Tributes to Dores McCree

Angela Onwuachi-Willig

Boston University School of Law

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THE LATE-BLOOMING CAREER OF DORES McCREE†

After the death of her famous husband, she defined a new meaning for her life

Al Slote*

When she came to Ann Arbor in 1981 from Washington, D.C., Dores McCree was known around the U-M Law School as Mrs. Wade McCree, "It was a name I was used to," she says, McCree is a small, pretty woman of seventy-five, whose sprightly bearing nearly conceals evidence of an arthritic condition. In her tiny office at the Law School, a photo of her late husband, the former Solicitor General of the United States, sits near her desk, "When Wade first ran for public office—for Wayne County Circuit Court judge in the Fifties—he told me I had two names, Dores was my personal name and Mrs. Wade McCree was my social name, and at political gatherings I was just to talk about the weather and our children." She laughs, "Which I did. It was easy."

A longtime observer of the Law School scene says that Dores McCree in private was not a deferential wife but a true partner. "When Wade's files were a jumble following his move from Washington, and his new secretary was unable to cope, Dores came in quietly and in a few days had them straightened out. In public, she knew how to fade into the background. It was part of being a lady. Dores McCree is definitely a lady."

She was born Dores McCrary in Buena Vista, Georgia. In 1924, the family moved to Michigan, where her farmer father had found work in an automobile factory. Dores graduated from Ecorse High School and then from Wayne State University. She earned a master's in library science from Simmons College in Boston, and it was there, in 1942, that she met her future husband.

At first, McCree says, "I thought of him as a smart aleck. We were at a party. He was an army private, stationed at Fort Devens. He'd been drafted after his first year at Harvard Law School. He and a law student buddy were sitting on the floor talking Greek and Latin to each other. . . . I thought they were arrogant and snobbish. A week later, he called me for a date."

The McCrees were married in Detroit in 1946. Their three children are all U-M grads: Kathleen, a partner in the law firm of Dykema Gossett, is married and has two children; Karen is a librarian with Time Warner in New York City; and her twin, Wade Harper McCree III, married with one child, is a lawyer currently running for district court judge in Detroit.

† Al Slote, The Late-Blooming Career of Dores McCree, ANN ARBOR OBSERVER, August, 1996, at 17.

* The Michigan Journal of Race & Law is extremely grateful to Mr. Slote for sharing this interview with us.
After Harvard Law School, Wade McCree went to work for a Detroit law firm, and Dores McCree was a librarian at the Wayne County Public Library. Wade McCree's career blazed along: elected to Detroit circuit court; appointed to the federal bench by President Kennedy; appointed in 1966 to the U.S. Court of Appeals. In 1977, President Carter named McCree Solicitor General of the United States—the government's representative before the Supreme Court. McCree was the second black man ever to hold the position; the first was Thurgood Marshall.

What was life like as the wife of the Solicitor General?

"It could be very nice," Dores McCree says with a twinkle. "Supreme Court dinners, White House luncheons and dinners, State Department functions.... You're invited to lots of places and meet lots of important people. As Wade's wife, I got a lot of reflected respect." And, she laughs, "A car and driver if I was with him. If I was alone—forget it."

Following Carter's defeat in 1980, Wade McCree joined the U-M law faculty. He taught for six years until his untimely death from cancer in 1987.

Not long afterward, Lee Bollinger, then the Law School dean, asked Dores McCree to work at the school—and not, to her surprise, in the library. He wanted her to work in some capacity with students of color: the school, he felt, needed a minority presence on its administrative staff.

McCree hesitated. Nothing she had done had prepared her for a job like that. Finally, Ted St. Antoine, a former law dean, convinced her that she could make a difference in the school. There was another, compelling reason. "Money was never a part of Wade's ambitions," McCree explains. "Can you believe this man died without a will?"

"There is no pension for solicitors general. Wade gave up a lifetime pension when he left the federal judiciary to become Solicitor General. When he was teaching at the Law School—where, incidentally, he earned more than he earned as a federal judge—he was appointed a special master to help settle the Howard Hughes estate. Fees from that work were still uncollected at the time of his death. Yes, I took the job. I didn't know exactly what it entailed. But then I didn't think Lee Bollinger did, either.

"But just as Wade had had an open door for students, so did I. And that was how I learned that my job was mostly being there, mostly for students of color who felt out of place in a predominantly white law school, who felt this place wasn't for them.

"A student would appear in the doorway. 'Are you busy?' 'Come in. Sit down. Tell me what's the matter.' One student told me he wore a tape recorder under his shirt to record a professor making what he believed were racist comments. I told him to stop doing that: 'That's little stuff, and you have to learn to ignore it. It's a battle you can't win. What you can win is a good education. So stop wasting your time and money and start taking advantage of this place. There are bright professors here. You don't
have to like them to learn from them. Learn, learn. Study hard. Get good grades.'"

"Many listened. Perhaps," she smiles, "because I looked like their grandmothers."

Did any of her students, especially those from inner-city neighborhoods, feel a gulf between themselves and this distinguished, well-educated woman?

"Black is black," McCree says quietly. "Look, I know I came to this job with a lot of reflected credibility. Thanks to Wade, I knew lots of federal judges, lots of prominent lawyers, politicians. Those were perks—but I earned them. And I used them. I became a sort of career placement office all of my own. 'I will help you,' I told them, 'but you have to help yourself first. You have to have credibility, too. So work hard and get the good grades I know you’re capable of.'" She pauses. "Did I make a difference? I think I did."

Dores McCree recently retired after eight years at the Law School. At her good-bye party, she thanked the students she had counseled: "What could have been a life of fruitless grief and aimless activity has been instead one of meaning, of purpose, and of great fulfillment."

The thanks of the students were equally eloquent, "As an adult," wrote one, "I encourage you to go. As one of your children, I want you to stay." The student praised McCree "for creating a safe space for us just by being all that you are."

Would Wade McCree have been surprised by what Mrs. Wade McCree has done?

