

The Bridge Builder: Charity Scott's Expansive Vision for Lawyers, Health, and Society

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Balancing on a tightrope twenty feet above the ground is outside the comfort zones of many health law professors. Being there forces you to consider in new ways yourself, your skills, and your surroundings. Fears arise, and yet you must still act. And you must trust that the person who offered you this opportunity cared about you and your well-being, and that they would ensure there was a way to get from where you began to the other side.

This was one of the experiences Charity Scott presented to us as health law professors participating in the 2014 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Georgia State University-funded Future of Public Health Law Education Faculty Fellowship Program she led.¹ This innovative and formative experience, which included a 10-day retreat in Park City, Utah, offered an opportunity to rethink how we engaged with issues at the intersection of law and the public's health, as well as how we thought about ourselves and our relationships with others.

For the three of us, who all have academic careers as scholars and teachers with appointments outside of law schools, it was an invitation to be part of an inclusive community of practice that sees, interrogates, and is challenged to address, in and out of our classes, the connections between health, law, and broader social and ecological factors. It also presented us with the invaluable experience of being mentored by Charity, guided by her unique insights into what it means to be a transdisciplinary scholar, a teacher, and a life-long seeker of knowledge, understanding, and connection.

In this essay, we reflect on Charity and our interactions with her over more than a decade, and how our own work and the field of Public Health Law have been, and continue to be, influenced by her vision and efforts. Her legacy includes fostering the growth of a supportive community of health law and public health law teachers in and outside of law schools inspired by her commitment to nurturing, challenging, and mak-

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ing connections through service to her students and society. She built up this community through her work directing the Future of Public Health Law Education fellowship, founding the Center for Law, Health & Society, leadership in the American Bar Association and American Society of Law, Medicine & Ethics, stewardship of the Jay Healey teaching session at the annual ASLME Health Law Professors Conference, and her extensive mentorship.

Charity Scott was a powerful, impactful advocate who worked to improve health and shape the growth and maturation of our field by building and strengthening countless bridges, not only between colleagues, but also between our inner and professional lives, our creative and scientific sides, and our roles as scholars and teachers.

learn first-hand about the ethical issues patients and providers were confronting. She followed this sabbatical by partnering with Emory University's medical school to teach an interdisciplinary ethics seminar that brought together law students and medical students. Though the course focused on ethics, her not-so-secret underlying goal for the course was to break down the distrust and professional egoism that inhibited collaboration between lawyers and doctors. One classroom of students at a time, she was putting into practice her belief that a well-functioning health care system depended on the ability of these professions to work with and learn from one another.

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Her inter-professional bridge-building also stemmed from a related facet of Charity's professional humility: her skepticism that the legal toolkit was always the first or best place to look for solutions. This was a driver of her later decision to pursue a master's degree in conflict management, but her interest in alternative dispute resolution and "therapeutic jurisprudence" dated back decades, and it spurred earlier collaborations with experts in ethics, health administration, mediation, and other fields.

Building Bridges Between Colleagues

Charity's creation of the Faculty Fellowship Program was paradigmatic of a career spent building bridges between colleagues. "Colleague" in this context is a broad term, encompassing all those interested in advancing student learning, legal scholarship, health care, or public health — even if, prior to encountering Charity, they had no idea they could contribute to such endeavors.

Inter-Professional Colleagues

Fundamentally, Charity's dedication to interdisciplinary collaboration was the product of deep and all-too-rare humility about the role and expertise of lawyers and legal academics. She was passionately optimistic about the ability of law to help respond to social challenges, but skeptical of what lawyers could understand about health care without extensive and meaningful engagement with both the patients and providers operating day-to-day within health care systems. Tellingly, she spent her first sabbatical as a law professor doing a six-month ethics fellowship in the neonatal intensive care unit at Grady Memorial Hospital to

always the first or best place to look for solutions. This was a driver of her later decision to pursue a master's degree in conflict management, but her interest in alternative dispute resolution and "therapeutic jurisprudence" dated back decades,² and it spurred earlier collaborations with experts in ethics, health administration, mediation, and other fields.

