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A law professor for the ages

BY JEANETTE STEWART, THE STARPHOENIX NOVEMBER 28, 2012

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Professor Signa Daum Shanks stands next to her Metis sash in her office at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon on November , 2012. Bridges Photo by Michelle Berg

Photograph by: Michelle Berg, The StarPhoenix

A hand-written note above Professor Signa Daum Shank's door says "Radical Hospitality."

It's not just an expression. She offers me tea, an invitation to her yoga class and a chance to sit in on a law lecture.

On an early Tuesday morning, the University of Saskatchewan professor heads to her first class, an 8:30 a.m. tort law class for first-year students.

"Had a late night? Had two late nights in a row?" she greets them, to laughter. It's the day of the American election and she asks her class for their opinion on the possible outcome.

She refers to each of her students by Ms. or Mr. and their last name. Those who come under-prepared are left high and dry as she asks her students to respond at random, testing their budding knowledge of legalese, teaching in a Socratic style of question and discussion.

Despite the early hour and the on-your-toes tension in the room, there's a lot of laughter.

One of Daum Shank's former students describes her as a "challenging" professor, but someone who creates a comfortable learning environment by asking questions and opening dialogue.

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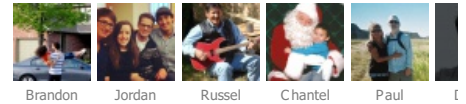
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“She expected us to do a great job and so we worked really hard,” said Cara Merasty, a U of S graduate now articling at a law firm in Prince Albert. “She had a really neat way of integrating different areas of law into the content we were learning.”

As she teaches, I check her out on Rate My Professor, a website that allows students to spark at and praise their professors.

Daum Shanks receives good ratings, with a few students complaining they have too much work in her classes.

“Test was super hard but if somebody came to class I think they’ll do okay,” comments one second-year law student.

Daum Shanks joined the U of S law faculty full-time in January, 2010. But her journey has been a long one. Over the course of a few interviews and a chain of emails, she reveals her academic life story, one marked with twists, turns and moments of synchronicity. Her quirky sense of humour bubbles up constantly; she refers to herself both as the “Eliza Doolittle of Osgoode Hall” and the “Metis Bridget Jones.”

One of her colleagues, Winona Wheeler, calls her the “most educated Native person that I know about.”

“She has four degrees and she’s working on another,” explains Wheeler, the current head of the Department of Native Studies at the U of S, and the first person to give Daum Shanks an academic job in the 1990s.

Wheeler commends her analytical skills and the broad range of knowledge she has.

“She’s able to draw from all of them, and create cogent, coherent stories. She’s very much an interdisciplinary scholar,” said Wheeler.

Daum Shanks’ journey through academia is a diverse one, but she attributes many of her successes to the idea that good things come from simply being herself.

“It’s been a lot of happy accidents,” she said.

Daum Shanks was raised in Saskatoon by her supportive single mother. An early interest in writing was nurtured by her high school teachers at Evan Hardy, who later went on to found ThistleDown Press. She says they made a big impact on her decision to pursue writing and academics.

“I was always really encouraged to be a writer,” she said.

Her mother suggested one story that illustrates her daughter’s willingness to follow her path as it unfolds in front of her.

During high school, a band conductor for the Saskatoon Lion’s Band asked Daum Shanks to play piano in the honours jazz group. They competed at Nationals, winning a silver medal. Daum Shanks was awarded “best improvisation.”

But Daum Shanks had never taken a piano lesson in her life. The conductor meant to pick another student but got the names wrong. Daum Shanks agreed to perform anyway. She taught herself.

When she received her first paycheque as a professor, she bought a piano instead of a car. She now uses her parking spot as a worm compost.

Over breakfast at the Park Cafe in Saskatoon, Daum Shanks explains how she found herself in law school at Osgoode Hall, and at 43, an associate professor at the U of S, still paying off her student loans. After earning her bachelor’s degree at the U of S, she went to Western for a Master’s in History, then worked for Indian Affairs in Ottawa before she

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decided to apply to the prestigious Toronto law school.

“I was the only person not from Etobicoke,” she said of her time at Osgoode Hall — an experience that proved both isolating and rewarding.

Her law school experiences include the King of Sweden judging her classes’ pumpkin carving competition, and rubbing shoulders with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada.

She was so nervous she told the Chief Justice “you must be important because I’m wearing nylons.”