"I think he’d have been proud."

Was Dores McCree surprised by Mrs. Wade McCree’s career?

"No." Smiling, she adds, "It was just delayed."
I consulted Dore McCree every time I had a significant decision to make. When a group of us were thinking about starting the journal that later became the *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, we consulted Mrs. McCree. When I found out that my wife and I were going to have our first child and we were not sure how we were going to pay the bills, we consulted Mrs. McCree. When a member of the faculty treated one of us as if we did not belong at the Law School, we consulted Mrs. McCree. When some faculty treated us with dignity, we rejoiced with Mrs. McCree. She was our oracle, though not at all opaque, like the famous Greek one. “Children,” Mrs. McCree would often start—that was her appellation for us—and then would proceed to bless us with her wisdom.

We needed Mrs. McCree. Many, though not by any means all, of us who looked to her for guidance and wisdom were matriculating through an institution where our presence was deeply contested. Affirmations of belonging were lacking, to put it mildly. Strangely enough, perhaps, we understood Mrs. McCree’s position as the institution’s official recognition that it was failing students of color at some level. Mrs. McCree, like a superwoman, was responsible for rectifying the failure.

They asked her to be our grandmother and it worked. She reminded us that we were smart and that this was as much our institution as anyone else’s. She knew who was dating whom (and who should not be dating). She knew who was struggling academically and she was not afraid to give a swift kick in the pants. Her trademark smile was easily converted into a sneer when she felt a reprimand was necessary. That woman was very sweet, but she was not a fool. And she seemed to have the ear of every notable person at the University.

It was obvious to her that we should start a journal and so we did. She provided the guidance that made the endeavor successful. She advised us on speakers for our first symposium and was willing to lend her name to entice them to come to Ann Arbor. Though she was not a lawyer, she was often quick to remind us of this fact, she was brilliant and thus understood well the legal academic enterprise. Among those of us who founded the *Journal*, seven or eight of us are now legal academics. Mrs. McCree’s guidance played a large part in our career paths.

I continue to pass on to others what Mrs. McCree said to me when I told her that we were about to have a baby and were not sure how we

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* Professor of Law and Director, Center on Law, Race, and Politics at Duke University School of Law; Volume 1 Editor-in-Chief of the *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, J.D., 1997, University of Michigan Law School.
were going to take care of this new child. "There is no bad time to have a child," she said, "it will work out just fine." And work out it did.

I will miss Dores McCree. I know that I will no longer receive a holiday card from her. I know that I cannot expect to see her face when I return to Ann Arbor. I know that there are generations of students at Michigan who will no longer have the benefit of her wisdom.

But I will endeavor to carry out Mrs. McCree's spirit. I am grateful that I knew her and am a better person as a result. She was the oracle of Ann Arbor, but also my grandmother and my friend.
There is no being of any race who, if he finds the proper guide, cannot attain to virtue.

—Cicero

Perhaps Cicero knew of the coming of Mrs. Dores McCree. After all, Mrs. McCree served as the guide for countless law students at the University of Michigan Law School during the many years she served as a grandmother to all of us. As a law student in the mid-90s, I was a frequent visitor—and more frequent “invited guest”—to Mrs. McCree’s Room 200 office. Often, I walked in outraged, sometimes humbled, and every now and again, dejected. And yet, I always walked out upright. After all those visits, amazingly, to this day, I could not tell you what title Mrs. McCree held at the law school. Maybe she was Sounding-Board-in-Chief? Or perhaps she was the Principal Problem Diffuser? Or would Dean of Comfort best capture her essence? No matter. Mrs. McCree’s slight stature belied the enormity of her title. She was simply “There.” Always.

Mrs. McCree was there when a group of students sought to start a journal dedicated to the exploration of issues at the intersection of race and law. As a member of that determined yet unsure group, we sought out Mrs. McCree’s guidance. Seeking out Mrs. McCree made sense; she gave comfort to your fears, perspective to your dilemma, and confidence to your hesitation. But, make no mistake, Mrs. McCree would not endeavor to tell you what you wanted to hear; she told you what you needed to hear. And so, when we approached Mrs. McCree for guidance, she did not provide us with answers to our countless questions. She responded with countless questions. As we thought through those questions, we stumbled across what Mrs. McCree was trying to teach us all along: although we were building something new, we had to think about building something worthy of becoming old.

Mrs. McCree was there when we needed a career reality check or when we reached a crux in our path to professional excellence. Although we may have thought that a particular Supreme Court Justice should consider themselves blessed to have received our application or a particular law firm fortunate that we accepted their invitation for a call-back interview, Mrs. McCree was there to stoke our enthusiasm for the law, while

reminding us that our intellectual gifts entitled us to nothing more than what we earned through hard work and determination. Although she was not trained in the law, she was there to advocate for our dreams, counsel our aspirations, and represent our interests in a manner that was empowering. Mrs. McCree had a knack for making you feel big. Perhaps that is because she saw in each of us the real promise of tomorrow, even when you could not or would not see past the vicissitudes of today.

Mrs. McCree was there for us when we took small situations and transformed them into colossal problems. With slumped shoulders and chagrined faces, many of us went to see Mrs. McCree ready to explain how the world had wronged us. We soon found out that she would entertain no such arguments. For Mrs. McCree knew that responsibility lay at the core of our new-found profession. She could not let us go on believing that we had been wronged in a manner that allowed us to shirk the cold, hard, multi-faceted facts that would only reveal themselves under the light of self-reflection. She could not let us off the hook because she saw it as her mission to help us grow from what we believed was surely a career-ending misstep. With perspective and warmth, Mrs. McCree’s words enabled us to catch our breath, contemplate what really happened, and then make peace with our role in the situation. At no time did Mrs. McCree upbraid you—she was too gracious to embark on such a path. At no time was she moved to anger—she was far too patient for such an emotion. And at no time was her support conditional—she loved too completely to bother with such measurement.

