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OF LAW HOUSTON

2020

**OVERCOMING CHALLENGES, CELEBRATING COMMUNITY,
AND LOOKING TOWARD THE NEXT 100 YEARS**



Michael Dirden '92 builds bridges between citizens and law enforcement

WRITTEN BY **LAUREN MCDOWELL**

Fresh out of The University of Texas at Austin with an economics degree, Michael Dirden '92 found himself at a crossroads. It was 1985, and he was back in his hometown of Houston contemplating his next career move.

The big picture seemed simple enough. He had always been drawn to the idea of law school, then going on to teach as a professor.

But before he could put that plan into motion, there were more immediate concerns — he needed a way to provide for his young family. A friend helped convince Dirden that the Houston Police Department (HPD) might offer just what he was looking for.

As Dirden says, “I had a very close friend who used to rag me about being broke. He had graduated from a university, and he was working at HPD at night and going to dental school during the day. He suggested it could also be a solution for me.”

What started as a means to an end would turn into a long career marrying law enforcement with legal education, as Dirden rose through the ranks of the Houston Police Department to eventually become the executive assistant chief of police.

When then-patrolman Dirden began attending South Texas College of Law Houston, the plan was still to graduate and go the professor route.

“My education at STCL Houston equipped me to assist in creating a safe space in which the community and the police can work collaboratively to resolve issues.” – MICHAEL DIRDEN '92

After graduating in 1992, Dirden was working in the legal services unit of the police department, looking toward the future and trying to determine a career path. Samuel Nuchia '83, a former assistant U.S. attorney and the chief of police at the time, saw promise in the young officer and urged him to stay.

“Instead of going out and making a lot of money, [Nuchia] challenged me to take my knowledge and use that to help reform the profession,” says Dirden. “My education at STCL Houston equipped me to assist in creating a safe space in which the community and the police can work collaboratively to resolve issues.”

The notion stuck, and it became Dirden's central mission in almost three decades of working for HPD. Over the next two decades, Dirden would take on dual roles as a high-ranking police officer: working externally with the public while working towards accountability inside the department.

As a sergeant working in the Organizational Development Unit, he helped redesign the structure of the department and its core processes. When he became assistant chief of police, he led Professional Standards and Criminal Investigations oversight. And in his final role as executive assistant chief of police, Dirden's responsibilities included oversight for a wide-ranging set of operational divisions, from patrol to mental health to apartment enforcement and differential police response, among others.

Looking back on his time at South Texas, Dirden is grateful for the way law school fit into a life he was already building with a broad coalition of coworkers and friends.

“I think the ability to bring practical knowledge and infuse that with legal talent makes South Texas unique. For me as a working student, there was never a sense that there was a distinction between full-time students and students who were working full time. We all were given the opportunity to succeed and participate in the law school and most of us took advantage of that.”

Combining knowledge and experience from the legal and law enforcement worlds helps Dirden remain objective in today's highly charged national conversation about the roles police officers play in the communities they serve.

“I believe it is important to recognize the value of critical dialogue instead of hateful rhetoric,” he said. “Obviously, events occurring in this country demonstrate some police officers may not respect and value Black or minority lives as they should. It is important that they be removed as soon as possible, considering police officers are afforded due process. I believe police must come to understand that greater civilian oversight of their duties is coming.”

Now retired, Dirden's job is different, but his work is far from over. As a senior subject-matter expert for a security risk management firm, Dirden consults on police department operations in cities throughout the United States, offering top to bottom assessment and evaluation of law enforcement agencies.

“Some cities and agencies want to know if their policies and practices are consistent with contemporary standards in the profession, e.g., use of force, internal investigation, transparency and constitutional policing. Some clients may ask us to review certain events; how well did we respond to the protest or civil unrest, what did we do well, what lessons can we learn, how can we improve community engagement? Examination of department records, training, force and internal affairs complaints, and discipline are issues of concern to most clients.”

Dirden says that every engagement involves discussion with government officials, members of the organization, stakeholders, and those in the community, especially those who are adversely affected by an incident or policy.

“Analysis of data is important, so our team will include researchers as well as professionals who are experienced and knowledgeable about the profession...someone experienced in community engagement, use of force, training, etc. The deliverable provides findings and recommendations that the stakeholders can use to move the organization forward.”

Asked about the legacy he hopes to leave behind, he said, “My focus has always been on giving others an opportunity to actualize their potential. If a leader accomplishes that, the positive benefit to the community and the organization is enduring.”

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UNPRECEDENTED

How South Texas students, faculty, and staff have
united, overcome, and persevered
under unusual circumstances during the
COVID-19 pandemic

WRITTEN BY **AMBER AMBROSE**



Temporary solutions become positive changes

If the rapid onset of adversity were an exam, South Texas College of Law Houston professor Derek Fincham and Ted Field, associate dean for faculty, would pass with flying colors.

