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Harper was law school's first Black tenured professor

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Robert Berkley Harper, first Black tenured professor in the School of Law, died Oct. 12, 2021 at 82.

"Bob was a larger-than-life figure in the law school for many years," said his former colleague Arthur Hellman, now professor emeritus, who arrived at Pitt in the middle of Harper's first Pitt Law post as the school's assistant dean (1973-77). "He was one of the most engaged teachers we've ever had at the law school, because he loved being with students and talking to students."

Hellman recalled seeing Harper in the school's hallways, surrounded by debating students. "They'd follow him on the elevator to get up to the fifth floor," where faculty offices are located, and continue the discussion there. "For Bob, the class meetings were just the start of what he felt were his responsibilities as a teacher.

"He was something of a performer, always conveying ideas in a way that would help students understand them but also keep their attention," Hellman said.

"Bob was a very bright, big-hearted person," said another long-time colleague, Lawrence Frolik, now emeritus professor. "He cared about the law and he cared about people.

"Bob had an upper-level class in evidence and that class was always heavily enrolled," Frolik recalled — even though this course was not required and Harper could be tough on students who weren't prepared to respond in class discussions.

"When he retired, he was a loss to the school," Frolik said.

Born in the Hill District, Harper graduated in 1958 from Fifth Avenue High School as a member of the National Honor Society. He earned his undergraduate degree in education from Pitt in 1962; had a stint in the Army, including time in Korea as a first lieutenant; and eventually entered Pitt's law school, graduating in 1971. He worked for the city's police bureau as chief legal adviser before joining the Pitt faculty.

Hellman and Frolik both remembered Harper as a force for compromise in a profession trained to argue persistently for your own side. In committee meetings, Hellman said, "he was always focusing on the task at hand and pushing us to do it efficiently ... In faculty

meetings, he was always one to find the middle ground — to bridge the gap and allow faculty to reach a consensus.”

Relatively late in his career, Harper began a new focus on education law, which was rare at the time. This placed him greatly in demand at education conferences, Hellman said.

“He really did have a gift for taking complex legal topics and explaining them in a way that people without a legal education could understand ... without distorting them or making them simpler than they were,” Hellman said. “Bob found an entirely new audience for Pitt expertise ... In that sense he was an ambassador for the law school.”

Harper is survived by his brother Henry (Yvonne).

A memorial service will be held in March 2022 in Pittsburgh.

— *Marty Levine*

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