Although Mrs. Dores McCree’s loss has left a void in our law school community, those of us who knew her and had the privilege of securing her company, if only for a moment, are all too aware how fortunate we were to have such a virtuous guide. For those that never had occasion to meet Mrs. McCree, her legacy of high expectations and unconditional, excellence-producing love will forever breathe life into our hallowed quadrangle. Even though Mrs. McCree is no longer physically with us, her legacy, evidenced in all of us, will always be there.
TRIBUTE TO DORES McCREE

Emily M.S. Houh*

Dores McCree meant a lot of things to a lot of people at Michigan Law. As we all know, during her 18 years with the Law School (from 1988–96), Mrs. McCree offered unwavering support and encouragement to scores of students, particularly students of color. During my time there (1993–96), her dedication to our activist efforts helped empower us to attempt to make institutional changes at the Law School. Those of us, for example, who helped found the Michigan Journal of Race & Law in the mid-1990s know first-hand that the Journal simply would not have come into existence without Mrs. McCree’s singular and steadfast support. In fact, for a long time, it often felt like outside of our classmates and co-conspirators, Mrs. McCree alone believed in us. As we worked toward making the Journal a reality, she always held us “in the light.” This faith in us was not only instrumental to the success of our project, it also exemplified Mrs. McCree’s general optimism and dedication to social equality both within and without the institution.

Because this is a tribute, I also want to comment on why I am additionally and more personally indebted to Mrs. McCree. I can say with a fair amount of certainty that without her, I very well may not have made it through law school. As was the case for some of us who had never really been exposed to lawyers or the legal profession (there were no lawyers in my family or family’s circle of friends), the first year of law school nearly broke me down. I remember sitting in my first-year classes, listening to my classmates as they engaged in Socratic colloquy with our professors, and thinking, “Are we reading the same thing? What am I missing here? Why are the things that I think are important in these cases not considered relevant in our classroom discussions?” I did not “love the law” during that first year of law school. In fact, at the time I rather hated it because I had not yet assimilated its rhetoric and did not yet understand its internal structure and its discursive power. I didn’t know what I was doing and was at a loss as to how to figure it out. I felt like a freak who

* University of Cincinnati College of Law, Associate Dean of Faculty and Gustavus Henry Wald Professor of the Law and Contracts; Co-director of the College’s Center for Race, Gender, and Social Justice; J.D., 1996, University of Michigan Law School.

1. To “hold” one “in the light” is a Quaker expression that, based on my past experiences attending (unprogrammed) Quaker meeting, conveys concern and care for a particular person or persons in need. As with many religious services, at the end of a Quaker meeting, the designated meeting leader usually asks if there are people whom the gathered Friends should “hold in the light.” The concept of “the light” originated, in turn, in the Quaker belief that God’s light exists in us all, and that in God’s light, we are all equal and deserving.
should have been more grateful for having been admitted to a school like Michigan, and constantly lamented my decision in college to take the LSAT instead of the GRE.

Fortunately, I found some extraordinary friends among my classmates and through the Critical Race Theory Reading Group (organized by Eddy Meng, Heather Martinez Zona, Leslie Newman, and Dan Varner, all Michigan Law '94). We provided to one another significant emotional and intellectual support, and many of us later dedicated the rest of our time at the Law School to making the Journal happen. But within the formal institution, it was Mrs. McCree who always had our backs, who always had a smile, who genuinely cared about how we—as individuals and together—were doing, and who encouraged us to take advantage of the many opportunities that had been given to us as a result of our admission to the Law School, particularly if those opportunities were in service to a greater good.

For example, when I decided to apply in the spring of my first year for a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) position to teach the “Women and the Law” course in the University’s Women’s Studies Program during what would be my 2L year, Mrs. McCree again offered (along with one of my first-year professors, Chris Whitman) unwavering support and encouragement. As luck would have it, I was offered one of the three GSI positions and taught the Women and the Law course for the next two years in law school. Teaching, along with working on the Journal, for the remainder of law school changed everything, and I have Mrs. McCree to thank, in part, for that.

Additionally, at the end of my first year, Mrs. McCree again floored me with her goodness of spirit. As many often do, I had decided to take a public interest position during the summer between my first and second year. By the time I had accepted the offer, I was almost at the end of my rope, though I thought I should perhaps give a law job a try. At the time, I had even contemplated giving up the GSI position I had recently been awarded in the event that I decided to pull the plug on law school altogether. But when I spoke about these concerns with Mrs. McCree (since I often sought advice and counsel from her), she insisted that I give the summer job at the Sugar Law Center for Economic and Social Justice (based in Detroit) a try and that I satisfy my GSI obligations for the following academic year. Of course, I knew she was right—I couldn’t give up yet. So, I started to think about how I might supplement my income for the summer, since Sugar could offer me only a very little bit of pay and I had managed, in my gloomy state, to miss the Student Funded Fellowship deadline.

A few days later after talking with her, Mrs. McCree tracked me down to tell me that she had obtained some funds to supplement my income from Sugar. I don’t remember the exact amount she had come up with, but it was enough to get me through the summer without having to
get another job working in the library or elsewhere. I couldn’t believe it when she found me to tell me about what she’d done. I hadn’t expected it and certainly didn’t feel entitled to it. I was so shocked and touched that I probably cried. Above all, I was grateful to Mrs. McCree for finding a way to enable me to work that summer under less stressful circumstances, because I knew it would free me to really think hard about whether I could and wanted to finish law school.

After a somewhat enjoyable and productive summer working at Sugar and preparing to teach Women and the Law, I decided that I could and should stay with it. If it hadn’t been for Mrs. McCree’s support during that bleak first year, I don’t know that I would have used that summer to gain the confidence that I did. And so, I am deeply indebted to Mrs. McCree for helping me through my darkest times in law school, and moving me along toward the light. I came back to school in the fall of 1994 (my second year) more invigorated than ever.

