

# New law school dean always had Charleston on his mind

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([http://charleston.net/stories/082104/hip\\_21gershon.shtml](http://charleston.net/stories/082104/hip_21gershon.shtml))

Their story began with a Charleston bar mitzvah brunch and a sister's voice on Donna Levine's answering machine in New York: "I met your future husband today. Call me for details."

That was 1995, when things weren't so obvious. Levine was an editor at Vogue, a poet and a recovering divorcee. "I'm so done with men!" she swore to her sister. What future could she possibly have with a soon-to-be-divorced law school professor from St. Petersburg, Fla.?

It all makes sense in reverse, of course. Maybe that's the only way things ever make sense.

But Donna Levine's sister, Julie Ellison, saw it all in that first glimpse: He was tall and handsome, though not self-consciously so, a man who carried himself with engaging manners and gentle humor. Intelligent, but not arrogant. And he had kind eyes.

You know. A mensch.

*Mensch*: In English, an upright, mature and responsible person. But the meaning runs deeper in Yiddish: It's a decent human being, a good person who always takes the high road. To call someone a mensch might just be the ultimate compliment.

That was Richard Gershon all over, and when Ellison looked at him that day she saw her sister's future life stretch out before her in happy tableau.

## WELCOME TO CHARLESTON

Fast forward to 2003, and it's Ellison on the phone again. Only this time the call is to Fort Worth, Texas, where Gershon has been forced out of his job as the dean of the Texas Wesleyan University School of Law.

"Alex Sanders is starting a law school," Ellison told her sister and brother-in-law. "I just read it in the paper."

It was almost too good to be true. Charleston had been atop the couple's list of places to live ever since their marriage in 1997. Only one thing kept them away: Gershon was a law school dean and Charleston was a city without a law school.

Still the city called to them.



GRACE BEAHM/STAFF

Charleston School of Law Dean I. Richard Gershon has presided over the creation of the city's new private law school since arriving here last year.

They had met here, and though Gershon grew up in Atlanta, his mother, Shifra Karesh Gershon, was a native Charlestonian of some standing. He had vacationed here as a child, had cousins here. Plus there was Ellison and her family.

And the timing? Amazing.

The newlyweds' move to Fort Worth in 1998 had been a happy surprise at first. People were welcoming, Gershon took over as dean within a year, and the fledgling law school made huge strides under his guidance.

But maybe it was too successful.

Texas Wesleyan was on probation, and one of the few places it could turn for easy cash was its fast-growing law school. In 2001, the university's new president siphoned off about \$1 million from Dean Gershon's school, a distinct no-no with its accrediting agency.

Gershon fought back, winning assurances that the diversion of funds would be a one-time event. But the next year arrived with similar budgeting instructions. He told the president he couldn't follow them, and that seemed to be the end of it.

It wasn't. On the first day of fall classes in 2002, the president showed up at Gershon's office and told him he had decided to "make a change" at the law school. Gershon was out.

"That was a negative thing, but the positive thing was that people understood it for what it was," he said. "No job is worth losing your in-tegrity over."

The school's alumni named their annual leadership award for him in tribute, but his support within the law school meant little in his dispute with the university.

"I would say that Richard was right, but if you approach things differently than your boss, that really doesn't make any difference," said Bill Bleibdrey, vice president for budget and finance at TWU. "Richard might have been, in a sense, a sacrificial lamb to bring in a new order."

So thanks to that little Texas soap opera, when Charleston went out looking for its first dean in the summer of 2003, Gershon just happened to be in the market. It was love at first sight.

"If we had drawn him up, he couldn't have been more perfect," said U.S. Magistrate Robert Carr, one of the law school's founders. "I've said that with his relationship to (legendary University of South Carolina Law School professor Coleman Karesh, Gershon's first cousin once removed), with his personal connections to Charleston, with his professional experience, if we were too stupid to hire him, we shouldn't be undertaking this enterprise."

But Gershon had two offers: one from Charleston, the other from a law school in California. On the pro side, Charleston offered family and community. On the con side, "There actually *is* a law school in California," Levine reminded him.

In the end, her question framed his decision. "If you don't go to Charleston and it's a huge success in five years, how will you feel?" she asked. "Absolutely miserable," he replied. That settled it.

Just 13 months later, the 47-year-old Gershon is two days away from presiding over the Charleston School of Law's first day of classes. To hear him talk about it, you'd think the guy had won the lottery.

## **SOUTHERN YIDDISH**

When he was 8, Richard Gershon noticed a familiar brown face leading two children out of the examining room at his father's office. The man was the Rev. Martin Luther King, and his children were Dr. Nathan Gershon's patients. Richard Gershon remembers his father explaining to him how they needed to keep that information private to minimize the risk to the King family.

