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Women in Leadership Highlights

Rita Sheffey, Assistant Dean for Public Service at Emory Law School

Rita Sheffey inspired, informed and totally invigorated the participants in TLG's 174th WIL seminar by sharing her wisdom, her perspective on public service and her life and career journey. Engaging the audience with thought-provoking questions, she helped everyone appreciate the breadth of what is meant by "public service." As Rita explained, "It's critical, collaborative, and contagious!"

In her current role at Emory, she's involved in career counseling, coordinating and planning pro bono volunteer opportunities for her law students with various nonprofits. Among the many skills she shares with students and others she mentors are her professionalism and leadership experience – all honed over many years in multiple roles.

Some of Rita's many leadership roles include being president of the Atlanta Bar Association; president of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society; partner with Hunton & Williams, chair of their Pro Bono Committee; creator of the Southside Legal Center pro bono clinic; and on a national level, she currently serves on the Executive Council of the National Conference of Bar Presidents.

Given the accomplishments in the legal arena for which she's known today, you might assume Rita grew up wanting to be / planning to be a lawyer. You'd be wrong. That was not at all her childhood dream. "Medicine – being a pediatrician," she said, "that's the dream I had all the way from high school to college."

Her undergraduate college experience was at the University of Virginia. Later at Duke, in addition to her classwork, she utilized her passion for helping others by tutoring football players – and along the way – learned to love sports.

She continued to matriculate in the academic world, but her early life dream of being a doctor began to give way to a new one. While she did go on to earn a PhD in Chemistry from Duke University, and secured a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard Medical School, Rita came to realize that neither medicine nor chemistry were her destiny. Her destiny would start when she earned her JD at Boston College Law School.

Rita shared a personal and professional story that came early in her career as a young lawyer. Through unexpected circumstances, she ended up in front of the 11th Circuit of Appeals Court appealing a case for a Viet Nam vet who was in prison. She won the appeal, and later was asked to represent "Jerry" in subsequent court cases. Over a number of years, Rita became frustrated with the toll that Jerry was having on her life. But – in the end - she came to realize that this case had changed the trajectory of her career. It was a turning point and it propelled her into public service. Not only had she had an impact on this one individual, he'd had an even more profound impact on her!

Rita also shared a difficult personal situation she had to deal with – a situation that caused her to do some serious reflection. That reflection caused her to question her faith and ultimately, to find it again. She began to read a lot of theological material, and one quote Frederick Buechner stands out: “The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Another quote that resonated with her is from C. S. Lewis: “Hardships prepare ordinary people for extraordinary destiny.”

In time, through the process of self-reflection and quiet study, Rita made a decision re a new pursuit. She’s become a student again – attending the Candler School of Theology working towards a Masters in Religion and Public Life (while keeping up her hectic schedule and full time job at Emory!) To date she’s enjoyed classes in moral leadership, interfaith dialogue, and spirituality. What’s next? “Introduction to preaching,” Rita said, “and I’m both excited and nervous about that.”

One of the interesting things she’s taken up is journaling. Her spirituality class introduced her to journaling - and she’s been somewhat surprised to learn that writing while she’s reflecting actually helps to clarify her thoughts.

As Rita ended her prepared remarks, it was abundantly clear that everyone in the audience was inspired by her authenticity, her passion for public service, and her entire life and career journey.

During the Q & A with Rita she was asked:

What were the roots of your public service when you were growing up?

“My mom was especially engaged in the community and in politics. Both mom and dad always supported things I was involved in like band and many other activities. I learned a lot from them.”

With all the things you’re involved in, how do you take care of yourself?

- “I have learned to say “no” to many things. I often take 24 hours to think about an invitation or request to see if it fits with my purpose and passion. I’m also going to Candler just for me, for me as a person, not for my professional self. I also believe that having someone to talk to is part of how I maintain a healthy balance.”

How do you mentor young people re pausing to reflect and/or how to change the world?

- “First, it’s good to take time to figure things out, but I certainly didn’t do that in my early life or career. I did realize later the benefit of being intentional about taking a pause to think about a decision or career path and I’d advise others to consider that as well.”
- “To change the world is certainly a good goal, especially with so many needs that exist and so many things needing solutions. But I think you have to make small contributions, over a long period of time, because one individual isn’t going to change the world. But - you can make an impact over the long term.”