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Joseph E. Claxton
Mercer University School of Law

Mark L. Jones
Mercer University School of Law, jones_ml@law.mercer.edu

Charles R. Adams

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A Tribute to Yonna Windham Shaw

By Joseph E. Claxton*
Mark L. Jones**
and Charles R. Adams III***

She cares, but she does not coddle.¹

Already in my career Yonna has significantly helped my connection to important lawyers in the state. She is the primary reason I will make it a point to visit Mercer Law School.²

Just over forty years ago, Mercer Law School's Dean Edgar H. Wilson asked Professor James C. Rehberg and a very junior professor named Joseph E. Claxton to join him in interviewing an applicant for a position on the law school's staff, a position which at that time (1974) was described simply as "Secretary" to the Mercer Law Review. The young applicant was named Yonna Windham Shaw. With some background as

* Professor Emeritus, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University. Oxford College of Emory University (A.A., 1966); Emory University (A.B., magna cum laude, 1968); Duke University School of Law (J.D., with distinction, 1972). Member, State Bar of Georgia.

** Professor of Law, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University. Oxford University (B.A., 1974 (M.A., 1979)); University of Michigan (L.L.M., 1983).

*** Senior Litigation Counsel, Kenneth S. Nugent, P.C., Duluth, Georgia (2014-present); Partner, Adams & Adams, LLP, Fort Valley, Georgia (1983-2013). Adjunct Professor, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University (1983-present). University of Georgia (B.A., 1980); Mercer University (J.D., cum laude, 1983). Member, Mercer Law Review, 1981-1983; Georgia Survey Editor, 1982-1983. Editor in Chief, Journal of Southern Legal History, 1996-2002. Member, State Bar of Georgia.

1. P. Krisi Hartig (Articles Editor 2012-2013) Questionnaire Response (on file with the Mercer Law Review). Krisi Hartig continues, "In learning from her example, Mercer Law Review members enjoy a unique advantage in developing professional habits. She is a paragon of work ethic, constructive compassion, and excellence in output."

2. Jacque Smith Clarke (Member 2011-2013) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

a legal secretary,³ Yonna, at the tender age of twenty, began working with the Mercer Law Review on September 3, 1974.⁴ Neither Yonna nor any of those who interviewed her could have imagined that she would weather crises immeasurable⁵ to become an institution at the Law School, and would ultimately become “the heart and the soul”⁶ of Mercer Law Review well into the twenty-first century. Yonna now has surpassed the late, much-beloved Georgia Albritton⁷ as the longest-serving staff member of the Law School during the period since World War II—and almost certainly during the entire 142-year history of the Law School, if not the University as a whole.

We have had the great privilege and pleasure of working with Yonna in many endeavors over the years, including, in addition to the *Mercer Law Review*, her work on behalf of *The Journal of Southern Legal History* and the Legal Writing Institute.⁸ By title,⁹ but far more significantly by ability and skill, Yonna Shaw has long since become one of the most important members of the Mercer Law School community.

I came to teach at Mercer in 1978 as a 27-year old nerdy Jewish guy from St. Louis who had spent the previous few years practicing law in Atlanta. While I grew up in the mid-west, I found it easy to adjust to life in Atlanta.... Relocating 75 miles south to Macon to teach at a

3. Part-time Legal Secretary, Jerome P. Kaplan (1971-1972); Legal Secretary, Frank B. Lanneau III (1973-1974).

4. “I remember when we hired Yonna. It was so wonderful to have someone help us *full time!*” Jeffrey Ward Bell, Student Writing Editor (1975-1976) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

5. *Dedication*, 38 MERCER L. REV. x, xi (1987).

This issue of the Mercer Law Review is gratefully dedicated to Yonna W. Shaw, Business Manager of the Mercer Law Review. Undaunted in the face of pending deadlines, irritable printers, insistent authors, panicked editors, broken equipment, missing footnotes, and illegible editing, Yonna has faithfully served the Law Review for almost fourteen years. Each year, a new crop of anxious editors and members quickly learn to depend on Yonna’s experience and knowledge, comforted in the assurance that, somehow, Yonna will “take care of it.” For your many years of service to the Mercer Law Review, we thank you, Yonna, and for the sake of future editors and members, we hope for many years of service to come.

