

# THE LEGACY OF ERIN LEVITAS



Erin's plan was to graduate from Wake Forest University and start at Maryland Carey Law the following fall. She intended to use her law degree to help sexual assault survivors and to work to make prevention of sexual assault a top priority. She planned to spend the summer traveling with friends and vacationing with her family before getting to work to realize her dreams. Her future was full of promise until stomach pain turned into a trip to the hospital, which turned into emergency surgery, which turned into a diagnosis that would upend her world. Erin had Ewing's sarcoma, a rare form of cancer.

Her first day of chemotherapy coincided with her last day of classes as an undergraduate. She walked across the stage at graduation feeling the after-effects. Her treatment regimen meant she would have to defer admission to Maryland Carey Law for at least a year to focus on the fight ahead.

After months of some of the most aggressive chemotherapy available, scans revealed that Erin's cancer had returned and spread. Although Erin continued her treatment, and wrote an amazing blog chronicling her fight, Erin passed away on January 16, 2016.

#### Carrying On Erin's Wishes

In the wake of losing Erin, her family formed the Erin Levitas Foundation to "fund the work Erin had hoped to accomplish in her lifetime." The foundation is launching the Erin Levitas Initiative for Sexual Assault Prevention at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law (Levitas Initiative).

The Levitas Initiative seeks to take an innovative approach to preventing sexual assault. The program focuses on children, as early as middle school, and seeks to combat "destructive ideas that give rise to sexual violence" and to help "undo the damage such attitudes cause."

Erin's family is excited to be able to honor her legacy and continue her work to aid sexual assault survivors.

Wende Levitas, Erin's mother, explains, "I think this is what Erin would really want. If we can do something for her, I feel like she's smiling down at us and cheering us on and saying 'OK, you can do this for me.'"

Her father, Michael Levitas, echoed Wende's sentiments. "Had Erin survived the cancer, she would be a very outspoken advocate for women's

rights," he says. "She would make sure that at a younger age people would understand the meaning of respecting other people's rights."

Erin's grandfather, Leonard Attman, agrees, "I think Erin would be extremely excited and she would jump right in and begin to tell us all the people that she wanted to help, whether it was lower school, middle school, high school, even on to colleges. She was trying to bring that message even as she was becoming ill. She knew that she wanted to come to the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law. She wanted to make it a specific message that when she graduated she was going to be there to help children of all ages, of all types, of all creeds, colors, religions, and races, to become safe and sound in their way of life."

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#### The Nuts And Bolts

The Levitas Foundation and Maryland Carey Law share a sweeping vision for the initiative. Dean Donald Tobin explains, "Our vision is to create a national program that addresses the underlying attitudes that lead to sexual violence. This initiative unites two of our strongest programs, our Center for Dispute Resolution (C-DRUM) and our Gender Violence Clinic, to create a curriculum so our students, under the supervision of our faculty, are able to go into elementary and middle schools and work with students on issues of gender violence."

Director of C-DRUM, Professor Deborah Eisenberg, echoes Dean Tobin's sentiments, "I see the work of the Center for Dispute

Resolution and our existing work with the mediation clinic intersecting with the gender violence clinic in a very exciting way,” she says.

“I see C-DRUM as being the experts in process: How do we set up the conditions to have dialogue about really difficult topics? And I see the Gender Violence Clinic and Professor [Leigh] Goodmark’s work really bringing the expertise in terms of sexual assault, how to prevent it, and how to address it in various ways.”

Another unique feature of the program’s approach is the focus on restorative justice, which seeks to repair the harm caused by a transgression, as opposed to punitive justice, which seeks only to punish.

Director of the Gender Violence Clinic, Professor Leigh Goodmark, explains, “There’s still a very punitive approach to sexual assault and sexual harassment in most places, including the school system, and there are concerns that some have expressed about the use of restorative justice in the context of gender-based violence. But I have seen what restorative justice can do in the context of gender-based violence, and there are programs across the world that are doing this work.”

