the profession to more veterans and to offer, in partnership with various agencies, programs that serve our students and the legal needs of veterans. In a short time it’s grown into this singular force not only for veterans, but also for the school, for students and for the broader community.

**LD: Is there anything you wish you had known before becoming dean?**

**RVC:** I could have used some guidance in terms of the managerial piece of a dean’s job. What I mean is thinking through being in a position where I’m working with people in collaboration and partnership, and where I also have people working for me – people with whom I must be clear regarding my goals. I must be clear, too, about delegating responsibility and authority while being conscious of the needs of others.

I basically went with my gut and instinct the first year. Working with such consummate professionals as this faculty and staff, it would have been nice to know more about when to tell people what to do, how to tell them and how much to tell them beyond saying here’s what needs to be done and here’s the timeline for doing it.

A corollary to this is learning to ask people for their recommendation – especially when they know more than I do in a particular area, and most particularly without committing to that recommendation. It’s one thing to ask questions; I’ve never had a problem with that. It’s different being the person who ultimately decides an issue for the entire school, while also being a

person who is open to learning both how we've done things in the past, and why, and how some or even many would change it moving forward.

**LD: Has anything surprised you about being dean?**

**RVC:** I'm a bit surprised by the amount of thinking I've done about framing different communications for different audiences. I'm always authentic: straightforward, honest. I'm always me. But I've come to understand that I need to frame what I say so that I directly address the concerns of the people with whom I'm speaking.

**LD: What distinguishes your institution from other law schools?**

**RVC:** Golden Gate University School of Law has a deep history of opening the legal profession and of embracing practice-based learning. We began as one of the YMCA night schools to provide access to legal education to those who could not afford a full-time program. And we still have an evening program for part-time students.

Dedicated to supporting underserved populations, Golden Gate Law was among the first law schools to actively pursue women applicants, students of color and LGBT students in large numbers, and to hire faculty and staff who mirror the diversity of our students. In fact, dean emerita Judy McKelvey was the second woman dean of an ABA-accredited law school in the United States. Our 2014 entering class is now our first majority minority class, with 56 percent of our first-year students indicating minority status.

Most recently, we have sought to enhance support for our students with military experience, with me calling every admitted veteran to both welcome them and to determine what their needs may be while transitioning into law school. We are also one of the few law schools in the country that provide Yellow Ribbon Tuition Assistance to all qualified applicants and cover 100 percent of tuition. We are proud of our veterans, and we coordinate with student groups and through the university to provide them with every resource we reasonably can.

In terms of practice-based education, two of our on-site clinics, the Women's Employment Rights Clinic and the Environmental Justice Clinic, just celebrated their 20-year anniversaries. Each clinic, leaders both nationally and in the Bay Area, provides students with practical hands-on experience that mirrors the experience of a law firm associate. Located in the heart of downtown San Francisco, our clinics provide our students with direct access to a myriad of public interest and private-sector legal offices, which are generous with their expertise.

Nearly every faculty member has significant legal practice experience, which is reflected in their pedagogy through their implementation of Practice Intensive Courses (PIC). In PIC courses, students receive formative assessment throughout the semester on their oral and written communications skills, giving students continual feedback of the nature a senior attorney would give a new lawyer. My colleagues and I take the task of preparing our students seriously and we are committed to the belief that engaging them both in and out of the classroom is essential to their long-term success.

Finally, we have a deep history in and are building on students' litigation skills. To that end we remodeled four classrooms as courtrooms, following the creative vision of Wes Porter, a faculty member here and director of the Litigation Center. He works with the mock trial teams and organizes the competition that we host. He was inspired to turn the arrangement around so that the audience is the jury. Normally, lawyers – and the students taking on the roles of lawyers – have their backs to the courtroom; they see only the judge and jury.

Wes Porter also designed a summer trial and evidence program so that right after their first year, our students can apply everything they learned to trial advocacy. I hear from graduates all the time that the experience and understanding they gained here of how law plays out in the courtroom informs how they advise their clients and how they do their work. That's a pretty powerful endorsement.

**LD: What are your biggest challenges as dean and how are you meeting them?**

**RVC:** We are very focused on increasing the first-time bar passage by our graduates and we entered into a partnership with Themis, a test-prep company, this year to more effectively teach and build on foundational skills required for success. Our goal is "one and done."