As we started back to school that fall, a small group of us began to meet on weekend mornings to discuss starting a new journal that would not only provide a venue in which legal race scholars could publish, but would also provide students of color and other students committed to issues of social justice with opportunities to explore issues of racial and social equality in a scholarly context. Of course, that venture eventually became the Journal, now working on production of its sixteenth volume, and now also widely regarded as one of the top (if not the top) U.S. race and law journals. I am willing to bet that every single one of us who gathered around those coffee shop tables back in the fall of 1994 can tell stories similar to the ones I just shared about Mrs. McCree—many of those stories, in fact, appear in this tribute. Mrs. McCree’s assistance to and support of each of us had such profound individual and collective impacts, and the value of her contributions, both personal and institutional, simply can’t be overstated.

It also has to be noted of course that, remarkably, Mrs. McCree never asked for anything in return from those of us she helped—not recognition, not congratulations, not any sort of quid pro quo. Rather, she did her work selflessly out of a sense of obligation to doing what she felt was right, both for individual students and for the community at large, and simply because she wanted to help people. I never had a chance to thank Mrs. McCree personally for all of this, that is, for so extraordinarily exemplifying what each of us should aspire to in our personal and professional lives. I’m thankful to the Journal and to BLSA for giving me the opportunity to do so in this special tribute, although I do wish I had been able to tell her all this before her passing. But I take great comfort in knowing that Mrs. McCree’s wonderful spirit is surely shining down on us from above, and that she continues to hold us all in her light, just as she did in life.
LIKE MRS. McCREE: A TRIBUTE TO DORES McCREE

Angela Onwuachi-Willig*

INTRODUCTION

Law school is not always an easy emotional experience. The angst that law school causes for many people is most evident in the continuing relevance of Scott Turow's novel One L, a thirty-three year old fictional story about the harrowing experiences of one first-year law student.¹ Decades after publishing One L, Turow still receives regular weekly e-mails from readers of the novel.² Turow notes, “I suspect my frankness about the fact that there were moments when I really felt close to coming apart has helped the book endure.”³

Since Turow's account, numerous female and minority lawyers, including law professors, have written about the difficulties of their own law school experiences.⁴ One black female professor at Columbia Law School, Patricia Williams, even wrote about the painful experience of exams for some minority law students from her perspective as a professor in her highly acclaimed book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights.*⁵ Both quantitative

* Charles M. and Marion Kierscht Scholar, Professor of Law, University of Iowa; B.A., Grinnell College; J.D., 1997, University of Michigan Law School. Thanks to Dean Gail Agrawal and Charles M. and Marion J. Kierscht for their research support. I give special thanks to my husband, Jacob Willig-Onwuachi, and our children, Elijah, Bethany, and Solomon for their constant love and support.

3. Id. at 1015.
and qualitative studies about the law school experience such as those reported in *Becoming Gentlemen: Women's Experiences at One Ivy League Law School* and *A Kinder, Gentler Law School? Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Legal Education at King Hall* have further validated these many accounts about the difficulties of law school environments, especially for minority and female students.

**MEETING THE BIG M OF MICHIGAN LAW**

My own experience as an outsider in law school does not differ much from many of these accounts. I found law school, on many occasions, to be frightening, isolating, stress-inducing, lonely, exhausting, and even defeating. Among the few things that helped to bring hope and strength back into my law school life were the many good people I met during law school—good friends; student and professorial collaborators in struggles on campus with the administration and, at times, even other students; family members; and last, but certainly not least, Mrs. Dores McCree. Of all the people I encountered at the University of Michigan Law School, none had more of a calming and powerful effect than Mrs. McCree.

In a place where there were very few people of color, especially women of color, on the faculty or in the administration, Mrs. McCree's mere presence in the building was of extraordinary importance to me. Mrs. McCree was small in stature, but big in voice and in the respect she commanded and received from her colleagues in the law school. Seeing another black woman with such power, and still yet such humanity and grace, at the law school served as a constant reminder to me that the University of Michigan Law School belonged to me just as much as it did to anyone else. That I, a black female student, would readily see the Law School as my own was not a given. One of my very first memories of law school is of sitting in Room 100 during orientation as the Dean remarked to us, the 1Ls: “This is your school.” I recall wondering, then, whether such a statement applied to me. After all, there I was staring at a line of paintings on the wall behind the Dean, but seeing no face on that wall (or any other wall) that reflected my own. This experience of not seeing women or people of color reflected in the image of the law school


remained a constant throughout my first year of law school. I had no classes with female professors or professors of color during my first year. The one female instructor whom I regularly saw during my first year was the 3L who led my legal writing section, along with a 2L male co-instructor. I remember her (and her co-instructor) quite fondly, but naturally, her presence did not quite serve the same function. Meeting Mrs. McCree—the real big M at Michigan—provided me with an image I needed in order to survive during the first year of law school.

But, Mrs. McCree was far more than her presence. Her representation extended beyond the symbolic. She was an incredible mentor, a wonderful spirit, and in many cases, another mother—beautiful and graceful—to many of us. Like any mother, Mrs. McCree believed in us even when we failed to believe in ourselves. Born in 1920, Mrs. McCree understood more than we ever could about the effects of racism, not just through law, but on our psyches. She worked incredibly hard to achieve all of her accomplishments, and she was so proud to see the legacy of her and her husband’s struggles as well as those of our ancestors continue through us. An accomplished librarian and administrator and the widow of Wade McCree, a former U.S. Circuit Judge for the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals and a former law professor at the University of Michigan Law School, Mrs. McCree represented a vision of what our lives could hold for us if we simply remained open to all possibilities. Mrs. McCree knew what we were facing better than we did, but unlike so many of us at various moments, she always had a strong belief in our talents and our ability to achieve any and all of our dreams.

One of my most vivid memories of Mrs. McCree is in watching her disappointment with me when she thought I sold myself short on a particular opportunity. She was not really disappointed in me, but rather in my underestimation of my abilities. Mrs. McCree had a faith in her students that was unparalleled. On that day, I learned a very valuable lesson from Mrs. McCree about believing in myself. Even as I do not always hold the same level of faith and trust in myself as Mrs. McCree did for so many of us, I often strive to be “like Mrs. McCree” in this respect. Throughout my career, she has remained with me as the good angel on my shoulder, encouraging and pushing me along the way. A year ago, I had an opportunity to really understand how much Mrs. McCree has remained with me when I returned to the University of Michigan Law School as a Visiting Professor of Law in the fall of 2009.