6. Charles R. Adams III, “*Lest We Forget*”: *The History of Mercer Law Review, Special Fiftieth Anniversary Contributions*, 50 MERCER L. REV. 7, 24 (1998).

7. Georgia Albritton was hired in August 1955 and retired in January 1995. Mercer University Personnel Record (on file with Mercer University Human Resources).

8. One publication is not nearly enough for Yonna!

9. She now is Publishing Coordinator for the *Mercer Law Review*, but, as Professor Jones notes, “This title barely begins to capture the reality that is Yonna. And so, dear Yonna, I say simply, thank you for everything — You are amazing, incredible, fantastic, incomparable, and a great blessing and inspiration to all of us.”

Baptist school, however, was a bit intimidating.... Fortunately, I was introduced to Yonna. I enjoyed her warmth, friendliness, and sense of humor. She made me feel very much at home.¹⁰

Yonna has evolved into a master administrator, a woman who brings organization to potential chaos, manages a budget with aplomb, and one who has inspired the affection and respect of scores of students, staff members, and faculty members. Her professionalism is outstanding.

When we prepare our survey article each year, we are writing for (and to) Yonna. We do this to demonstrate to her that as writers and lawyers we continue to strive to attain the goals she infused in us many years ago. We do not wonder what the transient Eleventh Circuit Survey Editor is going to think of our article. Rather, will it pass Yonna's muster?¹¹

The purpose of this Tribute is to tell something of the extraordinary story of Yonna Shaw, from the standpoint of many who have known and worked with her across these four decades. This project started out as a secret from Yonna, with much covert planning and plotting among co-conspirators that (while of course she found out about it within days) resulted in two initiatives to honor our beloved Yonna.¹²

The first initiative was executed at the Law Review Banquet on April 10, 2014, when Dean Daisy Hurst Floyd presented Yonna with a splendid bronze plaque bearing the title "The Walter F. George School of Law of Mercer University and The Mercer Law Review Recognition of

10. Michael D. Sabbath, Professor of Law, Walter F. George School of Law; The Southeastern Bankruptcy Law Institute, W. Homer Drake Jr. Endowed Chair in Bankruptcy Law. Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

11. Peter Reed Corbin (Eleventh Circuit Survey Editor 1974-1975) & John E. Duvall (Editor in Chief 1984-1985) Combined Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

12. Of course, it was impossible for it to remain a secret from Yonna very long. The core group of conspirators included Charles Adams III, Joe Claxton, Mark Jones, Leslie Cadle (Director of Alumni Affairs and now Director of Development), Jennifer Findley, (Editor-in-Chief 2013-14), Jonathan Wilson (Administrative Editor 2013-14), Nicholas Garcia (Editor-in-Chief 2014-15), and Tiffany Watkins (Georgia Survey Editor 2014-15). Also drawn into the conspiracy were first Dean Gary Simson and then Dean Daisy Floyd. We are grateful to both of them for their support of "Operation Yonna." In response, Yonna says, "I've never known anything that someone could hide from me in this office."

Distinguished Service Presented to Yonna Windham Shaw.¹³ The plaque, which will be placed in the Law Review suite, reads as follows:

With deep appreciation for 40 years of distinguished service to the Mercer University School of Law and to the Mercer Law Review. Yonna Shaw has been a mentor, friend, and indispensable administrator for hundreds of Law Review members, as well as a very effective representative of the Law School while working with innumerable authors, lawyers, and judges. Yonna Shaw is an inspiring exemplar of professional excellence and a true servant of legal education.

It is perhaps only out of respect for professional decorum that we omitted the term “mother figure”¹⁴ from the above listing of roles that Yonna has filled for the hundreds of Law Review members.¹⁵ However, this role surely becomes evident in the execution of the second initiative, which was announced at the Banquet and is memorialized in this Tribute. We sent to all of the Law Review members who have served during Yonna’s tenure a questionnaire asking for their recollections

13. Yonna tells the story about the Award Plaque almost being discovered as well. Yonna had ordered the certificates to be presented at the Law Review Banquet to the third-year members. An invoice was faxed to the office for a sum of money far greater than the anticipated amount. Also, the invoice number was 489YON1287. Yonna immediately phoned Karen Batts, the Dean’s administrative assistant, and asked, “Do you know anything about this invoice? I’m going to call the trophy shop and find out what this astronomical amount of money is for.” Karen promptly said it was the dean’s office invoice and snatched it away.