From adding “cheerleader” to a resumé to piecing together an optimized schedule for both virtual and in-person instruction for the fall, these two — and the entire faculty — realize this paradigm shift in higher education is not just a temporary reality. Now that some time has passed to allow for more perspective, they’ve reflected on just how much has changed.

“I felt closer to my students in some ways, even though we were physically separate,” says Fincham. “I really stressed to them that the number one thing was to be safe, to take care of themselves, and that we’d get the schoolwork done. I was almost an emotional support professor, too, in a way I hadn’t been before. Part of what I was doing was cheerleading.”

While Fincham was keeping students encouraged through the madness, adapting to online and remote learning, Dean Field was wishing for his Magic 8-Ball to help him predict the future and better plan the fall schedule.



FINCHAM

“We had to shift on a dime. We had to plan for contingencies.”

— TED FIELD,
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR FACULTY
AND PROFESSOR OF LAW

“We had to figure out how to plan as if we were all in person, all online, or somewhere in between,” says Field. “We had to shift on a dime. Here’s what we’re doing now, and here’s what we’re doing now to plan for the future. We had to plan for contingencies.”

Field worked closely with Mandi Gibson, assistant dean of students, to shift classes to different times of the day, find ways to maximize the space in the building, ensure onsite social distancing, and put as many classes online as possible to limit the number of people coming into the building — a daunting feat requiring creativity and ingenuity.

Throughout it all, Gibson and Field believe many of these shifts will



FIELD

prove advantageous for the foreseeable future for both faculty and students, including permanent changes in teaching styles.

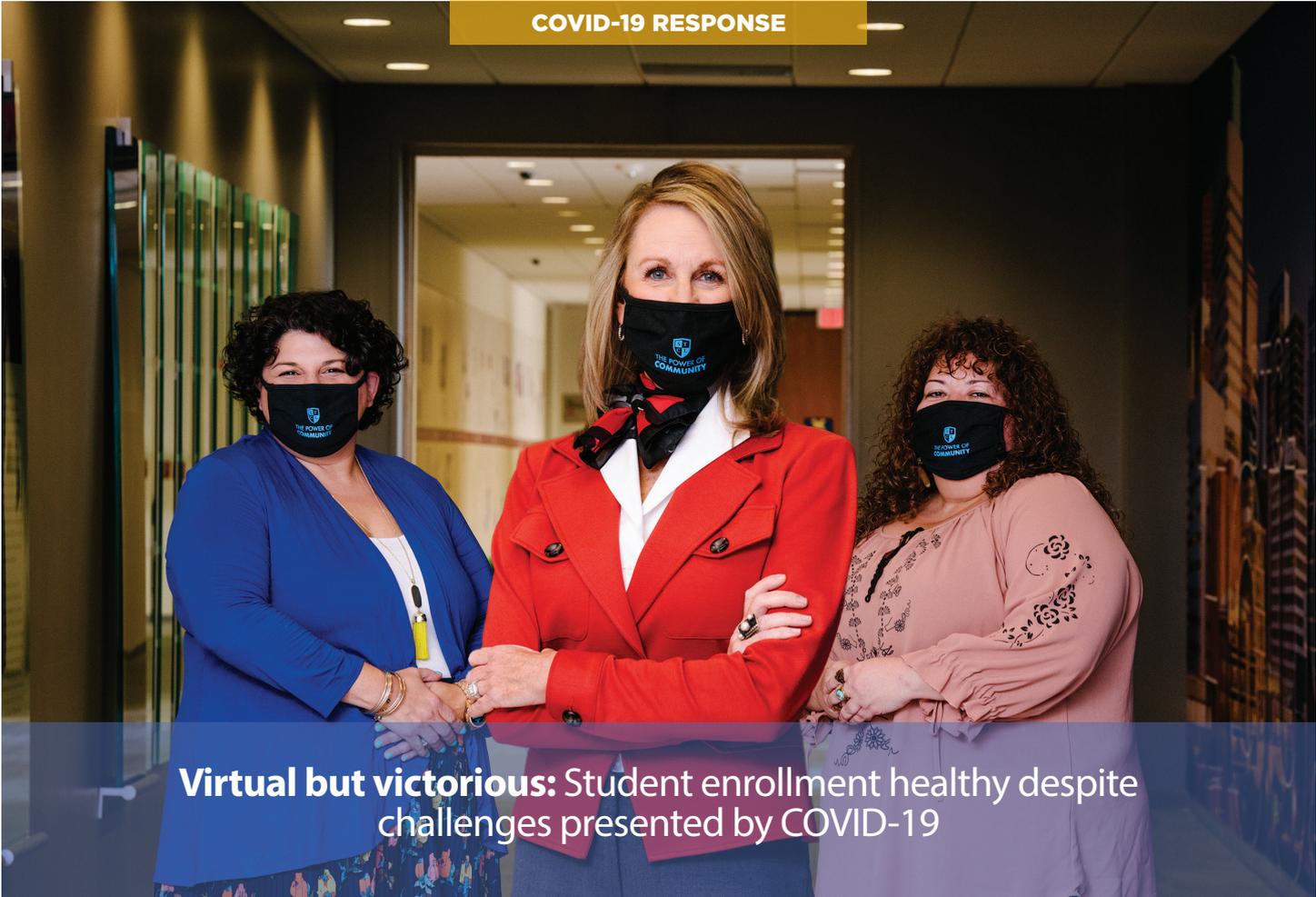
“Certain things that might seem dry, like citation or basic skills that don’t lend themselves to a straight lecture, I’ve been able to slice and dice up into more bite-sized chunks for students,” says Fincham. “This summer we [the writing professors] realized if we pooled our resources and did one asynchronous module apiece or one legal writing class, we’ve got eight modules done that we can remix and use. It allowed us to see what each professor was doing and maybe even up my game, or vice versa.”