**Michigan Law Without the Big M**

By the fall of 2009, I had returned to the University of Michigan Law School on only one other occasion: for the tenth anniversary symposium for the *Michigan Journal of Race & Law* (*MJR&L*). As with so many other things, *MJR&L* would not exist today but for Mrs. McCree. When
all others at the law school doubted the small but growing group of stu-
dents who wanted to include scholarly voices on race at the law school
through a journal, Mrs. McCree supported us without reservation and,
indeed, with much enthusiasm.

When I returned to the law school as a Visiting Professor in the fall
of 2009, I was a tenured professor at the University of Iowa College of
Law. I had established a respected record of scholarship and achievements
during my time as a professor, and the mystery of law professors' lives was
no longer a mystery to me. Yet, I found myself experiencing, again, a flood
of the same negative feelings that I experienced as a student at the law
school—the doubt, the isolation, and, yes, the exhaustion. It was not that
the law school was unwelcoming. Many professors I had during my time
at the law school such as Sam Gross, Christina Whitman, and Steven
Croley were warm and convivial, and many whom I did not have or who
were not present during my time as student were equally welcoming.

It was not until a friend asked me, "Why the doubt and exhaustion
still?" that I began to understand this return to my old insecurities as a
student. Unlike when I was a student, my professional and personal sup-
port mechanisms—friends from MJR&L and elsewhere and primarily Mrs.
McCree—were not in place during my visit. Instead, I found myself in the
position of being "like Mrs. McCree" (though I could never ever ever
fully be like her) to students. As I sat and listened regularly to the stream
of students who came to talk about and even cry about jobs, opportuni-
ties, and battles and experiences within the law school—many of which
resembled my own concerns, battles, and experiences as a student, I would
draw my strength and many of my responses from thinking: "What would
Mrs. McCree do? What would she say?" When I saw and heard students
underestimating themselves and their abilities, I often thought of Mrs.
McCree and her never-ending faith in me and others as students. Still
many years later, here was Mrs. McCree, guiding me, remaining with me,
and revealing her deep impact on my development, my thinking, my ap-
proach to students, and my approach to life.

My deepest regret is that I never shared with Mrs. McCree her in-
credible impact on me, even as I was there in her own backyard in Ann
Arbor. The saving grace, of course, is that I know that Mrs. McCree will
always be with me, always a part of me, always there on my shoulder, and
always in my heart. She will forever be missed and will forever remain to
me the big "M" at Michigan. Thank you to the law school and MJR&L
for this opportunity to pay tribute to a true pioneer and hero, Mrs. Dores
McCree.
FOND MEMORIES OF DORES McCREE

It is difficult for Jean and me to think of life without our dear friend, Dores. Although we had not seen Dores for a number of years, she was always in our minds. Some people are so consistently good to you, and so consistently good as people, over so long a period of time, that they stay with you forever. Dores definitely was such a person. Hiring Dores to be part of the Law School administration was one of the best things I ever did. She brought the role her inherent wisdom and positive outlook on life, as well as her endless capacity to nurture others, especially young people. But she nurtured us all, in fact. She understood frustration, impatience, and anger in others, even though she never exhibited those emotions herself. She soothed whatever situation she encountered, because her very person made people feel this was the better part of humanity.

We miss Wade, and we will miss Dores—very, very deeply. And we extend our sincere condolences to her wonderful family.

Lee C. Bollinger
President, Columbia University

For over 150 years the University of Michigan Law School has been the epitome of excellence in legal education. During the 1980s and 1990s it developed, implemented, and successfully defended an affirmative action policy that catapulted it to the forefront of elite public institutions of higher learning committed to assembling diverse and talented student bodies. It is indeed significant that during this important period, one of the most effective champions in implementing the Law School’s affirmative action policy that insured a diverse student body wasn’t a lawyer, law professor, or law student. From 1988 through 1996 Dores McCree was an effective bridge providing excellent counsel to the Law School community. Despite the sometimes divergent views of students, faculty, and administrators, she was a masterful supporter of each. Most important, her contributions were made with compassion, dignity, and a wonderful sense of humor. I had the great fortune to work with Mrs. McCree on many projects in which she enriched both the entire Law School community as well my life. The University of Michigan Law School community is significantly better because Doris McCree spent time here.

Saul A. Green
J.D., 1992, Public Interest/Public Service Faculty Fellow
University of Michigan Law School
About 15 years ago I was talking to Kathleen McCree Lewis in Room 250, where she had just given a speech, when two young women law students came up said: “Mrs. Lewis, we want to thank you so much for lending us your mother, because she’s our mother too.” Kathleen must have heard things like that dozens of times. Dores was a mother to many lost children at the law school. But the way these two impressive women said it made me realize that I too had come to think of Dores as a mother, not something I am used to, perhaps because she reminded me of my own.

Dores was nothing like an earth mother. She was small and wiry, with an infectious and sometimes wicked smile. She was funny and witty and sharp, and she could be bitingly critical. Dores had standards, high standards, and she did not conceal her disappointments. She understood us well—students, faculty, administrators, alumni—better sometimes than we might have wished. But she was never bitter, or cynical or distant. She seemed to know everyone, to remember everybody, and to care about us all. She could summon the better angels of our nature.

She will be deeply missed.

Samuel Gross
Thomas and Mabel Long Professor of Law
University of Michigan Law School

Dores Mc Cree was one of the finest people I have ever known. She was not only smart and kind, she was wise beyond her years. And that is saying something about a person in her nineties.