Atlanta in the 1960s was an odd place. Gershon grew up in a mixed neighborhood that was largely Jewish, but for the most part the city remained ethnically and racially divided. King led the civil rights movement from the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the city's Jews, excluded from whites-only clubs, joined their own country clubs based on the type of synagogue they attended. It was a "Driving Miss Daisy" world in a Jim Crow era.

But if the Gershons were Jews first, they were Atlantans second. "My father spoke Yiddish with a Southern accent," Gershon says now.

That identity would be challenged in 1968 when King was murdered in Memphis. The event still resonates in Gershon's life. "For me, even at 11, I recognized his greatness and what he represented. He used the rule of law to effect change. And yet there were people who were glad about it. You could still hear people say openly on the street that they were glad it happened.

"I was someone who never thought I would live anywhere but Atlanta, and here was this great Atlantan who had done so much. It upset me. The law should belong to everyone."

The seeds of his law career had been planted, but they were slow to bloom. Gershon went through his early years as "a fat kid," a sports enthusiast with modest talents, an average student who underachieved in the classroom. He showed up for the ninth grade in the worst shape of his life and was taunted by the other high school students.

So Gershon decided to change, riding his bike to and from school, skipping lunch to play basketball. The fat kid became lean, confident and more athletic. "I think you re-engineer your life, but it's part of a natural progression. You decide you don't want to feel that way. You have to do it for yourself. You can't get it from your parents."

Gershon attended the University of Georgia, bagging a political science degree with a pedestrian 3.0 grade-point average, working summers as a counselor at a Jewish camp and earning money during the school year as a radio reporter covering the Atlanta Flames hockey team. Hockey, with its blue-collar athletes and work-ethic style of play, would be the great passion in his life for years.

He found a new passion when he enrolled in law school at the University of Tennessee. The classic underachiever was fascinated by his subject and focused on the career ahead of him. Gershon spent two successful summers clerking at an Atlanta firm and had assurances of a job there after graduation. He was engaged to a girl he had met while working at summer camp, and the table of his life seemed practically set.

It might have stayed that way, too, if the commercial real estate market hadn't tanked in the early 1980s.

## **A NEW DIRECTION**

The partners in the firm knew for months that they were too cash-strapped to hire Gershon, yet no one told him. It proved a valuable, if unintended, lesson.

"A lot of times we're afraid of just laying things on the table," he said, leaning forward on a stackable chair in his office at the Charleston School of Law on Mary Street. "I've learned that facts are facts. Trying to hide negative information from students or faculty is just really not a good idea. Adults tend to handle negative information well if you just give it to them."

Gershon graduated from law school with honors in 1982. In 1983, he earned a graduate degree in tax law from the University of Florida, took his first job as a law school professor and got married. The couple moved from Ohio to Florida in 1984 when Gershon landed a job at Stetson University's College of Law in St. Petersburg. The man who had set out to be a practicing attorney had found his niche as a teacher.

He progressed rapidly, accepting promotions to associate dean in 1988 and full professor a year later. He and his wife raised two children in Florida, and Gershon took up running ó a 20-mile-a-week habit that continues to this day.

Much of his life seemed to be thriving, but his marriage wasn't. The couple separated in 1994, and their divorce became final in 1996. "I don't think we were fully formed as people," Gershon said. "It lasted for a long time, but it just didn't work."

When his ex-wife moved with their children to Jacksonville, the last ties holding Gershon to Tampa Bay began to fray. But there was the matter of this New York poet and magazine editor, Donna Levine, to resolve.

Levine describes their first date as "very Eastern European." She flew down from New York to Charleston. He came up from Florida. Her sister and brother-in-law accompanied her. He was chaperoned by a cousin and the cousin's wife. After introductions, all six went out to T-Bonz. The couple-to-be didn't get off on their own until late, when Richard followed Donna to Sullivan's Island for a walk on the beach.

They did an awful lot of walking that weekend and left with plans to meet again. Thus began a long-range courtship that involved lots of weekend flights, but vague parameters. Levine left New York for a job as an editor at a Charleston publishing company in 1996, but the move was unrelated to Gershon. Neither wanted to rush into anything, but what, exactly, were they? "It's hard to know when you only see people on weekends," she said.

The answer came later that year when Levine met Gershon in Atlanta for his father's funeral. They faced each other and asked, "What do we really want?" The answer was each other. Levine relocated to Florida and they married a year later.

"Richard has made me feel in our life together that any good thing is possible. And this is a new thing for me. I think that's a very special gift."

## **COMING HOME**

It's early August, and Gershon's office at the Charleston School of Law looks like a regular office except for the fact that everything that should be on the walls is actually just leaning against them, as if some artificially heavy gravity has caused the room to sag. Gershon takes calls at a simple desk with a flat-screen monitor. A bobble-head doll of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist nods gravely from the windowsill.

