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Heather Warnken

CENTER FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM,
UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE SCHOOL OF LAW

A NONTRADITIONAL PATH, A DREAM REALIZED

BY COLLEEN ARACRI, ESQ.

IN THE MARYLAND LEGAL COMMUNITY, the Warnken name is synonymous with expertise in criminal law. Known as “Mr. UB,” Byron Warnken, who passed away September 5, 2022, taught at the University of Baltimore Law for 45 years before retiring in 2018. Professor Warnken’s treatise, *Maryland Criminal Procedure*, is widely regarded as the go-to resource for Maryland criminal attorneys; the MSBA is honored to be publishing the second edition of the treatise later this year.

While many attorneys cite Professor Warnken as a source of influence and inspiration, the knowledge he imparted to his daughter, Heather Warnken, is immeasurable. One of the greatest lessons he taught her is what a superpower it is to care deeply about something in a culture of apathy. Warnken, a Maryland attorney, took her father’s directive to heart and has made a career out of addressing the harm caused by the inequities of our country’s criminal legal system. She recently joined the Center for Criminal Justice Reform at the University of Baltimore Law School (the Center) as its Executive Director; since she stepped into her new role, she feels her father’s presence and the impact of his legacy daily.

A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley School of Law, Warnken has spent her career focused on breaking down the dichotomy between how society views crime victims and people who have touched the criminal and juvenile legal system.

Her experience includes clerking for the Hon. Joseph F. Murphy on the Court of Appeals of Maryland and working on criminal justice reform issues at the Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, a research center at University of California, Berkeley School of Law. She subsequently served as a visiting fellow at the U.S. Department of Justice, working under three presidential administrations. She was in the first position dedicated to bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice, to improve the response to crime victimization and communities impacted by violence.

Warnken says obtaining the position of Executive Director

for the Center is a dream realized. She is passionate about her new role, not only because it allows her to continue to work on criminal justice reform that can have a meaningful positive impact on people’s lives in real-time, but also because it gives her the chance to cultivate meaningful chances for law students to have a hands-on, real-world impact.

Like many others, Warnken did not want to litigate but was looking for multidisciplinary ways to use her law degree. She believes the more you empower students to take nontraditional paths, the better. The Center creates opportunities for students to get involved in multidisciplinary problem-solving work, which Warnken hopes will impart a responsibility to use their law degrees for change and to confront injustice. She anticipates that the Center will add to the University of Baltimore Law School’s nationally renowned reputation for its student clinics by creating opportunities for policy reform work.

The Center aspires to lift the voices of those directly impacted by criminal justice issues and aims to heal the harm and inequity created by the criminal legal system in this country. It also seeks solutions that promote public safety. Warnken brought two grant-funded projects with her to the Center that focus on addressing and reducing violence, specifically gun violence, in ways that shrink the footprint of the criminal legal system rather than contribute to mass incarceration.

While the Center engages in efforts to address issues relating to the intersection of crime and trauma nationally, its work is community-driven, and its obligation is first and foremost to

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be of service to communities in Baltimore and Maryland. One challenge the Center faces is how to proactively build an agenda of work around specific issues in ways that will make the most impact while also being reactive to the requests of the communities that are already deeply engaged in leading that work.

Although rewarding, Warnken says her work has challenges. The biggest professional obstacle she currently faces is how to bring a consistent practice of ongoing learning and humility and an anti-racist lens to her work as a white woman in a leadership position. She strives to be in an ongoing mode of listening to and learning from those directly impacted by the work she does and to deepen the tools she has to bring an anti-racist lens.

In addition to her father, Warnken counts Nancy Lemon, one of her professors at the Law School at UC Berkeley, as a mentor. Lemon had a lasting impact on Warnken because she encouraged her students to be human and created a space for them to do so when the prevailing view was that attorneys should not bring their personal experiences to their legal practice. Warnken wants to carry on Professor Lemon's message and convey to students that caring does not make them any less capable of rigorous law and policy analysis and advocacy; if anything, it makes them much more well-positioned to work as attorneys for the long haul.



Photo Courtesy Of Travis Marshall Photography