Long-term, full-time, bar license-required employment nine months after graduation continues to be a challenge for us. This is the result, in part, of our location in one of the most saturated legal markets in the country. But explanations, however reasonable, are not substitutes for action. So we recently hired a director of employer outreach, who is 100 percent focused on strengthening existing relationships with employers and forging new relationships.

This also involves translating the skills, knowledge and values our students hone and cultivate in our clinic and externship programs to employment in other modes and types of law practice. For example, a student working in our Veterans Legal Advocacy Center learns client interviewing, case management, research and writing skills, as well as resilience and empathy and the substance of veterans' benefits law. These skills and qualities transfer to many types of practice. Our new outreach director is helping us demonstrate those links to potential employers.

We have expanded our Bridge Fellowship Program. Initially, this program was created to assist our local courts when they lost significant funding. The law school has paid students modest stipends, which allowed them to work with judges and continue to develop their skills. We have since extended this to support graduates who take on what is otherwise volunteer work at public defender, district attorney, city attorney and legal aid offices. The many graduates taking advantage of this program tell us that it has enhanced their career development, professional network and, ultimately, their employment.

This year we plan to survey our students 15 months after graduation in addition to the 10-month reporting time required by the ABA, to gain a better picture of their career paths, because we don't believe the 10-month snapshot properly reflects our market in California and in the Bay Area. Our students graduate mid-May and take the bar exam in July, but don't get results until the end of November. This gives the ones who pass only two-to-three months, during the holiday season, to find and begin a job.

Another challenge we're wrestling with: We are very aware of the debt load of our graduates and are working to both increase institutional aid for students and graduates and reduce expenses at the law school and at the university. I believe it is crucial to fund more need-based scholarships as well as increase funding for our Loan Repayment Assistance Program while helping graduates' use of the federal loan forgiveness programs for working in public service jobs.

In an effort to drive down costs, we have also had to take a hard look at our expenditures. Recently, we evaluated how we

utilized our space and found that we were underutilizing nearly 50 percent of our two buildings. This, during such a tremendous economic boom in San Francisco, where office space runs more than \$60 a square foot, provided us with a hard, but smart choice – consolidation. We have decided to move out of one of our buildings and to lease that vacant space for a few years to help lower the cost of tuition, while optimizing the use of our space. We need to think about what is right for our students, and this combination of efficiency and cost savings helps fulfill that responsibility.

As an eternal optimist, I look for the opportunity in everything. While applications to law school have declined nationally, we have intentionally decreased the size of our entering class since the fall of 2011. During the last academic year, with an entering class of 150 students, we implemented a coaching program in which each first-year student is assigned a faculty coach with whom that student could discuss the transition to law school and to the legal profession.

This academic year I have met individually with each new student to learn about why they decided to attend law school, how they are doing so far and how we can help maximize their growth as budding attorneys. I've learned that our new students have compelling reasons for seeking a legal education – reasons that consistently involve the desire to help others seek and attain justice — and that they are committed to the hard work required as well as to marshaling the resources here to support them.

I began this spring term by meeting with each *graduating* student individually. They have echoed much of what our entering students told me. They have also been very thoughtful in their ideas about ways in which we can enhance our program, our communication with students and our support for student success. I've started working with my wonderful staff and faculty to address these suggestions.

**LD: What do you do outside the law school when you're not being dean?**

**RVC:** I find this position to be a wonderful challenge, though my 24-year-old daughter often reminds me that I am “not the dean of everything,” which helps me to maintain perspective. That said, swimming is my meditation as well as a time when I compose many of the myriad speeches, welcomes, writings that are a part of the job. For the curious – I swim freestyle, maybe three-quarters of a mile to one mile in a pool nearly every morning. I did swim once in open water – two miles – and I remember thinking in the midst of it, “Are you nuts?” But I was determined to finish, and I did.

I love to read and in the last year have read a number of books about how our brains work, such as *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes* and *The Power of Habit*. I've also read books about veterans such as *The Things They Carried*, *Redeployment*, *Thank You for Your Service*, *No Man's Land* and *Soldier Girls*.

Most of my non-work time I try to spend with my family, particularly going to our 14-year-old's soccer games to cheer him on as the team's goalie. I also enjoy cooking and baking – especially Italian biscotti and an ever-changing Bolognese pasta sauce.

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