

UVA LAW | Shaping Justice-Ganzy-podcast

SUBJECT: Thank you for inviting me here today. It's such an honor to be invited to participate in this conference. My love for UVA runs deep, and I'm so proud of the way the public-interest community and the program at the law school continues to grow. You are justice shapers, and you inspire me to be hopeful for the future because I know you're going to move the needle toward justice.

So the title of this conference, Shaping Justice In a Time of Crisis, really hit home for me. There were times during the past year when I cried myself to sleep-- the seemingly nonstop reports of Black people, trans people being killed; the ways that the victims of police violence were criminalized; the knowledge that this didn't start in 2020 or 2021 or 2016 but it's been repeated throughout our nation's history; saying their names while knowing that there are too many names to say; fearing for my children, for my husband, for my brothers, watching as police officers have unlimited patience for white people with guns but treat unarmed Black people with extreme prejudice; watching refrigerated trucks line up outside hospitals to hold the many people who had succumbed to COVID-19; fearing for the safety of the people we were trying to protect in jails and prisons. It was all just so and too much, and I was angry, and I was sad, and I allowed myself to cry.

And I say I allowed myself to cry because too often it seems that we pressure ourselves or we feel pressured to put on our best face, to pretend like everything is OK and we hold back the tears for the sake of holding it all together. But allowing myself to cry for as long as I needed was an act of self-love for me. I did not want to pretend like my heart was not broken, like I wasn't exhausted, like the horrific things that I was witnessing and experiencing weren't traumatic.

I couldn't ignore the fear my mom expressed every day when I went for a walk alone in my quiet neighborhood or when my dad walked up and down the country roads of Mississippi picking up cans. She was genuinely fearful for us, fearful that we would be the next victims of violence because of the color of our skin.

And yet I couldn't stay indoors because, one, walking in the fresh air was therapeutic for me and, two, because I knew that there was no place in America that a Black person is safe, not even in our own homes. And so I cried. And allowing myself to cry helped me to keep going.

And this conversation that we're having today about shaping justice during a time of crisis is necessary. It's necessary because when we're experiencing crises, it's easy to feel overwhelmed, helpless, and helpless. And spaces like this one allow us to learn from each other, support each other, and remind one another that there will be light at the end of this tunnel and we will be a part of creating that life. So thank you for making this space and for inviting me to participate in it.

When I think about shaping things, I see so many wonderful images in my life. I see my

grandmother's hands sewing together a quilt with bits of fabric from various parts of our family's lives. We call her Ma, and she had a vision of how that finished product would look. And while she couldn't foresee the exact nights that would be needed, she went to work piecing the fabric together because she knew it would one day warm her family.

When I think about shaping things, I visualize my two boys when they were younger diligently combining various shades of Play-Doh to create their own works of art. Sometimes I had to explain to me what they had created because I couldn't see their vision, but each time they had an idea, and they went to work to bring it to life.

So when I think about shaping justice, I see creators. I see visionaries. I see believers. I see people who give life to a dream, an idea. I see communities of people whose names we may never know giving of themselves to make a difference. And I see all of you.

Because I see you and because shaping justice is so critical, I want to share a few tips that I hope will sustain you on your journeys as creators and innovators of change. And the first thing I want you to know is that you are enough.

We're dealing with big problems, so big and that have existed for such a long period of time that there may come a time in your life or your career when you wonder if what you have to contribute is even worth bothering. You might ask yourself, what can little me do for a problem this big? And since the beginning of time, activists and advocates like you have faced seemingly insurmountable challenges, and they have risen to these challenges every single time.

Some were killed because they insisted on change, but taking their lives did not take their legacies. And so I want to remind you that every effort you make towards justice is an effort that will reverberate throughout history. You might not realize how much of a difference caring makes in the quest for justice.

We also often think of sweeping changes when we think of shaping justice. And sweeping changes are important, but there are smaller things too like genuinely caring about the people you are serving your career, like treating people with dignity, respect, and warmth, like listening to and learning from the people who are most impacted by injustice.

