

Making a serious impression

County native Karen Lott graduates first in her class at UM Law School

By **CHRISTINA STEUBE** *University of Miss. School of Law*

OXFORD - Leakesville native Karen Lott is the 2020 recipient of the Robert J. Farley Award for Highest GPA at the University of Mississippi School of Law.

Lott has always been passionate about education. Growing up in Leakesville, Lott lived next to the local library where she would read as much as she could. Her passion for reading and learning continued, and that passion led her to complete law school at the top of her class.

In high school, Lott worked with in the office of a local real estate attorney, Cheryl Pierce. Lott has known Cheryl Pierce and her husband, Randy Pierce, who is a former Mississippi Supreme Court Justice and current director of the Mississippi Judicial College, who also teaches at UM Law, most of her life. It was the Pierces who first introduced Lott to the idea of a legal education.

"I've watched Karen grow up. She has always been an exceptional human being," said Randy Pierce. "Having taught many of the students in Karen's law school class, I know how talented this group is. What she accomplished is incredible.

"Karen is a product of my hometown and the Greene County public school system. She is an inspiration to many people, especially in her community. Her hometown loves her and is proud of her."

After high school, Lott attended Jones College on scholarship and was a member of the JCJC Honors College. She spent the next two years at the Mississippi University for Women, where she majored in political science.

"It was a small liberal arts setting that really helped students build confidence," she said. "It was a wonderful choice for me, and I had such great professors there."

After MUW, it was decision time for Lott. She wanted to pursue law school, but she also thoroughly enjoyed her time tutoring others as a college student.

"I was torn between law school and teaching but ultimately decided I should try teaching first and then I could always go to law school later," Lott said.

She applied to Teach for America and spent two years teaching at Canton High School, followed by two years teaching in Leakesville.

"Teaching really changed my life," Lott said. "I'm still in touch with my former students and I'm so very proud of them. It was such an honor to teach alongside the educators that taught me as a young girl."

Lott's time in the workforce as an educator helped her prepare for law school. It also helped hone her own skills as a student. She knew she wanted to stay in Mississippi for her legal education, and UM Law's social justice programs, like the MacArthur Justice Center, made it a perfect fit.

Lott also credits her work experience for the early start to her success in law school. "I treated it like a job. In my first year, I would get to the law library at 7 or 8 a.m. and work until 5 p.m., with classes in between," she said. "In comparison to teaching junior high, it was kind of a break. Law school was tough, and it sounds cheesy, but there were days I would drive up to the building and just be so excited to be there."

Lott's goal during her first

semester was to finish in the top 10% of her class. She studied hard, but the exams provided a more challenging hurdle than anticipated.

"The tests were really hard, and as soon as I finished the first semester, I just hoped to finish in the top third or half of the class," she said. "Grades came back, I made all A's and I thought to myself 'someone got this wrong. I'm not going to tell anyone, but this isn't right.' When it happened the second semester, I realized it wasn't a fluke."

The pressure increased for Lott, because now she aimed to finish what she started.

During the first year of law school, students are not involved in any extracurricular activities to allow time to adjust to the rigors of law school. As many students join organizations in their second year, the balance between involvement and studying can be difficult to attain.

"It's like a pie-eating contest - you win the award, and the award is more pie," she said.

During her second year of law school, Lott was in a leadership role with the Public Interest Law Foundation. She was also a member of the Moot Court Board, where she competed in the National Entertainment Law Competition, and she traveled to compete with other institutions in delivering oral arguments.

"Karen has always stood out as a student. You can tell how engaged and thoughtful she is about the material," said Stacey Lantagne, Associate Dean at UM Law and Lott's Moot Court coach. "My impression of her was reinforced once I began working with her on my Moot Court team. The entire team did a tremendous job dedicat-

ing themselves to the problem with energy and enthusiasm."

Following the competition, Lott became a research assistant for Lantagne.

"She honestly did a better job researching my scholarship than I would have," Lantagne said. "I will miss so much her willingness to go above and beyond in every assignment, just for her own intellectual curiosity. She not only excels in what she has been asked to do, but also in what you didn't think to ask her to do but should have, and that is a rare talent that will serve her well in law and life. And on top of all of this, she is one of the kindest people I have ever met."

In her third year, Lott continued to be involved with PILF and Moot Court. She also served as Executive Notes and Comments Editor for the Mississippi Law Journal. She used her teaching background to help her peers write law journal articles. In addition, she served as a research assistant for UM Law Dean Susan Duncan on the topic of the rise of women deans in law schools.

"She is an excellent writer and had great substantive ideas on how to improve the paper," Duncan said. "To me, she is a model leader - inspiring, energetic, committed, and always trying to make the world better with her talents. She is one of the kindest and most thoughtful people I

know, but she's also fiercely determined and focused. I can't wait to see what the future holds for Karen."

Lott plans to take the Tennessee Bar Exam and will aim to be licensed in both Tennessee and Mississippi. Over the next year, she will serve as a law clerk for Tommy Parker, U.S. District Court Judge for the Western District of Tennessee. Lott has also accepted a position with Baker Donelson, which she will begin upon finishing her judicial clerkship.


"I couldn't have done this



KAREN LOTT

without the support of my family, my fiancé and the amazing faculty and staff," Lott said.

"Everyone at the law school really cares about students, and I didn't have a single bad experience during my time there."



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GCHS Graduate Olivia Eubanks is shown with her aunt and local pharmacist Kayla Dobbins