And the benefits of these shifts aren’t limited to instruction alone. Students experienced real-world takeaways that could positively influence their future as lawyers.

“Students learning to take depositions or doing other things like that online are going to have a leg up on those who have been around longer but don’t have that same experience,” adds Field. “The whole practice of law could change.”



GIBSON



Virtual but victorious: Student enrollment healthy despite challenges presented by COVID-19

When COVID-19 hit, like most people, Alicia Cramer, assistant dean of Admissions, was scared. The “What if I can’t adapt?” thoughts came creeping in.



CRAMER

There were fears of not being able to meet enrollment numbers, because when the world is turned upside-down, do people still want to go to law school? While the adventure continues to unfold in realtime, Cramer is confident about the future. Realizing that “nothing is going to be the same,” means something very different now than it did in March, and Cramer is looking ahead with excitement and optimism.

“My thought was that perhaps people were going to be fearful about in-person learning or the pandemic itself,” says Cramer.

Thankfully, those worries were easily put to bed, though it wasn’t without ingenuity and an overnight pivot on the admissions process. Transitioning from in-person to virtual recruitment

“The resilience of people has not been surprising, but reaffirming.”

— ALICIA CRAMER,
ASSISTANT DEAN OF ADMISSIONS

events meant going from the usual two on-campus receptions for admitted students to 16 or more events via Zoom video conferencing between April and June. Cramer thinks the flexibility and versatility of virtual meetings ended up creating opportunities. Remote attendance meant students didn’t need to travel, and more frequent events meant flexibility for students’ schedules.

“When we’re having to make so much more of an impact to help these students understand who we are, what we’re about, what we have to offer and they can’t come to campus, that was a challenge,” says Cramer. “But people got

a good sense of who we were.”

Ultimately, South Texas welcomed a robust, class of 306 talented 1L students this fall.

Cramer knows the quick adjustments to strategy played a role in enrollment success, but she acknowledges that teamwork really does make the dream work — not only on the part of her Admissions colleagues Antigone Olivares and Melanie Krugel — but across



OLIVARES



KRUGEL

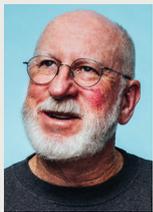
multiple departments (Faculty, Communications, and Instructional Technology to name a few).

“I have even more respect for the people that I work with,” says Cramer. “The teamwork that came out of trying to make things happen when someone else was struggling — to pitch in, was pretty cool.”



One problem (and solution) at a time:
Instructional Technology rises to the remote learning occasion

Terry Smith immediately downplays his role and that of his department when the term “rise to the occasion” is brought up in conversation.



SMITH

The senior director of Instructional Technology insists that a team effort was essential to keeping things functioning for faculty, students, and staff at South Texas College of Law Houston

in the sudden post-COVID-19 turnaround. He’s humble and gracious, but he does admit to working more intensely than before and agrees that there were plenty of creative solutions that contributed to keeping the STCL community connected when it mattered most.

“We were working crazy hours,” says Smith, referencing the huge evolution of his department in a very small amount of time. “It totally shifted the way we do things, but we maintained ourselves in a virtual office.”

When Smith uses the term “virtual office,” he isn’t just throwing phrases around. He means a literal, open-like-an-actual-physical-office virtual space where faculty, staff, and students can pop in whenever they like

“We were working crazy hours. It totally shifted the way we do things, but we maintained ourselves in a virtual office.”

— **TERRY SMITH,**
SENIOR DIRECTOR,
INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY

during working hours to get help and find resources.