Some people may not ever see justice in the courts, but they can see justice in you. They can find justice in the way that you advocate for them, in the way that you support them, in the way that you care.

Some of you, I hope, will argue the big cases before the United States Supreme Court. Others of you will pass historic legislation. And still others of you will develop creative solutions to systemic problems. But if you do none of these things and you never receive public recognitions for any of your work, please know that your commitment to empowering your communities, to being a resource for community leaders, to being a friend to people who have few friends is all it takes to be a change maker and to leave your mark on this world.

The accomplishments that I most cherish in my career are the relationships I have built with people who society had intended to discard. The people I represented didn't have a lot of people in their lives who told them that they believed them, really believed in them. They didn't have a lot of people who made them a priority.

And I recall going to a hearing in a death-penalty case one day. Let's just say it didn't go so well. But after it was over I went to visit my client, and he told me that he was upset, but he wasn't upset with me. He was upset with the judge for not being kind to me. And that really moved me because it was his life that was on the line, but he was worried about how I was feeling because for him, justice wasn't just to win in court. Certainly we were working for that. But it was also having a friend who cared for him.

He ultimately passed away before getting relief on his sentence. But while he was alive, he knew that he was cared for.

While our goal remains to create sweeping, transformative change, don't discount how critical it is to touch someone's life in a meaningful way, and you have everything you need to do just that. You are enough.

The second thing that I want to encourage you to do is to continue to expand your vision of what is possible for justice. So much of public-interest work is fighting against current and historic unjust realities. How many times have you heard, well, that's the way it's always been or that's the way it works around here?

The sentiment is either defeatist, coming from someone who has given up hope for change, or is defiant when it comes from someone who's benefiting from the status quo. But as justice shapers, we must constantly seek to avoid suffering from a poverty of vision that would keep us stuck in an unjust reality. To do public-interest work is to believe that things can be better, that we can change our society.

And so perhaps we consider ourselves artists. With each stroke, with each effort we get closer to completing our masterpiece. Or maybe we're architects developing the blueprint that will guide future generations. We're envisioning and creating a world not quite like the one we currently see, one that is better, fairer, more just, one in which we can all thrive.

Yet history is replete with examples of unjust practices being the norm. History is also replete with people who challenged and changed that norm.

My grandmother, Miss Bertie Lee Walker, is one of those people. She was born in rural Mississippi in 1918. She had to drop out of school and help her mother and siblings on the farm when her father was sentenced to prison for murder. She worked most of her life as a maid, sometimes walking for miles with loads of laundry on her back. She raised five kids alone, and she helped shape justice.

When civil rights activists came into their town and called for volunteers to attempt to register to vote in Liberty, Mississippi, my grandmother raised her hand and said, here I am. Send me. At the time, as you know, lynchings, bombings, and various terroristic activities were being used to intimidate Black people from existing as full citizens, as full human beings, really.

Despite knowing that if she registered to vote in a city ironically called Liberty she would be placing her life in danger, she, my great-aunt, and their cousin made history as the first Black people to register to vote in that town. And she was rewarded not by public fanfare-- nobody knew her name, necessarily-- or praise but by being threatened. But she survived, and she's still thriving at now 102 years old.

My grandmother didn't have a fancy title or first-class education. She was just trying to make a life out of what she had, and she did that to the best of her ability. What she did have though was courage, conviction, and most importantly, I think, vision. She did not accept that her current reality had to be her forever reality. She decided to shape her future by helping to bring about change.

And I cannot emphasize enough that shapers of justice visualize a better way and work to make that vision a reality. They don't limit themselves by the, quote, unquote, customs of the time. They decide that sometimes normal and accepted does not equal right, and they decide that maybe there's nothing they can do about the way it's always been, but they can do something about the way it will be.

And I will be surprised if there's a single person at this conference who is here because they want to learn how to be a cog in the wheel, how to go along to get along, how to play it safe. No. You're here--

we're here because when we close our eyes, we see the world as it should be. We listen really closely. We hear cries for justice. And when we sit still, we feel the warmth of possibility. When we open our hearts, we know that the status quo just won't do. So we get to work molding, shaping, building the world that our children deserve.

