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Remembering Sarah McQuillen Tran: A Scholar, Teacher, Mother, Friend

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REMEMBERING
SARAH MCQUILLEN TRAN:
A SCHOLAR, TEACHER,
MOTHER, FRIEND¹

*Cheryl Nelson Butler**

IT is an honor to be with you today to celebrate the life of my dear friend and colleague, Sarah McQuillen Tran. Sarah enriched the lives of so many people here at SMU and in the Highland Park community here. We remember Sarah today as a promising legal scholar, a committed teacher, a loving mother, and a true friend. It is fitting to share with you some thoughts about how Sarah gave all of herself as she navigated all of these commitments.

I. SARAH THE LEGAL SCHOLAR

Professor Tran joined the full-time faculty of the Dedman School of Law in Fall 2010. She taught three courses: Property Law—a Bar course—to 80 students in the first year class; Intellectual Property—an upper-level course; and Innovation and the Environment—a seminar course that she taught last semester.

Sarah's background studying civil and environmental engineering at the University of California at Berkeley and working as an environmental engineer instilled in her a passion for technology and science. She pursued these interests in the legal field by working in the energy group at Jones Day in Washington, D.C., and by clerking for the Honorable Judge Dyk on the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, which has primary jurisdiction over intellectual property disputes. During these experiences, she became interested in administrative law issues and dedicated herself to scholarly research on the Patent & Trademark Office and regulatory structures that promote innovation and sustainable development. She was a prolific scholar even before she joined the SMU Law faculty, having published her work even while she was a law student at Georgetown.

During the time she served on our faculty, her professional accomplishments were extraordinary, having published five articles in a little over

1. This tribute is based on the eulogy delivered at the Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, in honor of my friend and colleague, Sarah Tran.

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three years, two of which were republished. She had written several others before she joined the faculty. Her articles received recognition from leading scholars in the field, have appeared on dozens of SSRN top-ten lists, and have been discussed favorably on four online legal blogs. Sarah had just completed her work with Peter Menell, a professor of law at the University of California at Berkeley, as co-editor of a book entitled *INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, INNOVATION, AND THE ENVIRONMENT*.

I am so grateful for having witnessed her competitive drive, dedication, and passion toward her legal scholarship. We shared many conversations about her hopes of making a meaning contribution to her field.

"I just finished my 5th article," she had said. "How many articles do you have?"

"I have four articles now, Sarah," I told her. "But, I am going to write another one this weekend. I am determined to keep up with you."

II. SARAH TRAN: THE TEACHER

Professor Tran was not only an accomplished legal scholar; she was an effective, dedicated teacher. We shared a love of teaching. During the 2012–2013 school year, we taught the same section of 75 first-year law students. Professor Tran showed extraordinary dedication to her students. Her decision to teach Property law from her room at Baylor was a pivotal moment.

I recall arriving for a visit at the hospital. When I entered her room, Professor Tran said, "Oh, you are just in time. But you have to be quiet."

"Okay," I said. "Is the doctor about to come in?"

"No, I am about to teach my class."

"Here?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, "I am going to use Skype."

"In your hospital gown?" I asked.

"No, silly," She replied. "Hand me my suit jacket." She put on her jacket.

That day at the hospital, she asked me, "Well, how do I look?"

And, I told her the truth. "You look beautiful, professional, strong. You are a girl on fire."

When Professor Tran taught the class via Skype, she dug deep into this complicated material. She took and answered questions as all law professors do. Then, as always, she was professional. She was enthusiastic. Prepared.

As I watched Professor Tran throughout her battle against cancer, I realized that I too had become one of her students. I too learned something much deeper than the gruesome Rule Against Perpetuities that the students must learn. I could see in her eyes:

Remarkable courage.

Unconquerable strength.

A relentless determination to show her students and the world.
She wanted you to know: This is how I teach.

This is how I persevere.

This is how I fight.

This is how I BEAT cancer.

In this way, she BEAT cancer.

There, from Baylor Medical Center, she taught perseverance and courage. She *felt* that satisfaction of knowing that cancer could not take her determination to do her life's work—to serve her students and this community. She was so happy to have the opportunity to do her life's work.

Professor Tran expressed her mission and accomplishments as a law professor in these words:

I believe my teaching is effective because I have connected well with my students. At the beginning of each semester, I have expressed my two main goals as a teacher to the students. First of all, I have a short-term goal of imparting the legal way of thinking to my students and helping them gain an appreciation for the subject matter. Just as significantly, I have a long-term goal of serving as an advocate for my former students. I believe each student has the potential to be successful, and I want to help them achieve their goals by supporting them in their career searches and providing them with any counseling they may need.

She certainly achieved those goals. Here is what the students had to say about Professor Tran:

“She has a command of material.”

“She pushes students hard.”

“The professor really cared about the students and went above and beyond to accommodate us when she herself had personal health issues. She is an example of why I value my education at SMU law—the great professors.”

“Inspirational.”

“Accessible to students.”

“Prof. Tran gave me excellent advice on my writing style, and I am a much better writer as a result.”

“Even while she battled her own illness, she stayed true to our class and made an extreme effort to be available to us.”

“You are my hero.”

III. SARAH TRAN: THE MOTHER.

This is also her legacy to her children. I hope that FarrahSophia and Jimi always know that Mom was a teacher, a fighter, and a modern superhero. Sarah was a great mother, always very dedicated to her children. Many of the parents, teachers, and administrators from the Armstrong Elementary School have come to celebrate her life. Many of you must remember, as I do, that Sarah loved to play with her children and

their classmates on the playground at Armstrong Elementary. I will remember fondly the times we spent together playing basketball and tag with my son Jarvis, who was in Mrs. Smith's class with FarrahSophia, and my daughter Nia. This was a lot of fun.

IV. SARAH TRAN: MY FRIEND

Most of all, I am going to miss Sarah Tran, my colleague.

Sarah was a great colleague. She was a concerned, kind-hearted, and loyal friend.

When I interviewed for my position at SMU, I did not meet Sarah because she was on maternity leave, enjoying time with Jimi and her family. When my husband and I came up to Dallas to look for schools for the kids, we were staying at the Hyatt House. And, I will never forget that I got an email from my future colleague.

She said "Hi, this is Sarah Tran. I want to welcome you to SMU. If there is anything that you need, make sure that you let me know. I am here to help you."

And she helped me so much, then and to the very end: a friend at work, a listening ear, a workout partner, a therapist, a cheerleader, and a midnight coffee break partner.

Her junior colleagues felt that she was a pleasure to be around, always happy, upbeat, laughing, smiling, she brought out the best in all of us—very competitive and at the same time, very supportive, wishing for her colleagues the same success she sought for herself.

That is why when we got that call from Jackie, her mom, several of us came down to the hospital on the 28th. In her last hours, her colleagues were with her too. We stood with her. We held her hand. We told her we were proud of her. We told her that we loved her and that she was not alone. And in her last hour, she was with us, ours, our Professor Tran. Her colleagues at the law school have set up a memorial fund in her honor, and we will continue to honor her and keep her legacy as a scholar, a teacher, a mother, and a colleague, alive.