“It’s a Zoom account and we [Instructional Technology staff] meet in it, and that’s where we are all day,” says Smith. “It’s a virtual office that we’re running from early in the morning until 7 p.m., depending on what we’ve got going on. And people come and go. They make use of it, trust me.”

Similar to visiting the IT counter on campus, the virtual office allows for drop-ins between set hours. The

signature Zoom doorbell sound effect alerts Smith and fellow staff that a visitor is waiting and needs assistance. Problems are solved just like they would be in a physical space, through conversation, patience and troubleshooting.

“It makes it easier to deal with things and gives everyone the feeling that we’re there for them,” says Smith.

Technical support has never been more necessary, which is why the virtual office became so important, but there were more internal developments needed to handle the massive scale of a fully remote campus. Smith says the technology team solved this issue by breaking down duties like a virtual assembly line. Staff members all handled one task in the process between recording each lecture and having it uploaded, labeled and ready to view by students.

Transitioning to a hybrid model in the fall with both in-person and virtual classes has added a layer of complexity to an already complex operation, but Smith has been here before and puts his faith in a simple but effective philosophy in making it work. “You find a problem, you find a solution, and then you move to the next thing.”



Ensuring success with small changes

For 2L student Lorena Valle, the transition to remote learning was difficult at first, but she made adjustments to ensure she kept on track in her coursework. Armed with months of experience and a good set of noise-cancelling headphones, Valle is making the

best of the circumstances. “The most important thing is having a routine,” she said, noting that she has maintained her study schedule and her habit of taking handwritten notes during lectures. She also has found comfort in the support of faculty.



“[My professors] make themselves available to their classes,” she says. “They understand that students could get lost. That accessibility is more important now than ever before.”



Taking comfort in community

As a first-generation college student and the first in his family to get a graduate degree, Mikheal Khan enjoys immersing himself in the student experience. He is actively involved in several student organizations — serving as a senator in the Student Bar Association; a vice president of the part-time student law society, the Night O.W.L.S.; and a member of the International Law and National Security Society. While these organizations have had to adapt their activities to a remote environment, Khan says online learning has unique benefits. From welcome



interruptions by classmates’ pets to meeting their toddlers, Khan says online learning has allowed him to “get to know classmates on a more personal level that I wouldn’t otherwise.” Khan also is impressed with the changes that faculty have made during the pandemic. “From the beginning, I got the feeling professors were looking out for us and genuinely cared. We are truly a community.”



Remaining focused despite challenges



The COVID-19 pandemic hit just as Eric Williams was approaching the end of his first year of law school. “[Before the pandemic] campus was my safe haven. I spent 12 hours a day at school. [Remote learning] threw my schedule upside down.” With years of professional work experience behind him, Williams approached the challenge as

a business problem. “I took a work-like approach to the problem,” he said. “I transformed my apartment, creating a small area dedicated solely to studying.” He credits the division with helping him remain focused. Throughout the fall semester, he has taken advantage of the added support provided by faculty, many of whom remain on Zoom after

class to answer students’ questions. “I’m impressed with the way the school has handled crises this year — whether related to social justice issues or the pandemic. This experience has solidified my belief that I made the right choice. South Texas really is a place that puts students first.”



Finding work-life balance

Part-time student Ashley Ekster says one positive aspect of the pandemic is that her family has been able to build stronger bonds. In fact, Ekster reports that her son helps her to take breaks, ensuring she gets up from her desk from time to time. “It can be done. The balance with work and family is possible!” she exclaimed. She also is pleased that her online courses have maintained the same quality she experienced on campus. The faculty “have been working

nonstop to ensure a rigorous learning environment.” In fact, she says, remote learning has pushed faculty to explore new ways to engage students. In addition to the typical lectures, her professors have introduced videos, in-class polls, and a variety of online learning tools. “Courses may have gone from the classroom to the computer, but the conversations haven’t changed,” Ekster states. “The quality is still there.”



Meet STCL Houston's Newest Professor: Guha Krishnamurthi

WRITTEN BY **TODD GREEN**

Professor Guha Krishnamurthi is a logician through and through, even when he's leading a lecture concerning "a show about nothing." Friendly and energetic, the newest faculty member at South Texas College of Law Houston spoke with *InRe Magazine* about his multidisciplinary approach to law, his current research, and the virtual *Seinfeld* Criminal Law lecture he gave this summer.

Outfitted with a trio of advanced degrees, Professor Krishnamurthi bolsters his J.D. from the University of Texas School of Law with an M.S. in mathematics from the University of Michigan and an M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Texas. His love of logic and fascination with the framework of law are deeply rooted in the rigorous methodology required of mathematicians and the reflective, esoteric musings of philosophers focused on the letter and spirit of the law.