Dores’ real job at the Law School was helping students solve their problems—whatever those problems might be—and she had an amazing sensitivity to people’s real needs. The first time she asked me to help with a student’s problem, it seemed to me that the task was so simple that I asked her why she didn’t just advise the student to do it himself. She explained that she knew he didn’t really need help with the task; his real problem was that he needed somebody to tell him to “stop acting like a fool” and she knew he wouldn’t be able to hear it from a “a little old lady who’s not even a member of the faculty.” After that, I never failed to get Dores’ perception of what the real problem was and she was never wrong.

The world is a better place for her having lived and is diminished by her departure. When I think about never seeing her again, I know that I am mourning for myself, not for Dores.

Nick Rhine
Clinical Professor of Law
University of Michigan Law School
All I can say is I truly loved Mrs. Dores McCree. Her wisdom, charm and grace made the Law School a much more enjoyable place for me. I can only thank her family for sharing her so fully with us. She is remembered fondly. When we're good, her legacy of selfless service shines through us.

Marcus A. Williams
Chairman, Black Law Student Association
J.D., 1996, University of Michigan Law School
DORES McCRY McCREE

David L. Chambers*

Dores McCree made your day a little better whenever she walked into a room. When you talked with her, you knew her goal was simply to enjoy your company, not to get something out of you, and not to show herself off. She was good at talking and good at listening. She’d cock her head slightly and ask questions to which she really cared about the answers. On more than one occasion, I had to jockey with others to be able to sit with her at a dinner.

I recently read the oral history Dores gave about Wade as part of Wayne State University's Detroit African-American History Project. She and Wade married while Wade was a law student at Harvard. Dores, trained as a librarian, worked until their first child, Kathleen, was born. She stood behind Wade while he finished law school near the top of his class (completing the final two years in eighteen months), while he searched for jobs after law school (denied employment by white law firms in Boston and Detroit before joining a small black firm in Detroit), and while, over a twenty-five year period, he served as a Michigan state circuit judge, a federal district judge, a federal appellate judge and Solicitor General of the United States. Dores worked again as a librarian at Wayne County General Hospital while their children were young. She helped Wade campaign for the elected circuit judgeship in Detroit (the first African-American elected judge in Michigan). She accompanied him to countless dinners and conventions. Mostly, she stayed in his shadow. After his death in 1987 (at the far too young age of 67), Dores devoted a great deal of time to sustaining Wade's public memory—attending dinners and receptions for scholarships in his name, serving as the founding president of the Historical Society for the U.S. District Court of the Eastern District of Michigan, and much else.

For us at the Law School, Dores emerged fully from Wade's shadow when she joined the law school's administrative staff a year after he died. She became good friends with many of us on the faculty and with a wide range of staff members. Over the years, she served many functions within the school, but I knew her best for the time she spent advising students, particularly African-American students—encouraging them in their studies and helping them find employment as judicial clerks, law firm associates and public-service attorneys. In the late 1990s, I knew she had fully emerged in her own right when I was speaking to an African-American


student after class and referred to Wade and a course he and I had once taught together, and the student said, “That was Mrs. McCree's husband, right?”

At the end of reading the oral history about Wade, I wanted so much for the interviewer to keep on going and to ask Dores more about her own life. But he didn’t, despite the fact that it was Dores, not Wade, who had grown up in Detroit and graduated from Wayne State, and despite the fact that Dores was such an obviously interesting person. I wanted the interviewer to ask her about her career as librarian, to learn to what degree her career as a librarian had been held back by being African-American, or by being a woman; or by being an African-American woman, to ask her whether she ever resented her role as a famous person’s wife and to press her a bit when she denied it, to ask her what she would have done for a career if she had been born not in 1920 but rather in 1947, the year her daughter Kathleen was born. Softer spoken but fully as sharp as her daughter, Dores might have chosen to be a librarian but could have become anything else she wanted, though she would, like Kathy, still have had to cope with lingering racism and sexism in whatever profession she’d chosen.

In the end, of course, I am selfishly glad that Dores led exactly the life she did, for it meant that we at the Law School got the value of her services and I got the opportunity to know her as a friend.
TRIBUTE TO DORES McCREE

Christine Gregory*

The other day a colleague sent me a photo of Dores and wondered if I was the student in the picture. Dores was sitting across her desk from the young woman who looked like me, with a profile that was strikingly similar to my own. But I didn't recognize the photo or remember the moment. Was it me?

After taking a closer look, my heart sank. I wanted to claim this as one of many times that I spent with Dores as a student; sitting across from her, soaking up advice, sharing both my frustrations about law school and dreams for the future. The truth is that I didn't take advantage of the support and listening ear that she provided to so many minority students. When my first year as a law student challenged my self-confidence, I looked to sources external to the Law School for support and encouragement. After three semesters, I left Michigan to spend a year at Indiana University where I would be closer to my family.

So I never got to know Dores as a student. It was only after I returned to the Law School years later as Assistant Dean that we became friends. And, it wasn't until after her death that I began to fully understand the important and critical role that she played. Dores was hired in 1988 as “Student Services Associate and Special Projects Administrator.” This position “was created to fill a void in the area of minority affairs,” according to the Winter 1989 issue of Law Quandrangle Notes. Dores

* Assistant Dean for Student Affairs, University of Michigan Law School. J.D., 1996, University of Michigan Law School.
was the first person hired by the Law School with the specific directive of addressing “minority affairs.” She helped recruit students of color, identified employment opportunities through her extensive connections in the legal profession, and worked on special projects and initiatives. She was most known and loved for her ability to comfort and encourage minority students who, like myself, had difficulty adjusting to law school.

Dores was the first to step into the “minority affairs void” and bridge the gap between race discrimination and the Law School’s mission to create an inclusive environment for students of color. She did this with persistence and grace. I have no doubt that because she was so effective, her role was institutionalized after her retirement in 1996 and made part of the job responsibilities assigned to the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs. I knew none of this when I was appointed by the Board of Regents in 2007. Dores rarely spoke about her work at the Law School. When asked she would say, “Oh, I didn’t really do much. I just brushed the lint off suits and straightened ties. Occasionally I would hand out tissues. That was really it.” She did so much more than that.

