Opening Remarks of the Symposium to Honor the Work of Professor Ruthann Robson

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OPENING REMARKS OF THE SYMPOSIUM
TO HONOR THE WORK OF
PROFESSOR RUTHANN ROBSON

Kelly Kuterbach*

Good Morning. It’s wonderful to see you all here. Thank you for coming to CUNY to share this day with us. I am very happy to be here this morning and I would like to take a few minutes to share with you my experience with coming to CUNY Law.

I never wanted to go to law school. I had absolutely no interest in cramming my radical politics into the conservative profession of law. And Tuesday¹ proved to us all that believing in equality for LGBT people is still a very radical idea.

I didn’t know that there was this other side of law, that public interest law meant more than just public defenders. And my experience working in domestic violence told me I didn’t want to do that. I didn’t know there was another way. I lived in San Diego, also known as Eden, and had never heard of CUNY Law.

When I was an undergrad, in my junior year as a Women’s Studies major at San Diego State University, I took a class called “Lesbian Lives and Cultures” with Dr. Bonnie Zimmerman.² For that class, I worked on a paper about lesbians in prison. While I was researching, all of my search queries resulted in a list of these beautiful articles in scholarly journals, and some books with great titles like Lesbian Outlaw.³ I was excited to have hit the jackpot because, at that time, my classmates and I lamented the idea of including twenty sources in my paper—we thought that was just outrageous. What did we know? So, I pulled the articles. But then I realized the vast majority of them were written by just one author

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² Dr. Bonnie Zimmerman is the Associate Vice President for Faculty Affairs at San Diego State University (SDSU). She is a distinguished Professor of Women’s Studies and has served on the editorial boards of several feminist scholarly journals.

. . . Ruthann Robson, of course. And so I rolled my eyes at the amount of research I still had to do.

I took the articles home, and spread them out on my bed, like I do, and I read them, one after another, after another. And, wow! Lesbian jurisprudence? I didn’t even know what that meant, but it sure sounded great. Lesbian legal theory? There’s a lesbian legal theory? Wow. I was enchanted. But I set that aside to finish my paper. Afterwards, I could not stop thinking about these new ideas, about “jurisprudence.” So I looked it up. And guess whose name I found, time after time? Search after search, it all lead me back to Ruthann.

I decided to read it all, because that’s what you do, right? I checked out Sappho Goes to Law School. While I was standing in line at the circulation desk at my school library, I flipped the book over and read, right there on the back: Ruthann Robson is professor of law at the City University of New York School of Law. And right there, in line at the library, I said to myself, probably out loud, “Oh my god . . . I’m going to law school.” And then, “Oh my god . . . I’m moving to New York!”

So I switched gears—I stopped looking at graduate schools and started looking at the LSATs. I looked up CUNY. I couldn’t believe that my skills as a grassroots community activist were a commodity at CUNY. I learned that public interest law is so much more than I imagined. Using the Constitution to protect people’s rights? Making my passion for social justice into a legal career? Okay, sign me up!

So here I am. I’m here at CUNY. I’m taking it to the next level. In a few short years I went from “Lesbian Lives and Culture” to “Liberty, Equality and Due Process” (a first-year Constitutional Law seminar), to becoming the president of OUTLaws, the Law School’s LGBT student association, to interning my first summer at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights, to this, my second year of law school, where I am student in Ruthann’s seminar called Sexuality and the Law.

But my point, and the reason why I am telling you this story, is to remind you that Ruthann’s work, as renowned as it is in the legal sphere, is out there, tapping on the shoulders of undergraduate students, plucking us out of our social work futures and teaching us legal theory. Women’s Studies Quarterly is the handbook of Women’s Studies students everywhere. And there she is, reaching out

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5 Women’s Studies Quarterly is a leading journal that treats feminist issues. Women’s
of its pages, telling us to claim our place, to *create* our place, at the bar.

And I’m not the only one. There are very many of us who are here in these halls, because of Ruthann’s work and the very many of us who have passed through: people like Ann Cammett, Victoria Neilson, Stephanie Schwartz, Tina Thivierge, Leslie Thrope, Cynthia Schneider, and Joey Mogul.⁶

So I’d like to take this opportunity to thank Ruthann for the work that she has done, for the work she continues to do, and for changing all of our lives. Thank you, Ruthann. And thanks to all of you for coming out to share your own experiences. I hope you enjoy the Symposium.