Krishnamurthi's multidisciplinary education influences his teaching methods and research topics, and as a lecturer of criminal law, he encourages students to bring their own expertise to their studies. Whether it be a prior degree, work or life experience, the professor believes it is critical to apply the lens through which we understand the world to law.

As a researcher, he embraces his philosophy background, exploring theories of punishment and the admissibility of confessions within criminal proceedings. Of particular interest to Krishnamurthi are incidents surrounding confessions made by those with disabilities. He notes that there are many stories to suggest that people who are incapable of complying during an arrest are at a higher risk of coercion or abuse from law enforcement. This area of research has led the professor to apply

for a seat on the board of directors of *The Arc*, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the civil rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which he is slated to join soon.

Outside the lecture hall, Krishnamurthi follows the NBA and professional cricket, and watches reruns of *Seinfeld* — one of which recently became more than just a way to unwind. This July, he joined Professor Gregory Shill of the University of Iowa, and other law professors from around the country, to produce a series of volunteer lectures on — you guessed it — *Seinfeld* and the law. They called it the *Yada Yada Law School*.

For his lecture, now on YouTube, Krish-

namurthi selected *Seinfeld* Criminal Law. The hour-long discussion explores how everyone's favorite "show about nothing" is really about a lot of things, including the interpretation of statutes. And that goes far beyond debating the unwritten rules of society: double-dipping or Elaine's offensive dancing, for example.

In fact, the professor's lecture touches on several violations of criminal law, including mail fraud by Kramer and Jerry and, of course, the Good Samaritan Law featured in the series finale. No spoilers though: The only way to find out if Professor Krishnamurthi thinks the *Seinfeld* gang was guilty — and see why the college is so thrilled to welcome him to the faculty — is to watch the lecture.

Prior to joining South Texas College of Law Houston, Krishnamurthi was a Climenko Fellow and Lecturer at Harvard University. He also clerked for the Honorable Goodwin H. Liu of the California Supreme Court, the Honorable Andrea R. Wood of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, and the Honorable Diane P. Wood of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. 🇺🇸

Of particular interest to Professor Krishnamurthi are incidents surrounding confessions made by those with disabilities.



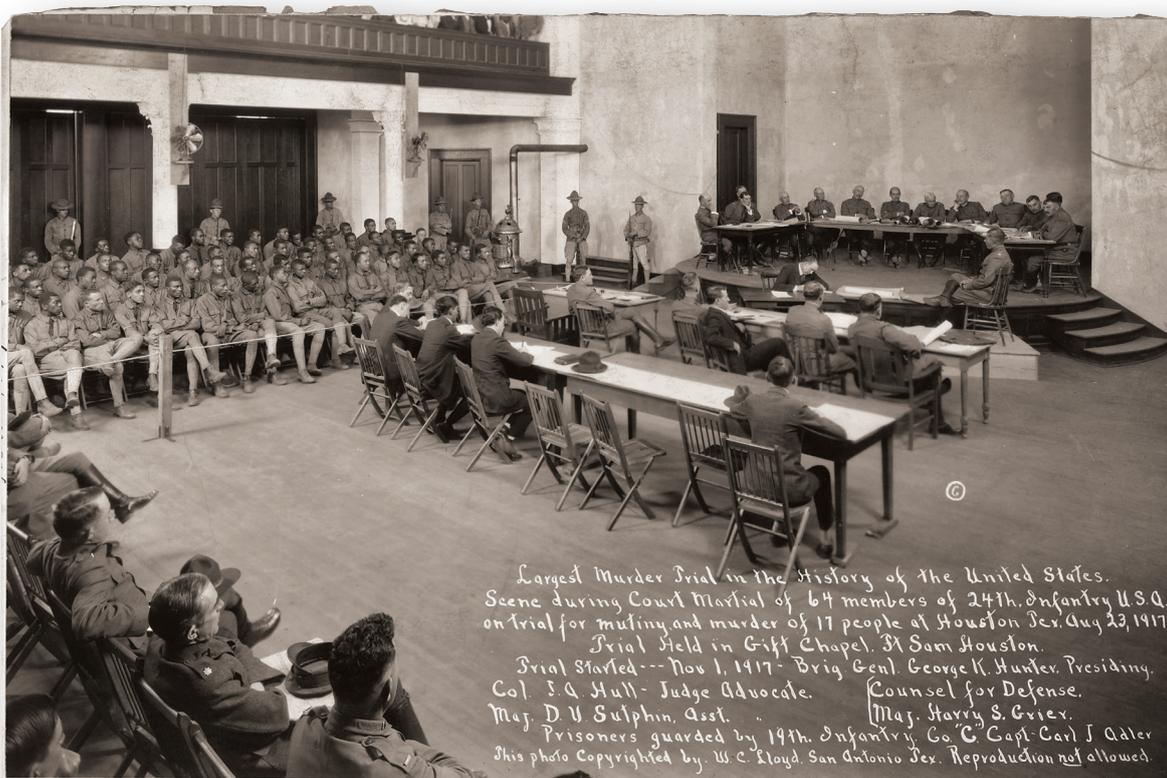
Guha Krishnamurthi and wife Charanya Krishnaswami, center, celebrate their wedding with Krishnaswami's parents, Sundara and Anusuya, left, and Krishnamurthi's parents, Manjula and Subramaniam, right.