14. “It is undisputable and without doubt or reservation that Yonna genuinely cares about each and every student who came through the doors of the Mercer Law Review.... When Yonna sends each outgoing class off with wishes of success and good luck, she means it.” James Daniel Cole (Managing Editor 2011-2012) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

15. “To paraphrase Maya Angelou, people may forget what you said and did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.... [Yonna] was like a big sister who would make me laugh and feel like everything was going to be ok. She was a person who created an oasis of caring in a stressful, competitive circumstance.” Tara Adyanthya (Member 1995-1997) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

about "life with Yonna."¹⁶ A representative sampling follows,¹⁷ but we will first add our own observations.

Professor Joe Claxton is one of Yonna's very close friends and to this day, extremely pleased with the decision he made in 1974:

Yonna has become my friend, and that friendship is one which always will have deep meaning for me. She has been a rock through good times and bad. I have placed my trust in Yonna on innumerable occasions and have learned that her loyalty to the Law School and the many students with whom she has worked is without limit. I am so very proud of the fact that I participated in her hiring those many years ago.¹⁸

Professor Mark Jones, the current Mercer Law Review advisor, discusses the guidance that he received from Yonna and that he came to depend on:

Lawyers are familiar with the expression "Who will guard the guardians?" But for me the more pressing question upon assuming the position of Faculty Advisor was "Who will advise the advisor?" The answer was, of course, rather clear – "Yonna will advise the advisor for Yonna is the institutional memory and the font of accumulated experience of the Law Review." And thus it has proved to be whenever I have had some Law Review related issue on which I needed instruction or matter on which I needed guidance and wise counsel. Yonna's authority, then, is inherent but by no means overbearing. Others in such a position may perhaps be tempted to regard the activity they shepherd as some kind of fiefdom, into which one enters only on their terms. It is not so with Yonna, and I have appreciated the

16. One of the questions asked was whether Yonna had ever invited the respondent to her river house. A number of alumni were confused by this question; however, this monumental project was just recently finished in 2008. Yonna took a home she inherited from her mother's estate that was built by her grandfather in 1908 and moved it to her property on the Oconee River in Laurens County, Georgia. After tearing off the tin roof on the three-room house, the ceiling joints were raised thirty-nine feet to add more bedrooms and bathrooms for family get-togethers. The old house actually sits "inside" the new house, saving the historical integrity of the original 100+ year-old home.

17. The daunting task of trying to sort all the accolades we received in the numerous responses that came into the office forced us to select only a few. One editor's first impression of Yonna gave us quite an idea of her overall personality: "I definitely remember my first impression of Yonna. I heard she 'ran a tight ship' so I was scared of her. She was all business-like at first, but then over time I saw Yonna's true personality come out. She was smart, witty, and a lot of fun!" Karen Kirkpatrick Karabinos (Administrative Editor 1985-95) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

18. Joseph E. Claxton, Emeritus Professor, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University.

opportunity for genuine dialogue as we have worked through some issue, problem, or other situation.¹⁹

Professor Charles Adams discusses Yonna's tenure at Mercer:

One of the things first-year law students learn about is the law of "fixtures." They learn that a "fixture" is something securely attached or appended, the removal of which would cause permanent damage. Very early in her remarkable tenure at Mercer, Yonna became a "fixture," not just with the Law Review, but of the Law School community as a whole. I got to know Yonna fairly early in her career, first as a co-worker when I worked in the Law Library as an undergraduate student between 1978 and 1980; later as a rather formidable taskmistress during my two years on the Law Review from 1981 to 1983; and, best of all, during and ever since that time as one of my closest personal friends and professional colleagues. Thus, I can vouch for the fact that the tremendous success of Mercer Law Review during the past four decades is attributable to Yonna Shaw more than to any other individual, and that she consequently has had as much or more beneficial impact upon the scholarship of that publication as have any of its denominated "scholars."²⁰

