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PROFESSOR SARAH MCQUILLEN TRAN: A PORTRAIT OF PERSEVERANCE AND COURAGE

*Julie Patterson Forrester**

WHEN Sarah Tran arrived at the law school to join the faculty, we knew something of her courage and perseverance. We knew that she was a cancer survivor, and we knew of her excellent publication record. She had even written and published several articles during law school. Upon meeting her, we believed she would be an excellent teacher. I immediately felt a kinship with her because she was to teach the Property class and had selected my casebook for her students. I offered to help with any questions she might have about the course, but she rarely needed any guidance. She quickly became a very popular and innovative teacher.

We learned of the recurrence of her leukemia in the fall of 2012. When we heard that she would have to be hospitalized, we assumed she would need to have someone cover her course, but Sarah would have none of that. Although she was hospitalized for twenty-eight days, she continued to teach for the remainder of the semester, initially by Skype from her hospital bed. During her class time on Wednesdays and Fridays, she would leave a sign on the door of her hospital room advising medical staff to enter quietly. She would wear a suit jacket over her hospital gown to look and feel more professional, and she would call on her students with questions just as she did in the classroom. She lost her hair due to chemotherapy treatments, but she did not miss a beat. In fact, she would wear different wigs, and thus adopt different looks, as the semester progressed. She was out of the hospital and back in the classroom before the end of the term.

As interim dean, I met with Sarah in the spring of 2013 to discuss the upcoming academic year. At the time, her immune system was weak, and we had to meet outdoors. She had dressed in business attire for the occasion, and we walked around the SMU campus as we talked. She wanted to teach despite a pending bone marrow transplant, which would be her third. She did in fact teach a seminar in the fall of 2013, again using Skype from her hospital room, and once holding her class in a hospital conference room.

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Sarah was a dedicated teacher who wanted her students to have an excellent classroom experience. Her students described her as enthusiastic, dedicated, strong, and commanding in the classroom. During the semester she taught Property from her hospital room, one student described her as “extraordinary and inspiring” while another said, “I will never forget the lessons of courage and professionalism we learned through her example this semester.” Another student said, “Professor Tran may well be the most inspiring teacher I have ever had.”

Sarah was also a prolific and well-regarded scholar. Her intellectual curiosity led her to write in several different areas, with articles on intellectual property, energy, and the environment. During her short time at SMU, she published six articles and co-authored a book. She was published in highly ranked law journals, and her work was well-regarded. Her book, *Intellectual Property, Innovation and the Environment*, co-authored with Peter Menell, which came out after her death, is a collection of articles that examines the interrelationship between intellectual property, innovation, and the environment. Sarah worked tirelessly, even during stints in the hospital, to continue her research and writing.

Sarah passed away on Friday, February 28, 2014, at the age of 34. She left behind her husband of ten years, Thuan Tran, and two children, FarrahSophia and Jimi. She also left many colleagues, students, and friends in mourning.

Had Sarah lived a few more weeks, the faculty of the law school would have had the opportunity to vote on her contract renewal, and I am sure the vote would have been unanimous in favor of renewal. Instead, the faculty unanimously adopted the following resolution:

RESOLVED, that the Faculty of the Dedman School of Law express their gratitude to the family of Sarah Tran for sharing her with us over the past three years. She was an inspiration to us all, as well as a dedicated, innovative, and outstanding teacher and a brilliant and prolific scholar. Both faculty and students are better for her time with us. People make institutions, and Sarah Tran represented what we aspire to be. We miss her terribly.

Had Sarah been with us a few more years, she most certainly would have been granted tenure and would have continued to carve out a national reputation in her fields.

To honor Sarah, the law school created an award in her name to recognize a graduating student who has demonstrated courage or perseverance in the face of adversity. We gave the award for the first time this past spring to a graduating student who demonstrated great perseverance by finishing law school after beginning in 2002, dropping out to work while his wife completed her studies, and having to start over on a part-time basis while working to support his family. We will continue to honor students who show the type of courage and perseverance that marked Sarah’s time at SMU.

Sarah McQuillen Tran was a remarkable woman. We shared only a very small part of her life, but in the short time she was part of the SMU Dedman School of Law community, she made a positive and lasting impact. We remember her with great affection and miss her tremendously.