The last time that I saw Dores was just a year ago at the Butch Carpenter banquet. Although her health was declining, she was stunningly beautiful with the same sparkle and razor sharp wit that I had come to know and appreciate. Last fall we missed our usual lunch date and I meant to pay her a visit. But when winter came, it was too late. She was gone.

I’ve decided to keep the photo because it’s symbolic of the critical role that Dores played in the lives of so many students and the important legacy she left behind. Whether or not the young woman in the picture is actually me, I see myself there, sitting across from Dores—learning from her example, and striving to carry out the job she started twenty-two years ago.
Dores McCree was the life-long partner of a highly regarded and accomplished jurist and scholar. She also raised three children, two of whom went on to become distinguished members of the legal profession. Her son-in-law is a prominent lawyer, and her eldest grandson continues the family’s legacy of leadership and contributions to the bar.

Dores McCree, the librarian, raised a family of lawyers, and after she was done she graced Hutchins Hall with her sharp mind, steady guidance, and generous spirit. Her brand of counsel was direct, candid, and always timely. She might not tell a law student what s/he wanted to hear, but those coached by her certainly received the advice needed to move forward. Any private admonishment was often coupled with her public admiration, and it was this “tough-love” for which Dores was known and revered. The University of Michigan Law School’s legacy is all the better for having hired Dores. There are countless beneficiaries of her wise counsel.

It was this perception of Dores as mother and mentor that I held when we first became friends. Had I kept her in that box, the loss would have been all mine. I was lucky enough to count Dores among my “girlfriends”, a term by which I mean no disrespect. Rather, I use it to describe our friendship. For us, there were few subjects off limits, no conversation that didn’t end too early, and no occasion we were together that was not punctuated by the kind of laughter that soothes the soul. We were girlfriends. Had we been contemporaries, we would have been in each other’s wedding, enjoyed an occasional night on the town, and often talked each other into buying a pair of shoes or handbag neither of us needed.

I treasured our friendship, mostly because Dores was who she was: elegant, radiant, smart, well read, and never condescending. I learned from Dores how to live out loud as a woman in a world where too few of us ever realize our own power. Dores taught me, by example, how to be comfortable in my own skin. She set the bar high enough that many of us can only aspire to what Dores McCree accomplished—a life so well lived that not even death can dim its light.

* Vice President and Dean of the College at Colgate University; J.D., 1988, University of Michigan Law School.
A TRIBUTE TO DORES McCREE

Nancy Krieger*

Dores McCree was a gift to the Law School community from Dean Lee Bollinger. As Dores told the story to me, they were at some gathering in the months after her late husband Professor McCree died, and in conversation with Lee she mentioned that she would soon be looking for a job. Without so much as a pause he asked her to come work with us at the Law School. Dores was very modest and couldn't imagine what she could do to be useful to the students at the school. It took some convincing, but she did come. Countless students and staff will always be grateful to Dean Bollinger.

Originally Dores was given an office on the third floor of Hutchins Hall near the various Deans’ offices but was soon moved downstairs to a tiny office in the Career Services area where she felt the students would be more comfortable coming and going. She was a most wonderful advisor for our students and alumni for many years, doling out advice about judicial clerkships, summer clerkships, proper etiquette and dress for interviews and work, budget advice, study advice, and any other advice a student needed. If she didn’t know the answer, which was mighty unusual, she would get the information.

Moving her office to the Career Services area gave me the opportunity to get to know this amazing woman better. Up to the point of the move I saw the same smart, elegant, well-dressed lady, mother of one of our grads, mother-in-law of another, that everyone else saw. Then she moved in next door and I began to see there was more than the public Dotes to know. I learned that she was always kind, even to people who weren’t kind to her. I learned that she always told the truth, even when it would have been more convenient to fib. I learned she worked incredibly hard. I learned she had a wonderful sense of humor. I learned she would be my wonderful friend until the end of her days.

Dores McCree was a treasure. I will miss her until the end of my days.

* Former Director of Career Services at the University of Michigan Law School.
REMEMBERING DORES

Jeffrey S. Lehman*

Dores McCree played a unique and vital counseling role at the University of Michigan Law School. The 1990s were a challenging period, especially for minority students, as outsiders challenged their presence at the school with a vehemence that would ultimately ripen into litigation. Dores was a priceless source of strength and comfort in those days: a thoughtful, sensitive, mature listener who could affirm the legitimacy of students’ worries without magnifying their fears.

Dores reinvented and reinvigorated the idea of in loco parentis. She identified a few very specific elements of “mothering” that she could properly import into her counseling role. Yet she was careful always to define her relationship to students within those carefully circumscribed boundaries.

Well, almost always. One of my funniest memories of working with Dores came after I received a phone call from the mother of a prominent African American celebrity who had achieved great fame in his 20’s. The man’s mother was concerned that he had not been meeting appropriately educated women, and his father had suggested that the celebrity should go spend time in the Law School Reading Room. The mother was skeptical. “How could he explain his presence in a law library? That he was looking for someone to review one of his endorsement contracts? It doesn’t make any sense!” The mother was calling to get my reaction to her husband’s idea.

I immediately ran down to Dores’s office and summarized the conversation. “Well, Jeff, I agree that is a difficult question,” she said, “but I think I just might be able to help.” She spun around and looked up at the shelves behind her desk. After a few seconds, she spotted a loose-leaf notebook, took it down, and quickly flipped through it, looking for a particular page, which she soon found. I couldn’t read the text on the page, but in the upper right hand corner was a photograph of one of our students.

“Yes,” said Dores. “I think she’d be an excellent match. Why don’t you give me the mother’s number, and I’ll take care of things from here?”

Dores winked. As always, I complied.