Yonna is the last physical link between the Law Review's former quarters on Coleman Avenue and its present location on Coleman Hill. Patrick Farrell relates that "[o]urs was the first class in the new building and I remember Yonna and the rest of us being so excited about our new law review office. It was luxurious and spacious, especially compared to the old building."²¹

The extent of her tenure might be most remarkably appreciated by the following anecdote from father/son Law Review editors Brad and Ben Bryant:

The Bryant family has a unique relationship with Yonna in the sense that ours is intergenerational. Brad, Editor in Chief in 1979, is a contemporary of Yonna age-wise.... Technology was non-existent. No beepers, no fax machines, no cell phones, no desk top computing, nothing that we take for granted today. We felt fortunate that Yonna

19. Mark L. Jones, Professor of Law, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University.

20. Charles R. Adams III, Adjunct Professor of Law, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University.

21. Patrick Farrell (Managing Editor 1977-1978) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review). "This was really tough," Yonna states. "We were instructed to pack only our desk and to leave everything else behind. We were all getting new desks, chairs, etc., but being from the old school of never throwing anything away, I just couldn't imagine doing that."

had a self-correcting typewriter and all galley work required transmission to the printer in Atlanta via the U.S. Postal Service.

Flash forward thirty years to find Brad's son Ben serving as Editor in Chief for the 2008-2009 academic year. We had all of the modern technologies, and yet the one thing that made the law review process run smoothly was Yonna's extensive experience. Yonna's constant presence in the office was always welcome and appreciated. Her sense of humor and ability to relate to students often left law review members in a happier place leaving the law review office than when entering.

While the differences in age and the rapid growth in technology may have required a different set of skills and attributes, we both believe that we are fortunate to have shared part of our lives with Yonna. Her capacity to learn new skills and continue to be a life-long learner are the traits we hold most dear and we will forever cherish our time with her.²²

One of the most significant events involving Yonna was when Mercer Law Review, in conjunction with Emory Law Journal, hosted the 1993 National Conference of Law Reviews in Atlanta. Mary Patricia Sullivan, the Editor in Chief that year, relates that Yonna

had time for a good laugh she reminded [us] that the law in life is about people and relationships. We worked real hard to get the Law Review right and complete and to put on the National Law Review convention. Yonna always acted with style and grace. No matter what the emergency, and we had a few my year, she kept things calm. That perspective, grace, and wisdom has served me well over my legal career.²³

Among the more amusing insights provided by the myriad of Yonna's admirers were these: "[Yonna] thought I was the best looking guy she had ever seen. She couldn't breathe when I was around, I'm told ... she still thinks I'm the best looking guy she's ever seen."²⁴

Cathy Cox relates Yonna's first encounter working with a woman editor in chief:

Immediately after my election as Editor in Chief, Yonna came into the Law Review office, closed the door, pulled up a chair close to me, and informed that she'd never worked for a woman... and she didn't think

22. Wm. Bradley Bryant (Editor in Chief 1978-1979); W. Benjamin Bryant (Editor in Chief 2008-2009) Combined Questionnaire response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

23. Mary Sullivan (Editor in Chief 1993-1994) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

24. Jay Barber (Member 1981-1983) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review). "But have you seen him lately?" asks his classmate, Professor Adams.

she was ready to do it now. Period. End of discussion. I sat there stunned.... We had some awkward silence for a while because I sure didn't know what to say, and I could tell that she was absolutely serious about not wanting to work for a woman.

Eventually, I asked her whether she'd just try it as I thought we would actually get along very well. I don't remember whether I got down on my knees and begged, or she made me wallow on the floor, or what but she finally relented.... We took off on a wonderful journey over the next year... I hope the women editors who followed me are thankful that I tamed the beast — and paved the way with a milder, gentler Yonna in the years that followed!

