

REMEMBERING DEBBIE PARKER¹

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I don't remember the first time I met Debbie Parker. I bet a lot of people would say the same because Debbie always made you feel like you had known her forever. No one was a stranger to Debbie.

I do remember the day Debbie changed my life. It was at the ALWD conference in 1997. Debbie's smile seemed even bigger and her eyes shined even brighter than usual. She had just returned from spending a semester in Ireland, teaching Legal Writing to college freshmen at University College Cork. Debbie talked as if it had been the experience of her career, and everyone who heard the joy in her voice as she talked about it was both excited for her, and a wee bit jealous. And then Debbie turned to me, "Steve, you would absolutely love teaching in Ireland. You'd be perfect!" It took five more years, but eventually, thanks to Debbie, I was able to follow in her footsteps and have my own Irish experience. It has turned me into an insufferable Celtiphile. For the next seven years, whenever Debbie or I was feeling weary of another dull, gloomy day in the middle of winter, we would talk to each other about the spiritually renewing power of the soft, gray weather in Ireland.

Most of us knew Debbie as a friend and colleague, but few of us were able to know her as teacher. Those who did knew that she was a remarkable mentor. Debbie seems to have been born to be a teacher. In high school, she was a popular summer camp

1. Deborah Leonard Parker passed away unexpectedly on April 24, 2009, at the age of 56. Debbie taught Legal Writing at Wake Forest from 1984 until 2000 when she became Wake's first Dean of Students. She was an active member of the Legal Writing Institute, serving on the Board of Directors from 1998 to 2002. She leaves behind her husband, Professor Wilson Parker; her children, Laurie, Jeffrey, and Adam; and countless friends around the world.

2. Professor of Law and Director of Legal Analysis and Writing, Lewis and Clark Law School. I would like to thank everyone who shared their memories of Debbie including Chris Coughlin, Suzanne Reynolds, Anne Enquist, Laurel Oates, Mary Beth Beazley, and Katy Mercer. Special thanks to my friend and colleague, Sandy Patrick.

counselor, a role she relished for several years. After college, she decided against pursuing a PhD. and instead began teaching history at Dudley High School, a traditionally black high school in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was there that Debbie became convinced that to teach her students, she had to *know* her students. She did not just know her students at school. She visited their homes. She went to their churches. She saw them on their playing grounds. She pushed her students to believe in themselves and their many abilities. During her five years at Dudley, Debbie became teacher, friend, and mentor to hundreds of students, many of whom have kept in contact with her, sending her pictures of college graduations, baptisms, and promotions. They remembered that Debbie was one reason for their successes.

Debbie left Dudley to attend law school at Wake Forest and after clerking for Judge Sid Eagles of the North Carolina Court of Appeals, in 1988, she returned to Wake to teach Legal Writing. There, her insistence that she needed to know her students in order to teach them became legendary. She helped students get jobs and told them when a firm would be a good fit and when it would not. She prodded those that needed prodded, and slowed down those that were overwhelmed. She was a mentor for students' lives, both professional and private, as this story from Chris Coughlin, the current Legal Writing Director at Wake, and Debbie's former student reveals:

[A]t the end of my third year, she decided that she did not like the boy I was dating. She called me in her office and stated, "Suzanne and I have been talking. We have decided that if you do not break up with 'Bob' we are going to tie you to my car and drive you up and down Interstate 40 until we can knock some sense into your head." Debbie was right, and Bob was history.

Debbie took her dedication to teaching across the Atlantic. Her assignment in Cork was daunting: "Introduce the fundamentals of legal analysis and writing to 200 college freshmen. You have four one-hour classes over the course of the semester. Good luck." Undaunted by that challenge, Debbie insisted that to teach her students, she needed to know them. So she conferenced with every student. Twice. That's 400 conferences in one semester.

Somehow, Debbie managed to do so without losing any of her grace, charm, or wit.³

In 2000, Debbie left Legal Writing to become Wake's first Dean of Students. This was a natural progression for Debbie as she had been the Unofficial Dean of Students for years. Not surprisingly, she brought enthusiasm and compassion to the official role as well. As Professor Suzanne Reynolds recalls,

Debbie loved the care and nurture of law students, and they loved her right back. Debbie advised students about dermatologists and dentists. She brought them to her house to demonstrate how to tend to peonies. Never far away from her soap box, she lectured the students who drank too much at Barristers' Ball, wagging her finger in faces of students twice her size, and asking them "what on earth their mothers would think?" At the same time, she picked up students for emergency trips to doctors' offices and held the hands of students in the hospital after car wrecks . . . She fought for students who were going to lose a scholarship, and she begged for understanding when students' individual hardships did not match the official definition.

Debbie's involvement with the national Legal Writing community dates back to the early years of LWI. Like many of us, she came to the early LWI conferences yearning for teaching tips, status updates, and most importantly, a sense of community. As usual, Debbie gave more than she took in all regards. We remember conversations about law and life on boat rides in Puget Sound with Debbie, Wilson, and their kids—regaling us with stories of living the progressive life with Jesse Helms as one's Senator.⁴ Anne Enquist recalls a typical Debbie moment from an LWI Board meeting:

My favorite Debbie story is a simple one. We were on the LWI Board together when Seattle U. announced at a Board meeting that it was relinquishing the host school responsibilities. Debbie must have been taken by surprise because

3. I fear that at least one visitor who tried to follow Debbie's example was not as successful. After 35 conferences in one day, I was reduced to an exhausted, babbling fool. I remain in awe of Debbie's energy and dedication to all of her students.

4. One of my favorite Parker memories is Jeffrey and Adam spending an afternoon explaining to Davalene Cooper how the New York Yankees were pure, unadulterated evil. Clearly, this reflects Debbie and Wilson's superb parenting.

she asked in her usual charming way, whether if she got down on her knees and begged, would Seattle U. reconsider? When I told her that was a rather entertaining and tempting proposal, but no, we were still giving up the host school role, she was the one who laughed longest and hardest.

But most of all, we remember that Debbie never lost her focus. As the discipline of Legal Writing grew, we were pushing our schools for improved status. We were dipping our toes into the waters of scholarship. We were reaching out to audiences beyond the comfortable circle of our community. But Debbie made sure we never forgot our reason for being. First, we are teachers. And Debbie was the best of us.

Last summer, we finally had the Irish reunion that Debbie and I had talked about for years. As luck would have it, another Irish teaching alumnae, Katy Mercer, was also returning to the Emerald Isle. On a beautiful summer day, eight of us (Debbie, Wilson, Katy, her husband Guy, their daughters Cece and Nicci, my wife Lenore, and me) spent a day hiking across the spectacular Slea Head, the westernmost point of Ireland. Along the way, we met up with a young French-Canadian couple, Paul and Marie. As is the way in Ireland, we stopped to exchange hellos and a few pleasantries about how lucky we all were to be in that special place. For most folks, that would have been the end of it and we all would have continued on our walks. But Debbie wanted to get to know our new friends. Soon we were sitting down, sharing the snacks in our packs and learning all about the French-Canadian life. We talked until the sun was beginning to set over the Atlantic. By the time we moved on, I think Debbie had finagled an invite to Paul and Marie's wedding, though before they met Debbie, they were not even engaged! That was fitting—yet another example of Debbie's ability to connect with strangers, her zest for the personal story, and her ability to draw people into deep conversation.

We have all lost a friend and mentor. Our hearts go out to Wilson, the Parker family, and the rest of the Wake Forest community. We should honor Debbie's life as she lived it. We should laugh more, hug more, and take time to find our own Irish sunset.