

SOUTHWESTERN LAW SCHOOL

3050 Wilshire Boulevard · Los Angeles, CA 90010-1106



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Dear Southwestern Students:

As we all grapple with the devastating killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis last week and its complicated heart wrenching aftermath, I wanted to reach out to you.

I write because of who we are and what we all value. We are drawn together by an extraordinary law school community. Southwestern is founded on the principle of equality and its value to our society, founded on the idea that race, gender, immigrant status or country of origin have nothing to do with who should or could become a lawyer. Southwestern is a place that most of us chose -- at least in part -- because of its commitment to the idea that we are better and stronger when we benefit from working and learning in a multi-racial community. We see our racial, economic and cultural diversity as a tremendous strength that helps Southwestern graduates function effectively as lawyers.

A lot of us draw our strength from Southwestern's incredible traditions. Even more than I usually do, over the last few days, I have found myself thinking about Tom Bradley of our evening class of 1956. He continued to serve as an officer in the Los Angeles Police Department throughout law school. I think back to the day the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 were touched off by the acquittal of the officers who had beaten Rodney King. Even Mayor Tom Bradley felt despair, as I am sure many of us have during the last few days. However, Mayor Bradley gathered himself and continued his determined quest for justice and equality. People came together and formed multiracial coalitions. The reforms that ensued, including the creation of an independent police commission, mattered. Were they enough? Clearly, the answer is a firm NO! On the one hand, Los Angeles is not Minneapolis, but on the other, we are not where we need to be either. This moment calls for not only compassion and outrage, it also calls even more urgently for action and resolve.

Who, in the age of the cellphone camera, can rationally deny the reality that we continue to live in a racist society? George Floyd's death and the deaths of so many before him, exposes the horrific reality that black Americans have lived with for centuries -- it is dangerous to be black in America, and as a consequence the daily lives of a huge group of Americans are diminished and denigrated. The pictures and videos we have seen over the last few days also make clear that our country as a whole pays a huge price, a completely unacceptable price, when any police department employs racists or people who like to inflict pain or dominate others. The price is multi-layered and complicated, and it includes inflicting further social and economic damage on all Americans. And this comes now on top of the economic and psychological impact of the pandemic.

But the pictures and videos also show promise, including police leadership and individual officers here and elsewhere working with protestors and expressing solidarity with their lawful mission, protestors and community members trying, and sometimes succeeding, in preventing or stopping the looting, and law abiding, non-violent protestors of all races separating themselves from, and sometimes stopping the lawlessness of violent looters. We saw the wisdom of the constitution at work, from tangible examples of why a free press matters, to the dramatic force of the 1st Amendment's guarantee of the

freedom of assembly, to the power of the principles introduced into the U.S. Constitution by the 14th and 15th Amendments after the Civil War.

We at Southwestern need to face the reality that creating a diverse, well-functioning community at Southwestern is not enough. The promise of what you accomplish in the future over decades in the legal profession is considerable and important, but that also is not enough.

The many of you who have visited our Dean's office, know the beautiful photograph of California's first female black Judge, Vaino Spencer of our class of 1952. She was an activist, and donning her judicial robes did not change her determination to make a difference in the world off the bench as well as on it. Were Justice Spencer with us now, I think she would firmly remind us that this moment calls for far more than compassion and outrage, and emphasize that we need to act with resolve and urgency. I can hear her saying something like: "Pull yourselves together and get going!"

So, it is not just that we are proud of our history and inspired by it; our history tells us that especially when the challenges seem overwhelming, that is precisely the time for creativity and action. Now that the unconscionable injustices black Americans live and die with are, yet again, in our faces and our minds, let's use our analytical and problem solving skills to determine specific actions that would make a difference and work to get them implemented. And let's think about how we can, apart from legal actions, further and better support our great and complex city, perhaps building on some of the important initiatives that Southwestern students, staff, alumni and faculty are already undertaking.

Some of you have reached out to me, or to Vice Dean Dov Waisman, to express concerns that you have about your fellow students, particularly those who are African American, and that says a lot about the people you are and the lawyers you will become.

Our longstanding tradition of effective student leadership in BLSA is one of our strengths, -- and the current leaders are hard at work and will be communicating to all of us their thoughts about how we can make a difference very soon. I'm certain that their leadership will be valuable and important.

I know I speak for the faculty and staff in emphasizing that, while we are not physically in Westmoreland and Bullocks Wilshire, we are all at work, and particularly during this difficult time, we encourage you to reach out to us for any reason or no particular reason. I so strongly wish that we could be together now as an in-person community. We will have opportunities for informal in person conversations in appropriately sized groups as soon as we possibly can. In the meantime, look for the BLSA message.

Take care everyone,

Dean Susan

Susan Westerberg Prager
Dean and Chief Executive Officer
Southwestern Law School

cc: Faculty and Staff