Yonna taught me that there was no excuse for missing a deadline, no place for whining or complaining, and no reason for not working like a dog every day and every night. In fact she treated us all like dogs. Well, not really—but almost!²⁵

As Greg Smith, another prominent Law Review alumnus and Trustee of the Georgia Legal History Foundation relates, Yonna's

insight, technical abilities, business acumen, and sheer determination keep both the books (and their respective editorial boards) on track. Yonna is an institution at Mercer Law School. Yonna has taught us all a lot about life in general—and how to behave as a lawyer (sometimes citing examples on how not to behave as a lawyer).²⁶

Or, in the words of the inestimable “Doc” Schneider:

If Chazz Michael Michaels is figure skating, then Yonna Shaw is the Mercer Law Review. She trained generations of lawyers in the delights of spaces, commas, signals, citations, and blue-booking. She gave the Mercer Law Review its consistency, the sense that the same person must somehow have been at the helm for 30 years or so—because there was one person at the helm! Thank goodness she took the Mercer Law Review under her wing—it soars because of her.²⁷

In 1996, Mercer Law School fortuitously became the home of the Georgia Legal History Foundation and and fortunately the *Journal of*

25. L. Catherine Cox (Editor in Chief 1985-1986) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review. “Yonna and I developed a pretty rude, crude habit of coming into each other's offices and greeting each other with warm, friendly [but very derogatory] salutations, which was always followed by raucous laughter. What fun it was to work with her!”

26. Gregory K. Smith (Editor in Chief 2000-2001) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

27. Richard A. “Doc” Schneider (Lead Articles I Editor 1980-1981) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

Southern Legal History.²⁸ Yonna has, capably and almost singlehandedly, managed the production of the *Journal* since that time. Stuart Walker, a former Editor in Chief of the *Mercer Law Review* and current Editor in Chief of the *Journal*, asserts, aptly on behalf of both publications, that

[t]here was not one decision made by the editor in chief that [Yonna] was not involved in. Editors who ignored Yonna's wise advice did so at their peril. Because of her counseling background (and her natural giftedness) she has a real knack for dealing with people and managing personalities. Yonna handles people with finesse. But that's not to say that she's a softie—just the opposite is true. Yonna doesn't take whining or excuses from anyone. And she would not tolerate bickering among anyone. Always cool and collected, she walked me through many a tough decision that year.

Probably the thing I most appreciated about Yonna during my two years on law review was her supportive attitude. She would go to the mat in defense of decisions made by me and by the editorial. Yonna does not like the limelight. She does not like taking credit for things and will never seek it out. She is the archetype of a humble servant. She is a model for us all.²⁹

Dwight Davis, the first Eleventh Circuit Survey Editor, and one of Mercer's most distinguished alumni, sums up Yonna's remarkable and unique career at Mercer as only he can:

I came to Mercer Law School after four years as an Army Ranger. So, I knew exactly how to deal with Yonna Shaw—with the awe and respect I showed to First Sergeants.

For those who do not know military rank, each year, hordes of new lieutenants are inflicted upon Infantry companies, each of whom is convinced that he is the rightful successor to Douglas MacArthur. It is the duty of the First Sergeants to keep the lieutenants from in turn inflicting any serious injury to the soldiers under them or to themselves; all the while defeating the enemy at hand and making it look like the lieutenants did it.

28. Robert E. Hicks, *My Memory of Griffin Bell's Resuscitation of The Georgia Legal History Foundation*, 18 J. S. LEGAL HIST. 89 (2010). "[Charles] Adams volunteered to edit the Journal if Mercer Law School could be made its home, if he could enlist the help of [Joe] Claxton and Yonna Windham Shaw, the Mercer Law Review's manager, and if adequate financing could be arranged to ensure the Journal's publication. I suggested that what the organization really needed to restore its vigor and financial strength was Griffin Bell."

29. Stuart Walker (Editor in Chief 2003-2004) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).

You see why I immediately recognized Yonna Shaw for the genius that she is. She kept the new law review members (each of whom thinks that he or she is the rightful successor to Benjamin Cardozo) in line, on task, and humble, all the while publishing four books a year and making it look like the editors did it.

Unflappable, calm under fire, and always optimistic, Yonna Shaw taught me more about how to soldier through tough times than any Ranger instructor I ever had.

It is said that First Sergeants are the backbone of the Army. But in a like vein, I would say that Yonna is the heart of Mercer Law Review. There is no doubt that I became a better lawyer because I knew her, but truth be known I am a better person because of it.³⁰

And so are we all, Dwight, so are we all. Thank you, Yonna, and many, many happy returns!



30. Dwight Davis (Eleventh Circuit Survey Editor 1981-1982) Questionnaire Response (on file with Mercer Law Review).