As her scholarly interests shifted towards understanding and addressing social determinants of health,³ Charity sought out new colleagues with additional forms of expertise. A considerable amount of public health scholarship emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration⁴ and authentic partnership with impacted communities, but Charity was unparalleled (and ahead of her time) in putting these ideals into action. In the Center for Law, Health, and Society's (CHLS) early years, Charity described it as "provid[ing] a forum to bring together a host of disciplines and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration across the community"⁵ — a strikingly different vision from most law-school-based health law centers at the time.⁶ And her community engagement fused and transcended

the typical faculty buckets of teaching, research, and service, building lasting partnerships like the Health Law Partnership (HeLP, discussed further below) that merged student learning, community collaboration, scholarship, and effective public advocacy.

All three of us can attest that interdisciplinary outreach and community engagement requires tremendous persistence in the face of logistical and bureaucratic obstacles.⁷ Indeed, many academics are pressured to abandon such partnerships because colleagues view them as a distraction from more traditional (if often less impactful) research outputs that are more easily measured and rewarded. For her part, Charity was indefatigable, firm, and relentlessly optimistic in pushing past barriers,⁸ clearing the road for those who followed in her path. For the three of us (and many others), she was an indispensable advisor, mentor, and cheerleader when we wondered whether the effort to carve out our non-traditional, interdisciplinary career paths was worth it.

Intra-Professional Colleagues

Within legal academia, Charity's bridge-building was marked by a commitment to building supportive communities of teachers and scholars. Much of her work focused on creating communities of *teachers* — often a secondary focus in legal academia. From creating and editing the "Teaching Health Law" column in the *Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics*, to organizing the Jay Healey Teaching Session at the Health Law Professors Conference for fifteen years in a row, to conceptualizing and leading the Faculty Fellowship program, Charity was committed, as Brietta Clark has beautifully summarized, to fostering opportunities "for professors at all levels to share their experiences—their joys and fears, their successes and how they learned from experiments that did not work as well."⁹

Though service to the profession is a component of every professor's job description, Charity engaged in service in the truest sense of the word. She had no interest in self-aggrandizement or collecting impressive-sounding titles; she envisioned what a supportive community of health law (and later public health law) professors could accomplish, and she made it her mission to create such a community. Recognizing that the health law professor community included not just the subject area of public health law, but also scholars working in settings other than law schools, Charity broadened the perspectives involved in shaping the Jay Healey Teaching Session to include faculty from these other settings. All of us are now quite used to hearing new attendees at the Health Law Professors Conference express shock at how warm and welcom-

ing the community is; that culture is in no small part due to Charity's influence.

Charity had no patience for those who viewed scholarship about teaching or community engagement as second-class scholarship. Because she cared so much about teaching and community engagement, she was committed to doing these things in an evidence-informed way (including constant experimentation with — and then assessment of — new innovations). She encouraged the three of us not only to write about teaching, but to strengthen the connectivity between our research, teaching, and community engagement work. When she designed the faculty fellowship program, she required that the courses taught as part of the program include a community-engaged element, and that the participants write a scholarly article about their courses. In so doing, she helped ensure that the "community of practice" she created understood not only how to connect with colleagues and community members, but how to build bridges between the different aspects of their academic lives.¹⁰

Bridging the Inner and Professional Life

Charity recognized that being a lawyer required more than just understanding the law. As she stated, "To be successful lawyers, [law students] need to learn how to keep learning the law for the rest of their professional careers, which is a self-reflective skill that law professors generally do not teach in their classrooms. Law students also need to learn a broad range of practical interpersonal and behavioral skills that are essential for good counseling and representation of clients. In addition, they need to internalize habits, values, and attitudes about professional work that will sustain both the quality of their work and their satisfaction with their professional lives in the future."¹¹ As a scholar of law and ethics, she understood that these skills would also help students maintain their integrity, humility, and humanity.