The final thing that I hope you will do is to live your life like you only get one life to live. While you're learning from your mistakes, growing, iterating, and making your mark, stay true to your value.

And take care of your [INAUDIBLE]. It's especially important during times of crisis. We're living in a time when it sometimes seems that telling the truth is no longer in fashion and that being respectful is passe, that caring for anyone other than ourselves is a show of weakness. But I'm here to tell you that knowing who you are and embracing your values are signs of strength, not weakness. It's easy to follow the path that so many others are treading. It's more difficult to make your own path.

I know this from personal experience because I took the road less traveled. When I was getting ready to graduate from law school and figured out whether I would take a position with a big firm in Mississippi or take a fellowship doing capital-defense work for \$30,000, that wasn't easy. It was not an easy decision for me. I had no interest at all in that firm job. I knew that I would be miserable doing work for which I had no passion and in a culture that would have required me to conform in order to succeed. I hated the thought of it, but I didn't hate the money.

For my parents, however, when I mentioned it to them, this conundrum that I was feeling, it was a no-brainer. My mom said, Tarika, can you pay your tuition with love? Can you pay it with compassion? No. It takes M-O-N-E-Y, and she was right. UVA wanted their money, and my warm and fuzzy feelings were not an acceptable form of payment. But I couldn't choose the high-paying job at the expense of my passion and my emotional well-being. I just could not do that to myself, and so I chose me.

And I struggled for a while with feeling selfish because I was the only lawyer in my family in a family that didn't know enough lawyers to know that lawyers weren't all financially well off or at least upper middle class. I felt internal pressure to make enough money to be able to give back to my family. But I guess I didn't feel enough pressure because I just could not subject myself to being miserable. It was an act of self-care that I chose to do public interest, to follow my passion, although at the time I wouldn't have called it that.

When I graduated from law school, almost nobody in my class was going directly into public interest. I think there were maybe 365 students in the class, and only around 13 of us went directly into public interest. I understand that that's a lot different now at UVA. There's a public-interest wing at the law

school, which is beautiful and I'm jealous. But almost 20 years ago, it was a pretty lonely role. But I persisted because I recognized that I only get one life to live, and I refused to live most of it doing work that didn't move me. My values are my values, and I won't compromise them.

And maybe not everyone understands that, and that's OK, but it's not their business to understand because I have to live with myself, and you have to live with yourself. So holding onto your values and being secure in who you are will get you through the hard days, the times when you want to give up. It will also help you make tough decisions because you can simply ask yourself, which of these options best reflect the person I'm trying to be, the person I am? And there's your answer.

Living your life like you only get one also means taking care of yourself. You can't shape justice if you're unwell. So for justice's sake, prioritize your well being. For each person, that may mean something different. Whether you find joy like I do binge watching your favorite television show or running or dancing, whatever it is that brings you joy, make time for it. Make time for joy in this life. Make time for relaxation and rejuvenation.

It took me a while to understand the importance of self-care. I came up in a generation that prized working really hard, to prove yourself even at the cost of sleeping and eating. I heard someone say I can sleep when I'm dead, and at the time I thought that was an inspirational statement. I thought, yeah, you're right. Work hard and sleep when you die.

I didn't quite get it when my younger colleagues said that they didn't answer emails after a certain time. I remember looking around like, what? Who does that? But I later figured out that, well, actually people who got to sustain themselves in their work do. Maybe limiting your email consumption is not a boundary that you can set, but find something that does help you center yourself.

So as I wind up, I'll leave you with a final bit of advice that I received from a state supreme court justice while I was a law student, working, I think, for the summer for you, Professor Rutherglen. She told me that if I follow my passions, everything else would come, and I believed her. And I found that she was absolutely correct. Where you start out won't be where you end up, so do what you love, and do it well, and take stock of the amazing results that will follow, even in times of crisis.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak with you today. I look forward to answering any questions that you have or any questions that the students have, Professor Rutherglen.