* Chancellor and Founding Dean of the School of Transnational Law at Peking University; J.D., 1981, University of Michigan Law School.
DORES MCCREE

Theodore J. St. Antoine*

Dores McCree had an unusual combination of great qualities. She was totally dedicated to her role as a career advisor to students at the Law School and relentlessly persistent in pursuing opportunities for them among her large, nationwide group of lawyer friends. Yet she could be very hard-headed and realistic in appraising the qualifications of an individual candidate for a particular position. "John or Mary," she would say in that warm, disarming, and totally persuasive voice of hers, "I just don't think that job is the right fit for you. Let's find something better."

One moment Dores would be striding confidently forward in her mission of advancing student interests. Another time her endearing sense of humility would come to the fore and she would be afflicted with doubts. Every once in a while she would muse, "I'm not sure I'm the right person for this work. I'm not a lawyer. How can I help a young man or woman decide what to do in the law?" One would remind her that she was immersed in a family of leading lawyers, knew dozens of others throughout the country, and, most important, had a rare, magical skill for sizing people up. She would nod and say quietly, "Well, maybe I'll try it a little longer . . ." And the next moment she would again be moving ahead full-throttle.

Dores McCree was a wondrous mix of tough-minded perception, compassion, zeal, and genuine sweetness. It was an honor to have known her.

I was leaving the law school.

I wasn’t leaving because the work was too difficult. I wasn’t leaving for financial reasons (I was actually on full scholarship). I was leaving because I had come to the University of Michigan Law School on what I called the Thurgood Marshall plan—I wanted to change the world through high impact class action litigation, and after what seemed like an interminable dose of Pierson v. Post, I was feeling like I had made an awful mistake. Whose fox was it? Really? Seriously? These studies had absolutely no relevance to what I wanted to do.

I went to see Mrs. McCree, not to ask for help, but to simply let her know. I felt as though I owed her the courtesy.

She sat quietly as I explained the reasons for my decision, occasionally nodding her head in understanding. She sat quietly after I finished, and looked high over my shoulder, recalling, perhaps, a similar conversation with another student from years past, or perhaps, how selfish and impatient today’s students had become. I hung my head, knowing that I was letting her down, and in turn, letting down all of those who had preceded me—who had made a way. I braced myself for the stern lecture that I knew was coming, and which I had already heard—with no effect. I was going to make my own way. And then she smiled—I’ll never forget it because it was such a contrast with the way that I was feeling. It was a warm smile. It almost said, “Don’t worry, son. Trust me, and everything will be fine.” And then she told me to do her one favor before I left: to go see Virginia Gordan, who was, at the time, one of the deans of the law school. It was, I thought, an odd request. But it was Ms. McCree (I called her my big sister, to which she would laugh and say that I was young enough to be her grandson) who was making it, so, without question, I would oblige.

I went to see Dean Gordan a few days later, and in response to my news and explanation, she in turn asked for a favor. She asked me to stay one more month, and requested that during that month I join a few student groups (in direct contradiction to the official advice we had gotten as entering 1Ls). She even suggested a few—perhaps the Haitian Refugee Project, or the National Lawyers Guild, or the Black Law Student Alliance? And so I stayed a month, and became active in the Refugee Project and BLSA, and a month turned into two, and two turned into the year, and before I knew it, I was graduating.

* Program Officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation J.D., 1994, University of Michigan Law School.
In hindsight, it is clear to me that Ms. McCree conspired with Dean Gordan to keep me enrolled. These two wise women connected me with some of the law school’s informal learning environments, more important for me than the formal classroom lectures about the Uniform Commercial Code or Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, and in so doing, helped me rediscover the passion that had brought me to the law school in the first place. I am forever indebted to them both.
MRS. DORES McCREE—A WOMAN OF NOBLE CHARACTER

Donica Thomas Varner*

Proverbs 31:25-31

She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: “Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.”

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

When I read this passage of scripture from Proverbs describing a godly woman, I think of Mrs. McCree. Mrs. McCree was a woman who handled her business with grace and dignity while looking fabulous at all times and putting people at ease with her wonderful sense of humor.

She offered sound advice to those willing to listen.

She aimed to always help and never to harm.

It is not easy to be gracious and dignified in the face of injustice or unfairness, meanness or indifference, foolishness or ignorance—but to do so was Mrs. McCree’s effortless style. As such, she was a wonderful example to young women on how to be a woman who earns the respect and admiration of her community.

She was a truth teller; a knowledge seeker; a way maker;

A mentor;

A friend;

A woman of noble character.

With love and admiration

*Assistant General Counsel, University of Michigan; J.D., 1993, University of Michigan Law School.
Dores McCree

Ena Weathers*

A worthy woman is the crown of her husband. —Proverbs 12:4

I met Mrs. Dores McCree when she opened her home to a number of first year law students and provided us with an informal atmosphere to become acquainted with Professor Wade McCree and a number of the other law school professors. Mrs. McCree was all at once gracious, genuine, and caring and made an indelible impression. Our friendship blossomed over the years, as she led by example in making sure that we knew the importance of giving back to the Law School and our community. Mrs. McCree was always witty, charming, pragmatic, and generous. There was never a time when she was not encouraging me to be more than I thought I could be, and at no time did she let me forget that who I am as a person is more important than what I will ever do.

Although she continued to insist that I call her Dores, my great admiration and respect prevented me from moving beyond Mrs. McCree. She was always willing to help and not once did she fail to lend a hand when needed. Mrs. McCree did not complain about her health or anything else. It was my pleasure to have lunch with her on a regular basis, and I will never forget the pearls of wisdom she always imparted. During our last visit, instead of going out for lunch, she allowed me to pick up something for her to eat but still insisted on setting the table for our soup and sandwich. That was who she was, grace under pressure—no matter her age or physical challenges she continued to make sure you felt special. It was her love of people and zest for life that prevented me from even considering that she would not be there the next time I called.

So, here’s to Dores, ‘my’ Mrs. McCree: a shining example of what it truly means to be a mentor and friend! She is truly missed!

Love, Ena

* Attorney Advisor Office of Disability Adjudication & Review (ODAR); J.D., 1988, University of Michigan Law School.