Similarly, Charity advocated for reflection, life-long learning, and understanding one's inner life as keys to success and longevity for law professors choosing to spend their professional lives seeking to improve the public's health through teaching, scholarship, and engagement in inclusive, transdisciplinary communities. These beliefs revealed themselves through her leadership of efforts like the Public Health Law Fellowship program, how she helped shape the structure and content of the Jay Healey teaching sessions, as well as through her own scholarship.

While Charity's explicit advocacy for mindfulness training came late in her professional career,¹² her commitment to reflective practices have long animated her

work. As an ethicist, professional mediator, teacher, leader, and builder of diverse, inclusive systems, Charity has long been a believer that the path to success and successful collaboration was paved with understanding your values, interests, skills, emotions, and motivations, as well as those of your collaborators.¹³

In the Public Health Law fellowship program, Charity applied these beliefs in a number of powerful ways that helped the lessons become embedded in our own outlook and professional approaches. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., is attributed to have said, “A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.”¹⁴

By constructing the fellowship around a ten-day retreat in Park City, she gave the participants the time and space to sit with thoughts and ideas, and opportunities for exploration and deeper engagement. Incorporating exercises like the tightrope walk were novel experiences that helped us surface and examine more fundamental emotions that would almost certainly arise as we pushed boundaries in our work. Invitations to engage in improvization helped us recognize new ways we might tap into our creativity to forms bonds and come up with novel solutions. We also had the opportunity to engage in practice-focused reflective exercises¹⁵ that allowed us to see how we might apply our interests and skills in new ways and through novel collaborations. As we stated in the JLME symposium issue on the fellowship program, “we did not expect how much it also gave us...a chance to know ourselves better, a push to stretch in new directions, and the enthusiasm and confidence to take on new challenges.”¹⁶

Charity’s commitment to reflection and understanding one’s own mind was also central to her leadership and guidance of the Jay Healey Teaching Session. This manifested in a diversity of ways, from providing small group participants with art supplies as they discussed pedagogy, to building discussion prompts for the participants like “What have we learned about compassion in reaching and teaching students and taking care of ourselves?” While open to new ideas and experiences, Charity served as a professional and personal role model in how she approached leading these engagements collaboratively, open to and fostering constructive conflict, committed to intellectual rigor, and employing a scholarly approach that included evaluating the effectiveness of the experiences and sharing and learning from the results.¹⁷

Bridging the Scientific with the Creative

Many of us went to law school because we didn’t see ourselves as “good at math or science.” Charity didn’t

believe in dichotomies that limited people by casting them into being “a right brain v. left brain thinker” or a “science/math v. humanities/law person.” For Charity, what made public health law so compelling was the fact that it brought people from multiple disciplines together to think creatively about solutions to complex problems. She understood that for us as teachers, scholars, and practitioners of public health law, we couldn’t embrace true transdisciplinarity until we explored the merging of science and creativity in ourselves.

In our fellowship, Charity used what she called the “velvet hammer” with us, just as she did with her students. She was kind with high expectations for all of us. Transdisciplinary work is harder than staying in one’s comfort zone — the profession we have been trained for. Charity challenged us to test the limits of the boundaries we sometimes set for ourselves and to instead build bridges by looking outside of ourselves. This manifested most clearly in the tightrope exercise discussed above: instead of having us travel across the span solo, we were paired with a partner to support us. Charity pressed us to ask ourselves: Who can we learn from in science, medicine, public health and other fields to change our approach to a legal problem? How can we use our talents and skills to reorient medicine and public health to make them more humane and just? Most importantly, how can we partner across disciplines to promote justice and dignity for our clients, model cross-disciplinary collaboration for our students, and improve population health in our communities?

