FRANCES RYAN RETIRES

by Professor Richard E. Shugrue

Frances Ryan is retiring from the full-time faculty. If she has it her way, it will be without fanfare, speeches, or encomiums.

Her way has always been the modest way, even though she has a litany of “firsts” to her credit, and a generation of men and women who have her to thank for a legal education.

Fran Ryan, the first female editor-in-chief of a law review, the first woman faculty member of the Creighton Law School, the single individual who created and nurtured our minority scholarship program, has reached the “twilight” of her second career.

But to say that she is retiring is to stretch the truth a little. A quick look at the 1992-93 class schedule for the law school shows that she will continue to teach, though a reduced load.

She will still chair the minority recruitment and scholarship program, and she will still be available to the dozens of men and women who seek her out for common-sense solutions to every-day problems.

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The notion of not being involved, of sitting in the sun at her lake-side home in Sarpy County, is just alien to Professor Ryan.

This tough, matter-of-fact lawyer who never took on a task which was easy and who never gave less than a full measure of talent and dedication, is by no means ready to throw in the towel on her diverse interests.

And she is by no means ready to abandon her adopted family, the scores of men and women who, over this past generation, have been recruited, interviewed, counseled and inspired by her, and have now become attorneys, public servants, and corporate executives in their own right.

Frances Ryan is not the sort of person who likes to show sentiment openly. But she possesses a profound affection for the individuals she has come to know as her “family.”

Dan Harris, of the class of 1982, and an attorney with Mutual of Omaha, speaks for all of “her” students when he says, “I don’t know of any minority student who wouldn’t come back for her. She has always been there when we had problems. She helped us grow.”

Harris relates that at his own graduation, his mother and grandmother came from the South to share the big day. “I wanted Miss Ryan to be there as part of the family. My family embraced her and they all cried as if they were long-lost relatives. It was a beautiful moment.”

Frances Ryan has roots in rural Nebraska. Her mother, Mary Gallagher, was born in Spencer, and met her father, Neil Ryan, while she was working at the courthouse in O’Neill.

Neil Ryan was born in Jackson, Nebraska, and was ranching on a family-owned property near O’Neill when he and Mary were married.
Frances was born on the ranch, but lived with her grandmother during the week while she attended St. Mary's Academy in O'Neill during her first few years of formal schooling.

When Frances was about nine years old, her father sold the ranch and moved to a farm outside of Sioux City, where he operated Ryan's Dairy Farm. In this way he could see to a good education for his growing family.

Frances, the oldest of seven children, went to Briar Cliff College in Sioux City and graduated first in her class.

She worked as a high school mathematics teacher in Iowa before enrolling at Marquette Law School.

She had saved from her earnings to attend law school, an ambition she had had from the time of her grade school days. Her nephew, Paul Gnabasik, a second-year Creighton law student, said, "One of her traits is an exceptional amount of personal discipline." He explained that during law school "the nest egg didn't go far enough, so that she would work during finals, and then study until the early hours of the morning on the day of the exams."

Ryan became editor-in-chief of the Marquette Law Review, another of her many "firsts," and she graduated at the top of her class.

Following law school, she went to the University of Michigan and earned a master's degree in taxation.

Then it was back to Milwaukee where she practiced until she came to Creighton in the fall of 1973.

Frances Ryan's service to minority students is unparalleled, and as far as they are concerned it is a legend worth repeating for generations to come. She has not only served as chair of the Minority Affairs Committee since the mid 1970s, and advisor of the Black Law Students Association equally as long, but she has been coordinator of the Graduate and Professional Opportunities Program since 1978.

John Pierce, Creighton's Director of Affirmative Action and himself a law school graduate (class of 1981) hails Ryan as a genuine role model for the students. "She is so committed and unswerving in her dedication to the cause of minorities," Pierce states. "She is a source of inspiration to everyone she touches."

"She remembers us all. She delights in our successes. She keeps track of our careers and our families."

"Nobody realizes how hard she has worked for equality and opportunity," Pierce pointed out. "She has set the example for Creighton."

His words are echoed by a more recent graduate, Mark Long of the class of 1991. "I don't want to sound corny, but she's like Mother Theresa. It is hard to imagine anyone who would devote her entire life at Creighton to helping inspire and improve minorities," he stated.

Long recited a list of African-American students...
whom he knows and who sing the praises of Frances Ryan. "People from years back just stop by to pay their respect to her," he observed. Long recalled that the Black American Law Student Association regional convention, held at Creighton in the 1989-90 school year, was dedicated to Professor Ryan.

"She'll never realize how much she means to others, how much she has touched and changed lives," Long added.

Professor Catherine Brooks, who will eventually assume the chair of the Minority Admission and Scholarship Committee, hosted a party at her home in honor of Ryan and invited the minority students.

"Frances was embarrassed at the attention," Brooks said, "but she looked at the assembled students and said, 'You are my legacy.'"

The Law School Liaison to the Law School Admissions Council Minority Enrollment Task Force for the past ten years, Ryan has also served Creighton in a host of unsung roles since she arrived on the Hilltop campus.

She has, for example, served on the All-university Committee on the Status of Women. She has been on the Graduate and Professional Financial Aid Advisory Committee. She has served on the Academic Council, the elected all-university faculty advisory group to the president and board of directors.

Many of her colleagues point to Ryan's long service on the Board of Directors of the Creighton Federal Credit Union as illustrative of her dedication and attention to detail.

Professor Roland Santoni, who served with Ryan on the Credit Union's Board, said that she was "relentless in solving the problems of the institution during some tough years."

He explained, "One of her duties was to read all the new regulations coming from the government and dealing with credit union management. Every single month she pored over hundreds of pages of material and reduced it all to a four or five page report. She wasn't going to let any of us get away with not knowing what the rules were."

Santoni has also worked with Ryan on the Minority Admissions Committee. "She deserves tremendous credit for the work she does there in phoning and writing all over the country, tracking down good candidates and checking them out," Santoni noted.

Fellow faculty members also laud Frances Ryan. Professor Barbara Green called Ryan "an incredible friend."

"Virtually everything she has done in her life has been a first. But the minority program is the crown of her career," Green noted. "She wanted a real, workable program, one in which Creighton could take pride and that is what she has given us," she added.

But that is not surprising, for Ryan is a spectacular person with a tremendous interest in observing new things, her colleague said.

Green noted that until she met Ryan, "I never thought I'd be out in a field in southeast Nebraska at 5:30 in the morning watching prairie chickens mate."

And a somewhat humbled Green added, "She's a fantastic Scrabble player. Once, I used up all my letters on my first turn. Now that's supposed to mean you're so far ahead—an automatic 50 extra points—that you can't lose. She whipped me!"

A plaque has been placed on the "Frances Ryan" suite, headquarters for the Black American Law Student Association and the Latino Law Student Association at the Law School. It summarizes the genuine love the school and its graduates have for Frances Ryan. It identifies her tireless efforts in searching for sources of financial aid and counseling all on educational opportunities.

It states that her dedicated efforts resulted in significant strides in enhancing the diversity of the student body.

But most of all, it says in simple, declarative language, that she is a "friend to all."