**A Century After the
Largest Military
Criminal Trial in
the Country,
the STCL Houston
Community Fights
for Justice**

WRITTEN BY **LAUREN MCDOWELL**

ABOVE IMAGES: COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES | OPPOSITE PAGE IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES



At sunrise on December 11, 1917, 13 condemned men — Black soldiers of the Third Battalion of the 24th Infantry Regiment in the United States Army — were hanged near Salado Creek in Bexar County.

They were buried in unmarked graves, identified only by numbers corresponding with the order in which they were executed.

Just two weeks prior, those men had been convicted of insubordination, mutiny, murder, and aggravated assault for their role in violent confrontations with local police and civilians known as the Camp Logan Riots.

The trial that led to their execution would earn the infamous distinction as the largest single military criminal trial in U.S. history, leading to decades of criticism from members of military and civilian communities. This includes South Texas College of Law Houston Professor Geoffrey Corn, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army.

“The experience these men suffered, from being thrust into a racist environment, being humiliated by having to build facilities so white novice draftees could train to go fight in a war they would be excluded from; to a rushed and biased process that didn’t even meet the minimal standards of military justice fairness of their day, compelled me to do what I could...to expose the injustice they suffered and to develop a comprehensive narrative of events.”

Above: A courtroom photo depicts the scene during the court martial of 64 members of the 24th Infantry. The trial was held in Gift Chapel at Fort Sam Houston. **Opposite:** Forty of the more than 100 Black soldiers who were charged in the violent conflict often referred to as the Camp Logan Riots.

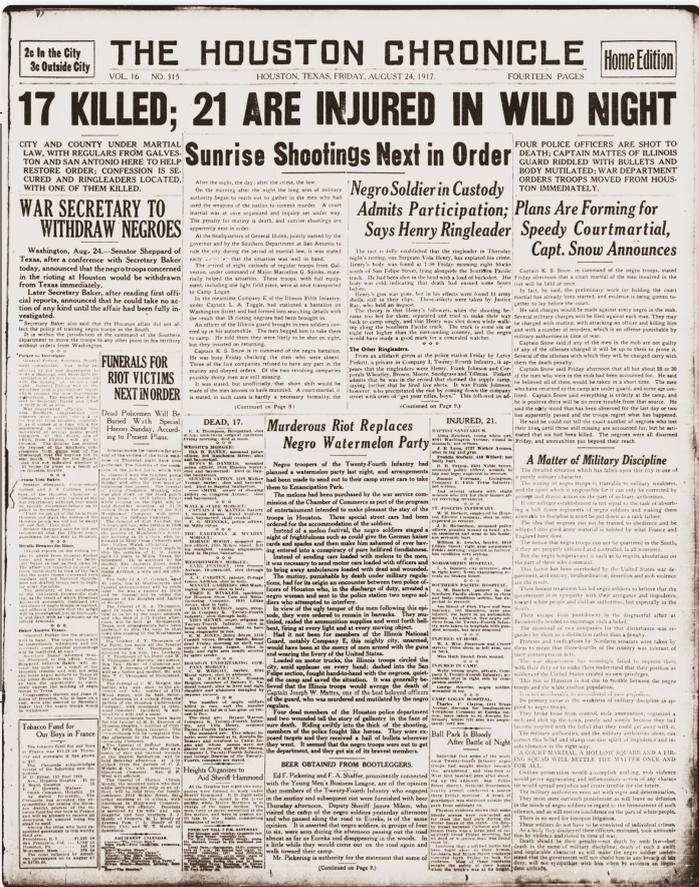
The first of three courts-martial, *United States v. William C. Nesbit*, took place November 1, 1917. During that trial, a single officer — not a licensed attorney — represented 58 of 64 soldiers; all pleaded not guilty. A month later, the court delivered five acquittals and 58 convictions, including 41 lifetime imprisonments and 13 death sentences. On December 10, 1917, the guilty findings and sentences were approved with no outside review of the case. Scaffolding was hastily constructed overnight, and the executions took place the following morning, with no prior notification to the prisoners or their families.

