

Feature

DEAR SISTERS, DEAR DAUGHTERS

Joyce A. Hughes[†]

I write as an eighty-one-year-old woman lawyer and professor whose early experiences may differ from your encounters. I graduated from law school during the 1965 Civil Rights Era when approximately 4% of women in the country were lawyers, and few were tenure-track professors. Times have changed, but obstacles remain to be endured and overcome on your professional journey.

During my time, my presence was frequently dismissed, and intellectual ability challenged as a Black person and woman on my journey to become:

- First Black Girls State Governor in the country of an integrated American Legion Auxiliary program
- First Black woman to achieve a J.D. degree from the University of Minnesota Law School
- First Black woman to be a tenure-track law professor at a majority-white school
- First Black woman tenured in any Northwestern University department
- First Black and woman General Counsel, Chicago Transit Authority

I encourage you to deepen your thinking to multiple consciousness, as you strive to “think like a lawyer.” Throughout your career, take an expansive view with multiple perspectives, versus the accepted or safe standpoint. I am a woman; Black; a lawyer; professor; I was born in segregated Alabama and raised in Minnesota. All inform my ability to see from one or more of these vantage points.

The challenges I faced, reflective of my times, are lengthy: an opposing male trial lawyer threw a projectile at me, irate I remained unnerved. My competency and authority were dismissed by both students and faculty colleagues, as described in the chapter “Neither a Whisper nor a Shout”

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within *Rebels in Law: Voices in History of Black Women Lawyers*, J. Clay Smith Jr. editor. I have experienced unequal pay, heavy teaching loads as a professor, failure to receive the usual perks, and more. Throughout a difficult road, I not only survived but thrived—as you can.

Your journey will be different from mine: you will undergo travails, particularly if you fall within a marginalized demographic. Going forward, guide yourself by three things: *Self-assessment*, *perseverance*, and *personal definition of success*.

Rely on *self-assessment* during times when those evaluating your performance may not be invested in your success. Honestly and critically assess your own strengths and weaknesses and believe in the skills and talent you offer. When you face unfair, adverse treatment, let that not dissuade you. *Persevere!* Find ways to go around, under, over the obstacle in front of you.

When necessary, hold your ground and endure. Define your own idea of *success* and resist pressure to conform to external definitions, captured in the guidance: “Go to the mirror. The person whose verdict counts most is the person staring back from the glass.”

My closing words of advice are these: Never confuse making a living with making a life. Always remember that what you do is not who you are. Know that you stand on the shoulders of achieving women who have gone before. Let their spirits guide you!