Wayne Law Dean Jocelyn Benson appointed to Southern Poverty Law Center board

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Wayne State University Law School Dean Jocelyn Benson, an expert on civil rights law, will be the newest member of the Southern Poverty Law Center Board of Directors.

Founded in 1971 by civil rights attorneys Morris Dees and Joseph Levin Jr., the center is internationally known for tracking and exposing the activities of hate groups and for launching lawsuits to fight hate and bigotry and seek justice for the most vulnerable members of society. The center also provides educators with free resources to teach children to embrace diversity.

Benson was chosen for the appointment by the center's leadership in consultation with the board, which votes on new members.

The recent appointment, which is for a three-year term that is renewable twice, brings Benson full circle.
"She first came here straight out of college as an unpaid intern, and then worked for us," said Penny Weaver, longtime public affairs coordinator with the center, which is in Montgomery, Ala.

Benson worked as a waitress to support herself so she could continue to volunteer at the center, Weaver said. "I've known her ever since then," Weaver said. "She begged us to let her volunteer."

After graduating with a bachelor's degree from Wellesley College, Benson moved to Alabama to work full time for the center, investigating hate groups and hate crimes. It was the work of the center that inspired her to go to law school in the first place, she said, so she could make more of a difference in the nation's civil rights issues about which she was - and still is - so passionate.

Benson clerked for Judge Damon J. Keith on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, and that experience, too, helped fuel her passion for civil rights law.

Prior to serving as dean at Wayne Law, she was an associate professor of law and associate director of the law school's Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights. In that capacity she created the Michigan Allies Project, an effort designed to track hate incidents throughout Michigan and provide legal support for victims.

Her areas of expertise include civil rights law, education law and election law. She is widely quoted on those subjects in local, regional, national and international media.

Benson also is founder and executive director of the nonpartisan Michigan Center for Election Law, which hosts projects that support transparency and integrity in elections. In addition, she is founder and president of Military Spouses of Michigan.

She earned a master of philosophy degree from Oxford University and law degree from Harvard Law School.

Photo: Jocelyn Benson