

CLEVELAND-MARSHALL COLLEGE OF LAW

Cleveland State University

To our Board of Visitors, Alumni Board, and Leaders-in-Residence,

At the outset, I want to thank you for your continued support over these past several months as well as this past week. To say that it has been a difficult and challenging time for our law school is an understatement, and I am expecting very challenging times ahead. Our fiscal, enrollment, and student employment challenges are very real, but that is a message for another day. This evening, I want to address the challenges that affect the heart, soul, and spirit that embodies the core mission of Cleveland-Marshall.

I am copying Associate Deans/Professors Carolyn Broering-Jacobs and Jonathan Witmer-Rich and my administrative assistant, Holli Goodman, because they have been my indispensable partners during this unprecedented time in the history of our country and our law school. I could not have addressed our significant challenges effectively without them and many other staff and faculty.

I acknowledge that most words seem inadequate at a time like this, but I want to keep you up to date on the message we have sent to our students, staff, and faculty over the past week. Whether it is dealing with a global pandemic that abruptly disrupts our way of life or a tragedy that triggers international anguish and outrage, I believe that it is better to err on the side of communicating with our law school community too much rather than too little. That's why this won't be the last time you hear from me about what has transpired in recent days and what we should do next.

Cleveland-Marshall's mission and motto is *Learn Law. Live Justice*. To live out that mission, we cannot remain silent in the face of the grave injustices of racism and violence against people of color. We must both speak out and take action. Moreover, as attorneys, we have a special responsibility to use our voices to understand the role of the law both in creating and exacerbating racism, and in working to effect positive change.

Last Saturday's 2020 Commencement was already historic and memorable because of the backdrop of the global pandemic, but it was made even more so in the aftermath of George Floyd's horrific death at the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, while three other officers watched Floyd plea for his life and did nothing to intervene.

I recently completed four years of service as a charter member of the Cleveland Community Police Commission, and I know that while we have made progress and that there are many police officers genuinely committed to bias-free community policing and racial justice, we have a long way to go to create a sense of trust between police and the communities they serve, particularly the African-American community. This is a link to a column I wrote several years ago in *Cleveland Magazine's Community Leader* about this issue. See [Culture of Trust](#).

The rage over the killing of George Floyd is well justified, as are the peaceful protests by many.

The senseless, counterproductive looting and destruction by some is not; the unacceptable violence overshadows and hurts a just and urgent cause.

We are heartbroken, outraged, and unsettled by the events of the past 11 days. I hope and trust that it will make our 2020 graduates even more determined to pursue our mission of "living justice." We charge them to use their legal education and law degree to advocate for justice everywhere, to fight against injustice anywhere, and to help heal our nation.

Below is what I wrote this afternoon to our students, staff, and faculty about last night's Cleveland-Marshall virtual Town Hall.

Last evening, over 50 of our students, staff, and faculty had a 90-minute conversation in what we called a virtual Town Hall about the pain, anguish, and outrage all of us are feeling.

We recognize that this has impacted our brothers and sisters of color in our law school community, especially our Black students, faculty members and staff in ways that those of us who are not Black or of color, cannot fully understand.

But we do know one thing. We are with you.

We thank each of you who participated. A number of our Black students described being devastated, overwhelmed, and exhausted. Some noted that George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery “could have been me.”

Our goal last evening was to create a safe space to share feelings and emotions without apology and to share ideas and recommendations for actions to be taken by our law school community in the short and long-term future. We are committed to creating a community where all feel supported and valued. I encourage our students, faculty, and staff to engage in difficult conversations on equity, diversity, inclusion, and racial justice with empathy. Let’s listen, truly listen, to the lived experiences of each other.

To our students: we value your voices—you challenge us to live up to our mission to not just “Learn Law” but also “Live Justice.” Today those words are a call to each of us—students, faculty, and staff—to use our voices and the power of our institution to accomplish lasting change to end racism and end police brutality against communities of color.

Everyone who spoke last evening emphasized that this must be more than just a moment. It demands sustained individual and collective action.

We commit to spending the upcoming academic year deepening our collective understanding, identifying possible solutions, and taking effective action. Early next week, I will be sending an initial list of concrete actions we intend to take over the coming days, weeks, and months. These actions will be just a beginning, and we will continue to actively engage with our students, faculty, staff, and alumni, to listen and together determine the actions we must take.

As James Baldwin stated, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Together we will face the racial injustice plaguing our society, and together we will pursue meaningful change.

Cleveland-Marshall’s Black Law Students Association (BLSA) sent a compelling message earlier this week, which I am attaching with this message. We are grateful for BLSA’s ongoing leadership in the Cleveland-Marshall community. As the BLSA statement so aptly put it, “the current state of America is not a Black problem. This is a problem that affects us all.”

I welcome your thoughts, recommendations, and ideas about how we should move forward.

Thanks.

My best,
Lee

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