Seeking Justice in the 21st Century

Corn first became aware of the initiative to bring justice to the Camp Logan soldiers through Clyde Lemon, a Houston attorney and representative of the Veterans Affairs Committee of the local NAACP. When asked what drives his interest in the trials, Corn said, “Every JAG officer who learns of this event is stunned that such a defective process was used to try and punish these men, almost all of whom were among a very small number of Americans who gave years of honorable and courageous service to the nation as members of the regular Army.”

The path to restoring the soldiers’ honor felt like an essential obligation for Corn, who “believes passionately that every soldier deserves to be treated fairly during any disciplinary or criminal process,” especially if “bigotry or discrimination impact that fairness.”

As the complexities and scope of the project unfolded, Corn



The Camp Logan Riots

The Camp Logan Riots occurred on August 23, 1917 after a series of racially charged incidents and continued abuse of Black soldiers from the 24th United States Infantry Regiment by local police officers. The riot resulted in 17 dead, including four police officers, nine civilians, and two soldiers. Following the riot, military tribunals indicted 118 Black soldiers and found 110 guilty. Though two white officers faced courts-martial, they were released, and no white civilians or police officers were brought to trial.

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enlisted the help of STCL Houston librarians Heather Kushnerick and Monica Ortale in his research efforts, as well as military law expert Dru Brenner-Beck — also a retired lieutenant colonel. Corn calls Brenner-Beck “one of the finest lawyers I ever worked with during my Army career,” and said that “her devotion to the highest ideals of justice, and her love of the Army and its soldiers” made her an ideal sounding board for the project.

Now an adjunct professor at STCL Houston, Brenner-Beck oversees students in the Actual Innocence Clinic as they develop comprehensive records to support pardon petitions for the soldiers in partnership with Catherine Burnett, vice president, associate dean, and director of clinical programs.

Ashley Cromika, a student contributor on the project, has spent innumerable hours researching specific defendants — unearthing everything from their extensive military records to

letters they wrote to loved ones from jail cells.

“The details of this trial are gut-wrenching,” she says. “The riots happened right here in our city, and so many people don’t even know about it. Justice requires that we right these wrongs. These men, their families, and our country deserve at least that much.”

Corn and Brenner-Beck have not only expanded their team, but their pardon efforts as well — to include every convicted Camp Logan soldier, not just those who were executed. Accord-

ing to Brenner-Beck, “These soldiers were tried as a military unit, and the deficiencies in the process affected them all.”

The new scope was cemented at a meeting between regional NAACP representatives at STCL Houston in April 2019. The Fred Parks Law Library houses the most comprehensive

historical record of the events surrounding the Camp Logan riots, making South Texas a prime setting for the discussion.

Looking to the Future

Professor Corn has worked diligently to make the case known to high-level military connections. In one positive development, he connected with the acting General Counsel of the Army, Michele A. Pearce. Pearce expressed interest in supporting the cause and visited STCL Houston this fall to meet with students and faculty to review the project.

In another victory, Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy recently submitted a letter to the director of Veterans Affairs requesting placement of proper markers on the soldiers’ gravesites. Though Corn’s aim is for McCarthy to “order that all dishonorably discharged soldiers have their service changed to honorable,” the fact that the injustices suffered by the Camp Logan soldiers is now a focus of the secretary of the Army’s interest is encouraging.

While advocating for modifying all discharges to honorable, Corn and the legal minds at STCL Houston are also developing individual dossiers to support a pardon request submitted through the secretary of the Army to the president of the United States.

And as they continue their work, they are all aware that the road to justice is rarely quick, simple, or straightforward.

As Brenner-Beck says, “These courts-martial were legal, but they were not just. This effort is not simply an exercise in revisionist history. These courts-martial marked a salient turning point in the development of American military law, making the correction of the injustices in these trials even more imperative — it is never too late to right a fundamental wrong. These soldiers deserve no less from the Army and nation they served.”

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

WRITTEN BY LAUREN PATTERSON

This year marks the centennial of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, a pivotal moment in the country's voting history.

Over a century later, the pursuit and protection of equal voting rights for all U.S. citizens remains just as urgent, and the South Texas College of Law Houston community continues to build on a legacy of advocates, including those who fought for their own right to vote.

Women lawyers led on suffrage activism and advocacy

Women lawyers practiced law in the United States for decades before they could vote, and many took up the cause of suffrage with fervor in the earliest days of the movement. Lawyers like Inez Milholland and Lettie Burlingame were vocal suffragettes, and professional organizations like the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) and its predecessor, the Women's Lawyers Club, helped garner support for voting rights for women.

