



# Shaking the Foundations

*Stanford law students organize inspiring progressive lawyering conference*

**Laura Elizabeth Weidman**

Most Fridays at 5:00 p.m., Stanford Law School is largely deserted. Students have hopped on their bikes and lugged their books home for the weekend, and faculty members are home with their families. October 5th was different. A few minutes before five, the law lounge was filled with students, faculty, attorneys and advocates mingling over wine and tortilla chips before heading off to the final panel in a day filled with presentations and spirited debate about progressive lawyering.

Completely student-produced and drawing almost 200 attendees from the Bay Area and across the country, the eighth annual Shaking the Foundations conference was one part information, one part inspiration and one part networking. The event is designed to encourage students to use their legal skills for social justice, and to network with public interest attorneys.

[Editor's Note: *As part of our approach to broaden the definition of what a plaintiff's attorney is, we have invited a young student, Laura Elizabeth Weidman, to report on the Eighth Annual "Shaking the Foundations" Conference put on by Stanford Law School. We hope to continue to publish articles by law students on a frequent basis. First, their enthusiasm is contagious and certainly brings back memories (at least for me) of how we, as law students, were searching for the best career path. This article also demonstrates the need for plaintiff's attorneys to reach out to new lawyers and even law students, encouraging them to take up the fight for individual rights. Plaintiff invites other law students to contact us with their ideas, upcoming events and stories for inclusion in future issues. — Donna Bader]*

"Our hope was that each conference participant would walk away with a deeper, more nuanced understanding of

some of the most pressing issues in the struggle for social justice, as well as new strategies to address them," said Larisa Bowman, a second year law student at Stanford and one of the conference organizers.

Judging by the buzz in the hallways, the organizers achieved their mission. First year Stanford law student Orion Danjuma was thrilled that Shakings had created a "forum for many of the crucial issues in law and society" that Danjuma said were missing from first-year curriculum classes. Stanford undergraduate Carmen Vice, who had heard about the conference via email, called it "One of the most worthwhile experiences I've had at Stanford so far."

The conference had begun earlier in the day with a luncheon keynote address by Ruth Gilmore, Chair of the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. Attendees arrived with burritos assembled from a make-your-own Mexican buffet and



grabbed seats in a large classroom, ready to learn over lunch.

Gilmore gave a powerful talk about the problems in the American correctional system, deploring the use of prisons as “all-purpose solutions to any problem.” Not content with simple reform, Gilmore described the prison system as an economically draining “negative infrastructure” that did more to harm than help communities.

“The only way to fix the system is to reduce it,” Gilmore said. She encouraged lawyers and law students to work on mandatory sentencing reform, act as legal advisors to activists, and advocate for fair outcomes in trials and in plea bargains.

Gilmore set the stage for a conference that encouraged participants to challenge the status quo. True to its title, *Shaking the Foundations* presented speakers who were not content to urge participants to call their local congressperson to nudge along the slow tide of progress that a functioning democracy affords. Instead, the conference was an intellectual call-to-arms for those who believe that the path to a just society requires advocacy that does not hesitate to challenge societal assumptions about our legal system and its ability to protect the rights of disenfranchised people.

Trina Eiland, a first-year law student at Stanford, attended a session on U.S. drug policy led by Tamar Todd, a staff attorney at the Drug Policy Alliance. “The workshop provided a fantastic overview of the current issues facing drug policy reformers,” Eiland raved. She left clutching a few business cards, including Todd’s. “I want her job,” Eiland gushed.

Next up was a workshop on capital punishment. Stanford’s clinical programs director, Larry Marshall, told his audience that anti-death penalty advocates needed to change public opinion by using the press to humanize death row inmates.

“A story is better than 1,000 statistical studies in shaping public opinion,”

Marshall said. Ty Alper, Associate Director of the Death Penalty Clinic at Boalt, agreed, and added that press advocacy was also needed to raise awareness about the uneven application of the death penalty and its disproportionate use against African Americans.

Hands shot up as soon as the speakers finished their remarks. “What would you do with \$10 million to spend on the abolition movement?” one student asked. Marshall and Alper replied that they would fight what they called “the culture of capital punishment” by raising public awareness about discrimination based on race and income. A third panelist, Scharlette Holdman, Executive Director of the Center for Capital Assistance in San Francisco, preferred to train advocates to research the lives of capital defendants, so juries and the public could understand the forces that had shaped their lives and landed them on death row.

“I was surprised by how powerful the panel was,” said Stanford first-year law student William Ralph. “It’s really inspirational to hear people discuss their life’s work.”

The closing keynote address was delivered the following day over gourmet calzones and brownies by Patricia Williams, author, columnist for *The Nation*, and professor at Columbia Law School. Speaking before a backdrop of sunlit trees framed by picture windows, Williams described how issues of race permeated American society. She contrasted the media’s coverage of Angelina Jolie’s international adoptions with coverage of a lawsuit filed against a fertility clinic when an artificial insemination procedure had mistakenly resulted in the birth of an African American infant.

Clearly a favorite with students, Williams created a palpable sense of excitement that left many inspired. “Now I know I want to be a civil rights lawyer,” one student remarked to another on her way out of the building. “I can’t wait.”

Stanford undergraduate student Carmen Vice may well remember the conference as the pivotal event that changed her career path from medicine to law. She came “to explore how lawyers effectively work to initiate change in both the local and international community.” She wasn’t disappointed. Vice hopes to spend her summer working with legal aid lawyers and pediatricians who work together to improve the health of poor children in San Mateo county — a program she heard about at the conference. She’s likely to be front and center when *Shaking the Foundations* returns next year.

Interested in one of the organizations specifically mentioned in this article?

- Pick up Ruth Gilmore’s new book, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*.
- Learn about the Drug Policy Alliance at [www.drugpolicy.org](http://www.drugpolicy.org).
- Learn about the Center on Wrongful Convictions at [www.law.northwestern.edu/wrongfulconvictions](http://www.law.northwestern.edu/wrongfulconvictions); the Center for Capital Assistance by calling 415.621.8860; and the Death Penalty Clinic at UC Berkeley at [www.law.berkeley.edu/clinics/dpclinic](http://www.law.berkeley.edu/clinics/dpclinic).
- Get more information on becoming a Legal Observer or a volunteer attorney at [www.nlg.org](http://www.nlg.org).
- Read Patricia Williams’ column, *Diary of a Mad Law Professor* in *The Nation* or pick up her highly acclaimed first book, *The Alchemy of Race & Rights*.

*Laura Weidman is working toward her JD/MBA at Stanford, where she is currently in her first year of law school. She hails from New York City and completed her undergraduate studies at Harvard. She plans to use her joint degree in the field of public interest, specifically in devising ways to leverage the private sector for the public good.*



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