

Tulane law professor connects classroom legal theory to Carnival tradition

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Tulane Law professor Sally Brown Richardson started a Carnival tradition more than a decade ago when she first hosted a Mardi Gras law-themed walking tour on the Wednesday before Fat Tuesday. (Photo by Alina Hernandez)

Who is liable if a parade goer is injured by a throw? Are ladder manufacturers responsible for users who ignore their warning labels?

Every Mardi Gras season, dozens of law students and other legal enthusiasts discuss and debate questions like these as they walk down St. Charles Avenue, hours before the krewes of Druids and Alla roll on the street.

Sally Brown Richardson, the A.D. Freeman Professor of Civil Law in the Tulane School

of Law, leads the group, which has grown to more than 100 in recent years. For over a decade, she has hosted the walking tour that serves as a crash course in all manner of legal issues surrounding Carnival season.

“It gives students the opportunity to really engage and think about law in a different manner,” said Richardson, who guides tour attendees through scenarios ranging from attempts to trademark the iconic Mardi Gras bead dog to whether the laws of donations or the concept of occupancy should dictate who owns a Muses shoe.

The tour mirrors the Socratic seminar-style of learning that takes place in a law school class, with strong audience participation and dialogue.

“Students will absolutely be called on during the course of the walking tour, just like they're in a classroom,” said Richardson, who added that students often bring their class notes with them to consult.

But Richardson's students are not the only attendees. What began as an idea floated by her class years ago has turned into a community affair, with alumni and even parade-goers joining in. The tour itself turns into a spontaneous parade.

“We have people with zero connection to Tulane or the law who are on the route every year and will yell out ‘Professor!’ when they see the group coming,” Richardson said. “Every year, we’ve picked up random parade-goers who can hear me talking and are intrigued enough to join the tour.”

Richardson said the memorable examples she discusses on the tour and the rituals they prompt make abstract concepts tangible for students.

“Ladders are supposed to be six feet back from the curb, and they never are. But inevitably, when we get to that part of the tour, somebody who is six feet tall in the group will go and lie down on the ground and measure,” she said. “It becomes quite interactive in that regard, which is always a lot of fun.”

Richardson loves getting to know the students better in a setting outside of a lecture hall. And as the class walks down the neutral ground under oak trees strewn with beads, they come to understand the one-of-a-kind learning opportunities they have as Tulane students in New Orleans, she said.

“It's a great place to go to school, and it's a great environment to be in,” said Richardson. “It's a fun way to get students out to see aspects of the city that they would have no idea about.”

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