In Houston, the early 1900s saw a flurry of organizing, lobbying, and rallying for women's suffrage. The Houston Equal Suffrage League and the Texas Woman Suffrage Association (TWSA)¹

EQUAL VOTING RIGHTS

MILESTONES

- **1848** — The women's suffrage movement began at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York.
- **1869** — The first woman admitted to the bar in the U.S. was Arabella Mansfield in Iowa.
- **1870** — Ada Kepley became the first woman to earn a law degree in the U.S.
- **1872** — Charlotte Ray became the first African American woman to be admitted to the bar in the U.S.

paved the way for the 1918 law passed by the Texas Legislature, granting women the right to vote in primary elections two years before the federal women's suffrage amendment would pass.

Houston's own lawyer suffragette, Hortense Sparks Ward, was the first woman to pass the Texas State Bar exam in 1910 and helped enact the Married Women's Property Rights Law in 1913. She spearheaded the lobbying efforts for Texas' 1918 primary voting law and then led the charge to the polls as the first woman to register to vote in Harris County.



Hortense Sparks Ward

Progress is made but exclusion continues

The Texas Legislature approved the constitutional amendment for women's suffrage in 1919, becoming the ninth state and the first Southern state to do so. In 1920, Tennessee became the final state needed to ratify the 19th Amendment, at last giving women the legal right to vote across the United States.

But this was far from an arrival in the fight for suffrage for all women. Jim Crow laws and racist, xenophobic policies restricted voting access for African American women, women of color, immigrants, and Native Americans for decades. Threats of violence and discriminatory practices like poll taxes and literacy tests would not be deemed illegal until much later, with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

STCL Houston professor Sharon Finegan, who specializes in criminal law and teaches civil rights as part of the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project, believes "It's important to recognize the difference between the eligibility to vote and the ability to vote. They are not one and the same."

So, as we celebrate 100 years of women's suffrage, we also reflect on the role lawyers continue to play in the fight for voting rights across the country.

"Lawyers play a particularly crucial role in advancing voting rights, either by joining advocacy groups to lobby Congress or actually becoming members of the legislature to enact law that protects access to the right to vote," Finegan says. "There are also small actions, like getting certified to register citizens to vote, or volunteering to work at the polls as an observer to ensure that people aren't being turned away for improper reasons."

Members of the ACLU student chapter at STCL Houston recently engaged in one of the small acts of service about which Finegan speaks. The group organized a drive-through voter registration event in the law school's faculty and staff parking lot. Volunteer deputy registrars, all of whom are ACLU members, registered new voters and educated veteran voters on voting rights and procedures.

"Voting is central to the way our country works, and yet [voting laws] can be incredibly complicated," said Markia Bordeaux, current president of the ACLU student chapter. "As attorneys and future attorneys, we are uniquely empowered to serve our communities by sharing our time and the knowledge we have gained through our legal education and training."



Professor Sharon Finegan

Protecting the right to vote

Modern day forms of voter suppression like closure of poll locations in underprivileged neighborhoods, restrictive voter I.D. laws, and complex voter registration processes, alongside partisan practices like gerrymandering, work to disenfranchise citizens and jeopardize their ability to participate in our democracy.

"It's our duty to ensure that voting rights are not being abridged in overt ways, but also in smaller incremental ways that can have a huge impact," Professor Finegan stresses.

"As lawyers, we have both an ethical and a moral obligation to make sure that laws reflect the best interests of our citizenry. And we do that by making sure the population — the entire population — can vote for the representatives who enact those laws." 

- **1875** — In *Minor v. Happersett*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that the 14th Amendment's privileges and immunities clause does extend suffrage to women.
- **1886** — Lettie Burlingame founded the Equity Club for women law students and alumnae, the first professional organization for women lawyers.
- **1893** — Texas Equal Rights Association, the first Texas suffrage organization, formed in Dallas.
- **1899** — The National Association of Women Lawyers (called the Women Lawyers' Club at the outset) was founded.
- **1919** — The Texas legislature voted to ratify the 19th Amendment, becoming the first southern state to do so.
- **Aug. 1920** — The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified.
- **Nov. 1920** — More than 8 million women across the U.S. voted in elections for the first time.
- **1924** — Federal suffrage is extended to Native Americans of both sexes by an act of Congress.
- **1928** — Puerto Rican women won suffrage.
- **1944** — The Supreme Court declared the practice of excluding Black people from voting in the Democratic Primary in Harris County to be illegal.
- **1964** — Ratification of the 24th Amendment prohibited payment of a poll tax to vote in any federal election.
- **1965** — The Voting Rights Act was passed.
- **1971** — The 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18. In Texas, the requirement for annual voter registration was removed.
- **1975** — Congress amended the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by adding Section 203, requiring states to provide election and voting materials in Spanish and other languages.
- **1993** — The National Voter Registration Act passed, making voter registration available at the DMV and other public agencies.

¹ Renamed the Texas Equal Suffrage Association (TESA), and later became the Texas League of Women Voters.