

TRIBUTE: TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR ROBERT BERKLEY HARPER: FAREWELL TO PROFESSOR ROBERT BERKLEY HARPER

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Reporter

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Highlight

"A friend is a need's answer"-Kahil Gibran

Text

[*703] [SEE PHOTO IN ORIGINAL] [*704] [*705]

In 1977, I began teaching at The University of Pittsburgh Law School and in short order one of my closest friends during my tenure there was Professor Robert "Bob" Harper. I wondered when I was hired whether I was selected because I looked strikingly similar to Bob, and perhaps the faculty thought my favoring Professor Harper would make my assimilation into the law school faculty that much easier. Students constantly called me Professor Harper and, indeed, many on the faculty called me Bob for several years; I never bothered to correct them. I thought if they paid that little attention to detail in law school, I would just let them go through life missing some of the finer points their education, and life for that matter, has to offer.

Professor Harper is one of those finer points in life that we should all pay closer attention to.

He came from a large family whose mother worked diligently to provide a college education for five children and who always had room at the table for more.

He was a former Pittsburgh Public School math teacher and a military man, having served in Korea during the time of the Vietnam War, though he rarely talked about his military experience, in favor of his times in the public schools.

He was the first African-American legal counsel to Pittsburgh Police Department.

He was the first African-American Dean of Students, who handled financial aid, recruiting and admission, all at the same time at the law school. Thereafter, the law school hired a Dean of Admission, Financial Aid Officer and Dean of Students to handle his responsibilities.

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He was the first minority faculty member at the law school. He was the first tenured professor at the law school and the first minority full tenured professor at the law school.

He was the president of the Homer S. Brown Law Association for more than two years and talked me into becoming its president in 2000.

He was, and is, an enigmatic personality who was a calming force in a storm, a spiritual leader in the midst of decadence, an articulate scholar who rose above the chatter and dissension of the moment to see the possible in the improbable and the beauty in the way we live out our purpose in life.

Professor Harper told me not long after I arrived from Harvard that I was seen as the "fair haired" chosen one who would be the first to be tenured at the law school. Those who know me realize what an oxymoron it is to refer to me as "fair" or "haired" since I am brown and bald!

But Harper made it seem to apply, and he said it without any malice or envy, just plain matter of fact, and went on to talk about something else, never returning to the subject. For years until I left the law school I never forgot the comment, or as author Iyanla Vanzant would call it in her book *The Value in the Valley*, of knowing how people devalue your worth, but keeping the faith that you have value and some day it will be realized by others, as it is realized by you today.

Bob made history quietly at the law school, and he made it his way. He enjoyed teaching and seeing the students develop critical thinking skills, which he hoped some day would serve both the poor as well as the wealthy. Professor Harper treated his role as a faculty member with dignity and respect, and he was always prepared for classroom revelations as the students wrestled with cases that tested their values and their knowledge of life. He knew that some students would grow while others would shrink at the challenges they faced, both in and out of class. His caustic wit and profuse knowledge of the cases orchestrated some of the most interesting and comical class sessions of any academic in the University, let alone in the law school. He enjoyed leaving students perplexed, but not confused, and hoping that they would stretch to find deeper meaning and understanding in the legal reasoning of the courts and issues of social conflict of the day. He consistently admonished students that "we can disagree, agreeably."

Professor Harper made more than just history at the law school; he made a difference in what the face of the legal profession looked like, and for that we can all take pride and comfort in knowing that he paid the price, stayed the course and paved the way for a whole new generation of "diverse" lawyers at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. Being "first," being the "only," is a lonely road to travel and offers many opportunities to give up or give in.

[*707] Thankfully, Professor Harper stayed in long enough to assure all of us a brighter legal future, a better legal community and a memorable "living legend." We are all the better for his having passed our way, even if only once. As Professor Harper would say: "If you do it right, once is enough."