Barbara Grochal, Director of C-DRUM’s Conflict Resolution Education Programs, is excited for the expanded opportunities Maryland Carey

Law students will have to make a difference in the community in local schools. “Our law school is passionate about justice. Our clinics provide amazing opportunities for our law students. I’ve worked with so many of them who have said, ‘My experience in schools is the highlight of my work at the law school.’”

In addition to educating local students, their teachers, administrators, and parents will also have the opportunity for training in conflict resolution and restorative practices.

C. Quince Hopkins ’89, a national expert in restorative justice and gender-based violence, has been hired as Director of the Levitas Initiative and begins her work in the fall 2018 semester.

Nothing can make up for the loss of Erin and the impact she would have made on the world, but the Erin Levitas Initiative for Sexual Assault Prevention will keep her dream alive and will allow her vision and spirit to live on in the work we do together. ■



*Erin Levitas (middle) with her parents, Michael (left) and Wende (right).*

### About the Erin Levitas Foundation

The Erin Levitas Foundation is a 501(c)(3) that envisions a future with education for youth and young adults to prevent sexual assault and help victims heal. In addition to supporting the Erin Levitas Initiative at Maryland Carey Law, the Foundation also supports the Mind, Body and Soul Empowerment Program at St. Timothy’s School. Learn more at [erinlevitas.org](http://erinlevitas.org).

# Preparing Law Students in the Wake of #MeToo

By Paula A. Monopoli

Several years ago, I ran into a former colleague at a conference in New York City. She and I had been first-year associates together at a Wall Street law firm 30 years earlier. We started talking about the old days. Late in the conversation, she told me that one day, the partner she had worked for in her first year had closed the door, grabbed her and tried to kiss her. I was shocked. It had never occurred to me that the partner—who was known for berating young lawyers—would sexually assault one of them. But it shouldn't have surprised me, since sexual assault is about power. Just like bullying the people who work for you.

The #MeToo movement transcends one's professional status. Just because a woman has an advanced degree and works at a prestigious law firm doesn't protect her from sexual harassment or assault. Several national law firms have had partners depart over the past year due to sexual misconduct. So how do we protect our newly minted graduates as they enter the legal workplace? American law schools teach students legal analysis, trial advocacy skills and how to make persuasive appellate arguments. But they don't teach them how to recognize sexual harassment for what it is: a power play meant to demean and marginalize women.

At Maryland Carey Law, our Women, Leadership & Equality Program offers a unique curriculum that educates students about professional skills like communication, personal negotiation, and

business development. Such skills aren't part of the traditional law school curriculum, but they are essential to being able to successfully navigate the legal workplace. As part of this innovative curriculum, we talk about recognizing sexual harassment for what it is and calibrating how best to stop it with the least career impact.

Education is the most effective way to arm our students to recognize harassment and understand when to report it and to whom. Not every comment or off-color joke should be reported, while any physical assault should be. And there is a gray area in-between. There are research-based responses that have been proven to deter demeaning comments. Those techniques can be taught to students before they encounter this kind of marginalizing behavior. And when they eventually ascend to leadership positions in their firms, those former students will better understand how to create a culture where sexual harassment is no longer tolerated.

No one talked about this issue 30 years ago when my colleague and I were law students. If our law schools had at least alerted us to the nature of such harassment—that it was meant to undermine our authority as women lawyers—we would have been better served. Through the WLE Program's innovative curriculum, Maryland Carey Law is serving its own graduates well and leading the way for other American law schools to do better. ■



Paula A. Monopoli is the founding director of the Women, Leadership & Equality Program and Sol & Carlyn Hubert Professor of Law at Maryland Carey Law. She teaches in the areas of property, trusts and estates, and gender and the law. She has published widely and is a nationally recognized scholar in the fields of inheritance law and the intersection of gender and constitutional design.