In 2007, Charity founded one of the first academic medical-legal partnerships in the country, the Health Law Partnership (HeLP) Legal Services Clinic, which is highly respected across the country.¹⁸ Long before others in medicine, law and public health saw the value of interdisciplinary collaboration, Charity identified how bringing together clinicians, lawyers, social workers and other health professionals could facilitate a holistic approach to the intransigent health inequities and injustices experienced by children and their families. As a master teacher, she also saw the enormous promise of academic medical-legal partnership for teaching the future generation of medical, public health and legal professionals to practice in innovative ways by breaking down silos and creatively problem-solving as partners invested in health and justice.

Charity shared her wisdom with us that the artificial boundaries that separate the disciplines of medicine, public health, law and other helping professions not only harm the clients, patients, and communities that we aim to serve. They keep us from being the best we can be as teachers, scholars, and practitioners by

obstructing valuable communication and learning. She understood how communication across the divide of disciplinary training was challenging and took commitment. It was once said that “incomprehensible jargon is the hallmark of a profession.”¹⁹ Charity despised jargon and viewed the ability to communicate across boundaries as fundamental. For students, she conveyed this by showing them that expertise was only valuable if you could communicate your particular knowledge effectively to aid in problem-solving, not to demonstrate that you were smarter than your colleagues. In 2017, she wrote: “Appreciating the differences in knowledge, skills, and values among professionals — and discovering a common language they can communicate in — is key to their ability to work together as a team.”²⁰

It is not surprising that Charity chose to pursue conflict management later in her career. She built bridges through promoting healthy communication in every setting. She modeled for all of us how humility combined with listening and learning makes us better professionals, teachers, scholars, and human beings.

Note

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3. C. Scott, “Incorporating Lawyers on the Interprofessional Team to Promote Health and Health Equity,” *Indiana Health Law Review* 14, no. 1 (2017): 54-96.
4. *Interdisciplinary* collaborations involve people sharing different disciplinary perspectives with one another, while in *transdisciplinary* collaborations “collaborators work jointly on a problem from the very outset, using a shared conceptual framework that draws together discipline-specific theories, models, methods, and measures into a new synthesis.” D.B. Abrams, “Applying Transdisciplinary Research Strategies to Understanding and Eliminating Health Disparities,” *Health Education & Behavior* 33, no. 4 (2006): 515-531 (summarizing the framework developed by Patricia Rosenfield). As Charity noted, both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborations aimed at improving health and reducing health disparities too often exclude attorneys. Scott, Incorporating Lawyers, *supra* note 3, at 60-62.
5. Georgia State University School of Law, Health Law Program Ranked Among Top 10 by U.S. News & World Report, The Law Letter, (2007) available at <<https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=letter>> (last accessed February 5, 2024).
6. Notably, one key figure in the development of health law who shared Charity’s broad, humanistic, and transdisciplinary perspective was Jay Healey, who taught at the University of Connecticut. It is fitting that Charity devoted so much effort to leading the Jay Healey Teaching Session and was a recipient of the Jay Healey Teaching Award.
7. Charity once remarked that teaching interdisciplinary courses “seems to triple the amount of effort just to get the logistics and the curriculum worked out and the faculty’s and students’ schedules coordinated, to say nothing of figuring out how to present material to students of widely differing training and background and grading them fairly on their work product in light of those differences.” S. Allan et al., “Interdisciplinary Contributions to Public Health Law,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 32, no. S4 (2004): 92-96.
8. According to Charity, it took “over fifteen years of persistent effort” to find a hospital willing to collaborate with Georgia State and the Atlanta Legal Aid Society to create the HeLP program. See Scott, *supra* note 3, at 61.
9. B. Clark, “Teaching Health Law,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 51, no. 3 (2023): 698-702, at 699. Brietta Clark has recently become the new editor of the “Teaching Health Law” column in the *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*.
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19. Attributed to Kingman Brewster, former President of Yale University. Quote.org, Kingman Brewster Jr., available at <<https://quote.org/author/kingman-brewster-jr-42263>> (last visited February 3, 2023).
20. See Scott, *supra* note 4, at 92.