



TOURO COLLEGE
JACOB D. FUCHSBERG LAW CENTER
Where Knowledge and Values Meet

Touro Law Review

Volume 22
Number 1 *New York State Constitutional
Decisions: 2006 Compilation*

Article 4

November 2014

In Memoriam: Dr. Deborah C. Hecht

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Recommended Citation

Morris, Jeffrey B. (2014) "In Memoriam: Dr. Deborah C. Hecht," *Touro Law Review*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/lawreview/vol22/iss1/4>

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IN MEMORIAM: DR. DEBORAH C. HECHT

*Jeffrey B Morris**

With a Ph.D. in English, Deborah Hecht held a staff position as Director of our Writing Center. While, technically, Deborah was not a member of the Touro Law School faculty, she was fully integrated into the life of the faculty and viewed as our colleague.

Deborah often said that I was the first member of the Touro faculty whom she met. That occurred because when she arrived for her interview with Professor Hazel Weiser for the position of Director of the Writing Center, Hazel was briefly tied up. Innocently walking along the first floor corridor, I was corralled, introduced to Deborah, and asked to keep her company for a few minutes. What good fortune for me! Those few minutes in my office talking about books and about writing began an amazing friendship.

What a wonderful event that day was for Touro. It is hard to imagine that any one of us would care more about Touro than Deborah. She loved her job—her involvement with students, faculty, staff, and making the Writing Center grow and become more and more useful to students. Deborah was fiercely proud of the Law

* Professor of Law, Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center of Touro College. This tribute is an expansion of remarks given at the memorial service for Deborah C. Hecht, March 8, 2006 and a brief statement contained in the student newspaper. Jeffrey B. Morris, *In Memoriam*,

Center, cared passionately for Touro's students, and devoted, not just great energy, but great love to the Writing Center.

That day was, I believe, a very happy day for Deborah as well. Coming to Touro at a turning point in her life, she was given something to build, an environment from which she could draw stimulation of all kinds, make new friends, and have the opportunity to earn respect—something she obtained early and never lost.

The Writing Center would be a place where Deborah not only worked with students on a one-to-one basis, but the place where she worked with her teaching assistants, for which she developed materials, corresponded with others, and which provided her a launching pad for communicating with writers and writing center directors all across the country.

Thus, the Writing Center gave her a new outlet to blossom as a professional and that she did with gusto. If sometimes she could overwhelm one with her enthusiasm for what she was doing, Deborah also inspired the rest of us to work harder with our own students.

Deborah both knew and didn't know the respect and affection she was held in by her colleagues, teaching assistants, and the students with whom she worked. Law faculty often come armed with critical and sardonic streaks, but I never heard a critical word or an inkling of doubt about Deborah or her work. Rather, all of us sent more and more students to her ever-open door.

One important aspect to Deborah's work as Director of the Writing Center was to prevent those who came to the Center from

THE RESTATEMENT, Dec. 2005, at 7.

feeling stigmatized and to dispel the notion that the Writing Center was a place for remedial work. One very productive way that she did this was to reach out to various constituencies. Her door was open to the students on Law Review, the offices of the Student Bar Association, faculty and alumni, and she insisted that the Center was open to those who were at any stage of their professional career. For many, it was hard to resist her romance with action verbs, emphasis points, ambiguous pronouns, modifier errors, and not to speak of the nefarious comma. As a result of the value of her work, an increasing number of students came to her door for workshops and one-on-one work. To meet the demand, she was forced to try to clone herself by employing teaching assistants and part-time tutors. She also developed an online Writing Resources Center, employing original materials she created, essays on writing, links to other sites, interactive grammar exercises, and book recommendations.

Part of the reason Deborah was effective as a teacher was that she was willing to share with all of us, faculty and students alike, the times where she gave in to the challenges writers face—the distractions, procrastinations, self-doubt—but also the pleasures of writing.¹ In *Mark Twain's Study*, she wrote:

Recently, I had rediscovered that the seasons of the year and the moments of the day were a sensual delight. Delight returned when my writing was no longer a secret, no longer something I did when everyone was asleep: I'd been submitting my essays and short stories to magazines and quarterlies and now

¹ Deborah C. Hecht, *Getting Started*, THE SECOND DRAFT, Dec. 2002, at 1; Deborah Hecht, *The Writers Life: Rejection*, WRITER'S DIGEST, July 1996.

some of them were published

. . . .

. . . My life began when I acknowledged my heart's most cherished hope and worked – in daylight, when the world was awake – to realize it. It didn't matter what anyone said or thought, not anyone: like the college itself, perhaps I could recreate myself.²

Both her fiction and non-fiction were published in journals from *The American Scholar* and the *New York Times*, to the *North Atlantic Review*, *The Nantucket Review*, *The Jabberwock Review*, even to *Good Housekeeping*.

Her work was moving, thoughtful, eloquent, and sometimes spicy. Take, for example, *Daisy's Stories*, published in 1992, where she wrote that “[m]y mother, who lives by the rulebook, cannot guess what it's like to balance a fragile happiness against the terrors that wait for a moment of loneliness or vulnerability.”³

While praising Deborah's work at the Writing Center, it is important not to forget what an able and interesting scholar she was and the effect of her professional life on her scholarship. An authority on Edith Wharton and her works, her contact with the law at Touro led Deborah to consider Wharton's interest in lawyers, their work, their impact, and their personalities. She delivered two fine faculty colloquia on these subjects and authored several papers. For those of us far from the concerns and patois of professors of English, these colloquia were fascinating excursions that led at least some of us back to 19th and early 20th Century literature. If we lacked the

² Deborah C. Hecht, *Mark Twain's Study*.

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background to judge her as a professor of English might, as lawyers, we had no problem admiring the precision of Deborah's use of language and the elegance of her presentations. Deborah was also interested in how a writer's reputation is created and altered after death by friends, lovers, enemies, and the press, and she was able to see this even in inaccurate jacket copies and denial of permission rights.⁴ She wrote that biography is "[d]ifficult enough even when practiced in good faith," but "when good faith isn't present, [it] can be among the most useful of weapons available to sink the reputation of an enemy."⁵

Deborah Hecht was a learned, thoughtful, interesting person, extremely well-read, and wise. But it was not so much these traits that led me to take the fifty or so steps from my office to her's to chat as often as I did. What led me there was her warmth and kindness, her supportiveness, her willingness to converse, and the quality of her conversation. That, for me, is the true void left by her death and I am not alone.

³ Deborah C. Hecht, *Daisy's Stories*, NORTH ATLANTIC REVIEW, 1992, at 194.

⁴ See Deborah C. Hecht, *The Poisoned Well: Percy Lubbock and Edith Wharton*, THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, Spring 1993, at 255.

⁵ *Id.*

CONFRONTATION CLAUSE

United States Constitution Amendment VI:

*In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to . . .
be confronted with the witnesses against him*

New York Constitution article I, section 6:

*In any trial in any court whatever the party accused shall . . . be
confronted with the witnesses against him or her.*