After law school — where she received an award for Most Outstanding Graduate of her class — she worked as a Bay Street lawyer during her mid-’30s, an experience she recalls as full of “lots of navy suits and control top nylons.”

A Master’s of Law followed at the University of Toronto, and she began a doctorate in law when she realized her interests in history were calling again.

It was a point in which she had to assess her commitment to academics.

“This was where I found myself going ‘you’re 36-years-old and you’re living in a bachelor basement suite with wood panels and you’re okay with that? Shouldn’t you have a car or an RRSP or something?’ I was actually okay with that,” she said.

She found her focus on the history of Northern Saskatchewan, one that would act as evidence in law and illustrate the injustices created in the legal system when different indigenous groups are pitted against one another.

“I think when I was 20 I would never had said ‘I’m going to do a PhD in Saskatchewan history. It didn’t seem exotic enough or something. And now I think it’s the most exotic thing I could do, and the most important thing I could do,’” she said.

Her colleague Beth Bilson, a longtime faculty member and former Dean of Law, is excited about Daum Shank’s commitment to history, and welcomes her addition to the College of Law.

“You have to admire her energy,” said Bilson, who also works in the field of Saskatchewan legal history.

She sees Daum Shanks as an innovative scholar.

“She really does have a different slant on a lot of things. She doesn’t follow the legal traditional path on a lot of issues. I think it’s really interesting to see young scholars turning things inside out and not accepting the way they’ve been analyzed in the past,” said Bilson. She also commends her incorporation of her traditions into all the classes she teaches.

“It’s still not the norm in many classes, and it’s not part of the experience of many students to have that sort of relationship with a faculty member and have them try to live their culture in an environment that’s often seen as apart from cultural expression,” said Bilson.

As Daum Shanks explains it, she’s made a commitment to “wiggling in” traditional teaching along the way. At the end of each of her classes she hosts a feast.

“They seem like lots of work but they are worth it,” said Daum Shanks. She was on faculty at the University of Alberta’s department of Native Studies prior to joining the U of S, and began teaching Native Studies at the U of S as a sessional lecturer in 2000.

Her interest in activism has also led her to take on various projects of her own. During the 2011 federal election, Daum Shanks spent the afternoon in the inner city of Saskatoon helping people understand where they should go vote, setting up a booth on 20th Street West to talk to voters in a non-partisan way, helping them understand the process of voting. She's also found time to write into the Letters to the Editor section of the StarPhoenix on a few occasions, and was the focus of a Globe and Mail article on the subject of student loans.

One of her current research interests is the history of activism in the Canadian courts. She's about to publish a piece about the first indigenous civil litigant in Canadian history. In 1740 the indigenous woman argued in Montreal that she was not a slave. It's another example of writing those histories that matter.

"I think in law she should have won, but she 'coincidentally' disappears just before her appeal in front of judges that all have indigenous slaves," explained Daum Shanks.

For two years, Daum Shanks was also the leader of the U of S aboriginal moot court team. This was the first time I met Daum Shanks, and was immediately taken by the enthusiasm for the difficult task her students were facing in researching the rights of women murdered by serial killer Robert Pickton.

Graduate Merasty was a member of the moot team led by Daum Shanks two years ago and travelled with her to Vancouver to argue for the rights of the Carrier-Sekani women in a mock human rights trial.

After encouragement from Daum Shanks, Merasty also took part in the Osgoode Hall Aboriginal Intensive program and travelled to New Zealand to work with the Maori people.

Daum Shanks is happy about where she's ended up and the influence she's had on her students.

"Like Cara Merasty — she's articling now and she's had really, really long days, but just talking to her about the cases she's involved with already. It's so great to have a phone call like that, and I wouldn't get a phone call like that if I didn't have this job that makes me be in this building for 13 hours every Tuesday," she said. "It's such a pleasure to have a job I like, and get paid enough to buy groceries. I can't afford a car until I pay off my student loans. I don't want to say it all works out. It's just so nice to like what I'm doing, so I'd say that the hairiness of it has some really important moments that recharge me."

Merasty said she's happy to have a friend and a mentor in Daum Shanks.

"She always reminds me not to take everything so seriously. There's still more to work and research and things that can be approached in really innovative ways instead of the usual. I guess, thinking outside the box."

"Maybe scratch that," laughs Merasty. "Make the box more inclusive and open."

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