Gershon's unassembled office and unpacked belongings make for an informal scene that probably wouldn't surprise Jake Schrum, a former president of Texas Wesleyan. "There are a lot

of overly serious people who become deans," said Schrum, now the president of Southwestern University. "Richard Gershon is not one of them."

His staff echoes those sentiments, describing a boss unencumbered by the trappings of status. For instance, not many law school deans also teach classes. Gershon makes a point of it. Ask him what he does for a living and he calls himself a teacher ó not a lawyer, not a dean.

Marta Borinsky is a 27-year-old admissions counselor at the school, but less than a year ago she was a high-energy Washington, D.C., attorney with Enron litigation on her resume and a six-figure annual income. Her first career didn't make her happy, but something about the thought of joining a startup law school in Charleston did. Borinsky's introduction to Gershon was a phone call early in the process, back when she was deciding whether to take such a big career risk at such a huge pay cut.

"I was just shocked by how kind he was and how down-to-earth he seemed. My experience with the dean of my own law school was that he was so above me. Dean Gershon treated me as an equal."

Gershon makes no apologies for trying to create a supportive environment. He is more likely to talk about teamwork than competition and says he doesn't generally lose his temper unless he's confronted with a bully.

It's a laid-back style that has gone over well in Charleston, said Alex Sanders, a former state appeals court judge and College of Charleston president who may be best known nationally as a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate in 2002.

"He was just a person I instinctively liked," said Sanders, the school's chairman. "Since he's been here, he has far exceeded our expectations. He's been the best thing that's happened to us, and I think the community has taken to him just like I did."

Not bad for a guy "from off."

"I really do feel fortunate," Gershon said. "People have been very welcoming, very open to the idea of the law school and to Donna and me. Charleston, despite its reputation as a closed city, is really more welcoming than people give it credit for."

For Ellison, life has improved immensely since she first spotted Richard Gershon sitting at a table full of older women nine years ago. Not only did he marry her beloved Donna, but their new family settled just seven minutes away from hers. A third sister, former Washington attorney Nancy Zisk, also has joined the law school faculty and now lives across the street from Gershon and Levine.

The three sisters from New Jersey have eight children among them, 10 on those weeks when Gershon's older children come to visit. It's a big, lively family with ties and connections that sprawl across James Island and the Lowcountry.

But how did she *know*?

"There was just some gentle, inner quality about Richard that just hit me. It was weird, because Donna is the same way," Ellison said, thinking back to the beginning, trying to remember what triggered that first phone call, marveling at the ways life unfolds. "You could be with him, and you just felt like you were at home."

Now, thanks to a few breaks ó not to mention an unexpected law school ó they finally are.

## **I. Richard Gershon**

**BIRTH DATE:** July 11, 1957.

**FAMILY:** Wife, Donna Levine; children, Michelle, 15; Benjamin, 10; Claire, 6; and Eve, 3.

**MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION ABOUT THE NEW LAW SCHOOL AND YOUR TYPICAL ANSWER:** Why hasn't there been a law school in Charleston sooner? In 1825, the Forensic Club was the first law school in the South. It was in Charleston. The Charleston School of Law traces its roots to the Forensic Club.

**EXPLAIN "ICING" IN HOCKEY:** It's really a simple rule, and hockey is really a simple game. Icing is intentionally shooting the puck from your team's half of the ice (your side of the red line) past your opponent's goal line. The idea is to keep teams from dumping the puck down the ice to take pressure off of the defense. If you ice the puck, there will be a faceoff in your end of the ice.

**WHAT WOULD BE YOUR VOTE FOR THE CHARLESTON SCHOOL OF LAW'S SCHOOL MASCOT?** Mockingbirds. Atticus Finch is such a great character in "To Kill a Mockingbird." He epitomizes for me what a lawyer should be. He represents the goals and values of our law school.

**THE BEST PART OF LIVING ON JAMES ISLAND:** I love crossing the James Island connector on my commute each day. The view of the harbor and the marsh is beautiful.

**THE MOST SURPRISING THING ABOUT MOVING TO YOUR MOTHER'S HOMETOWN (SO FAR):** I always knew my mother as my mother. It is great meeting people who grew up with her in Charleston. I have learned a great deal about her since I moved here. She was a special person, and there are so many people here with fond memories of her.

**THE BEST QUESTION YOUR CHILDREN HAVE ASKED SINCE YOU GOT HERE:** We took our 3-year-old daughter, Eve, to a RiverDogs game. It was the first baseball game she had ever attended. As we were driving to the park, she asked, "Am I going to play in the baseball game?"

**THE GREATEST SPORTS FAN MOMENT OF YOUR LIFE:** About a week before we moved from Florida to Texas, Donna and my friends at Stetson Law School in Florida arranged for me to throw the first pitch at a Tampa Bay Devil Rays game. It was a complete surprise. Donna pulled off the surprise even though she was doing most of the packing for our move, and Claire was only 2 weeks old.