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**Ruthann Robson: CUNY
Distinguished Professor**



Ruthann Robson: CUNY Law's New Distinguished Professor

By Emily Sachar

An Illinois lesbian had been sentenced to die for murder. The prosecution argument: the woman was a ruthless man-hater who had lured the victim home from a bar with the explicit purpose of killing him. Ruthann Robson, professor of law, was working in her office overlooking the gardens of CUNY Law School in 2002 when an alumna, Joey

was to prove that the theory of the prosecution was wrong. There were many other factors involved in the killing that had not been brought to light at trial. Homophobia absolutely contributed to a woman being sentenced to death."

A Summer Honor

Now, Robson, 51, is in the limelight following the summer 2007 announcement that she has been named University Distinguished Professor by the CUNY Board of Trustees. Robson thus becomes the only Law School faculty member to hold the designation.

"It feels great to have my work recognized in this way, and it's so important for the Law School because we had no one on the faculty with the designation, and yet we have so many people here doing work worthy of it," Robson said. "Also it has always meant a great deal to me that CUNY has never said: 'Don't do this sort of writing and research; it's too

risky.' The word on the street used to be: 'Don't mention sexuality until you get tenure.' That turns out to be wrong."

In fact, Robson sought early tenure based on lesbian legal scholarship. She earned tenure at CUNY in 1993, three years after her arrival to the Law School, having just received her LL.M. from the University of California at Berkeley

(Boalt Hall) and done the seminal work for *(Out)Law*, a scholarly work that addresses legal implications for lesbians on everything from crimes of lesbian sex to immigration and lesbian legal workers.

Law School Dean Michelle J. Anderson concurs in noting the importance of Robson's new designation. "Ruthann has always engaged in ground-breaking work," Anderson said. "Having the Board of Trustees recognize her brilliance and the importance of her scholarly contributions by designating her a Distinguished University Professor is a gold star for both her and for the Law School."

The designation, adds Associate Dean Mary Lu Bilek, who has known Robson for her full tenure at CUNY Law, has meaning to the world-at-large and to CUNY Law internally. "It's recognition from the University that Ruthann is a scholar with a national reputation. We knew Ruthann was forging new paths and creating a whole new area of scholarship. It was clear that she was the national leader in doing so and that her scholarship was changing the way other scholars thought and talked about the law and also was helping others to change the law to promote social justice, especially for the LGBT community. Internally, what is especially meaningful to us," Bilek added, "is that Ruthann is the consummate professor and colleague, and the University has recognized that, as well."

Law and Literature

In fact, for nearly 20 years, Robson has made queer law, the interpretation and study of law as it pertains to lesbians, gay men, and other sexual minorities, the centerpiece of her scholarship. In addition, she is a fiction writer who has published two novels and three works of short fiction, most with lesbian themes. One of her books, *Cecile*, is assigned in many women's literature courses. She also is a poet with yet another book, *Masks*, to her credit; it was named one of the best poetry books of 1999 by *Library Journal*. And she was named a 2007 Fellow in Nonfic-



Robson enjoys a light moment.

Photo by Chris Rottler

Mogul (Class of '87), working at the People's Law Office in Chicago, phoned seeking her help. Would the law professor write an affidavit arguing that prosecutorial bias contributed to the defendant's conviction? Of course, Robson replied.

"The issue wasn't whether the woman committed the killing," the professor in queer legal theory said in a recent interview with *CUNY Law*. "Rather, the point

tion Literature by the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her legal publications, in law journals, anthologies, periodicals, and encyclopedias, number nearly 100 and include three non-fiction books.

Law and literature? "For me, they both come from this place of wanting social change and wanting to affect the way people move the social justice agenda forward," Robson says.

Robson also has used difficult life experiences as inspiration for writing. In "Notes from a Difficult Case," Robson wrote an award-winning essay about her experience facing liposarcoma, a rare cancer of the tissues. "What for me is especially striking in 'Notes' is Ruthann's honesty in registering her frustration with the formal terms of law and medicine, which are neither graceful, supple, nor humane, and her willingness to translate those terms into language that is more resonant and resilient," says Professor Andrea McArdle, director of legal writing at CUNY Law.

Love of Teaching

While reticent to speak of her own family relationships, Robson talks openly of her current and former students, her grading philosophy, and her role as founding co-adviser in 1995 of *The New York City Law Review*, CUNY Law's legal journal, devoted to the CUNY Law mission of social justice. The volumes of every edition since its inception share a prominent shelf in Robson's light-drenched office with a bottle of sea salt, an old

copy of Black's Law Dictionary and copies of dozens of publications written by members of the Law School faculty.

In fact, faculty have been Robson's students, too, as she has been instrumental in establishing mentoring programs to enhance their opportunities for published scholarship. "She's as concerned with others as she is with herself," says Professor Shirley Lung, who teaches a variety of courses at CUNY Law. "She's been very generous with her time and experience, giving wonderful guidance to others in getting an article conceived and going through the journal and publication submission process."

Robson's current and former students say they are deeply moved by her designation as Distinguished Professor. Mogul, the Chicago civil rights and capital defense attorney who turned to Robson when she was defending lesbian defendant Bernina Mata, said in a phone interview that she remembers well her time studying under Robson. "Ruthann has profoundly affected both my legal work and my work for justice," Mogul said. "She is an inspirational professor and an inspirational theorist who has blazed a path for advocating on behalf of lesbian, gay and queer individuals."

For her part, Robson says mentoring others is one of the most rewarding parts of her work. "With teaching, you assist people, as you would assist clients, and you also watch people grow," she says. "We have so many alums out there doing

great work, the sort of work I would do. In fact, if I had 100 lives, I would like to do many of the things our students do."

New Goals

As a new distinguished professor, Robson says she has two pressing agenda items. One is to organize an event or discussion each semester at the Law School with faculty and two distinguished professors from other fields outside the School hooked to a particular class topic. The first event will be held in early November and be devoted to a conversation about poverty and class.

Second on her list of to-dos is to work within CUNY to better understand the standards to earn the distinguished professor designation and to work to get more Law School colleagues designated.

As to her own work, Robson says she is always looking to write about subjects about which she can't find sufficient information to read. And she says she'll continue to ponder the headline issues of the day. Should gay marriage, for instance, continue to dominate the queer agenda?

"In the law, there are always new things that shake things up, that shake me up, that make me wonder," Robson says. "I can't envision that I'll ever be bored." On the contrary, she merely wishes, she says, for one more of those 100 lives.

For more about Ruthann Robson, visit her Web site: www.ruthannrobson.com

Robson Joins Elite Cadre of Distinguished Professors

Ruthann Robson joins 130 other distinguished professors among the 6,100 full-time teaching faculty at the City University of New York. That puts her among just 2 percent of her colleagues. She was one of seven who received the designation by the Board of Trustees in June 2007. Eight individuals were nominated.

Robson is the only professor at the Law School to hold the accolade currently. However, early in the Law School's history, Howard Lesnick, one of the School's founders, had been named a distinguished professor.

A CUNY Distinguished Professor is an exceptional scholar with an international reputation for scholarly and/or research excellence, according to Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost Selma Botman.

The number of Distinguished Professors is limited to 175 across the University under the terms of the collective bargaining agreement with the Professional Staff Congress, the labor union that represents more than 20,000 CUNY faculty and staff.

For more information on CUNY's Distinguished Professor program, visit: www.cuny.edu/dp

-Emily Sachar