



(Saying Goodbye to Dean Ryan)

AN ORAL HISTORY

STORY BY LORY HOUGH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSUE EVILLA



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HE DATE WAS JUNE 10, 2013.

The campus was slow and quiet, the way it usually is a couple of weeks after graduation. But in the back corner of Gutman, something interesting was happening: Harvard President Drew Faust had just called an impromptu reception to introduce the school's new dean, Jim Ryan. As Ryan's family stood to his side and staff and faculty gathered holding champagne flutes, Faust talked about the new dean's academic virtues, including his scholarship around equality and school desegregation and his tenure as associate dean of the law school at the University of Virginia.

Ryan, who had been quietly taking it all in, laughed and shook his head when Faust also joked that a former colleague at the University of Virginia had likened Ryan to a superhero. When it was his turn to talk, he continued the joking, saying that while he had big shoes to fill with Kathleen McCartney's departure, he was "at least as Irish."

And with that, the Ed School learned what kind of dean they were getting. A sharp mind and a subtle wit. The kind of dean who would, during his five years at Harvard, push the community to fulfill the promise of diversity and give commencement speeches that referenced casino tour buses, Dr. J, and a failed science experiment as a kid that led to setting a field on fire.

Now, as the academic year ends, Ryan is saying goodbye to the Ed School to return to the University of Virginia as its ninth president. *Ed.* magazine talked with some of the many people that Ryan has influenced during his time at Harvard about first impressions, one-liners, and the Boss.



DREW FAUST, PRESIDENT OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY: During the initial search, I'd heard very wonderful things about him from people, and yet when the committee was looking at information about him, they were puzzled. They said this guy's a lawyer and went to law school. Well, let him come and speak to us. So he came for a visit, and people were just so won over by his powerful commitment to education

and by his winning personality. He became a clear favorite candidate.



NONIE LESAUX, PROFESSOR AND ACADEMIC DEAN: I was on the search committee. His commitment to addressing issues of inequality came through in spades as genuine.



DAPHNE LAYTON, SENIOR ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ALUMNI RELATIONS: I liked him instantly; I remember feeling a tremendous sense of relief when I met him because I could see that he'd be someone I could enjoy working with. At the gathering in which Drew introduced him to the community, I remember watching him while Drew went on about his many impressive qualities as a teacher, as a scholar, and as a person. He kept scratching his head, which is an endearing habit that he has, in a way that signaled that all these accolades made him slightly uncomfortable. But the most amazing part came when he addressed the room, with his characteristic humor and humility, and took on the questions everyone had, which were "who am I and what on earth am I doing here?" It was completely disarming. At the same time, his personal story is powerful, and he connected it to HGSE in a way that was both affirming and inspiring. I think after that moment the whole school was pretty much eating out of his hands.

FAUST: He arrived just as the campaign was starting. This was a somewhat awkward time to arrive as a new dean when you're supposed to be raising money in a very vigorous way, but you don't know any of your alums and you're just beginning to know the school. The Ed School had its campaign launch on a beautiful fall day. We were all in this tent in Radcliffe Yard, and Jim got up and gave a speech that was so hilarious and winning and powerful. I was sitting with Yo-Yo Ma, who had agreed to perform at the launch, and I don't think he'd ever met Jim before, but he was dazzled. He looked at me and said, "This guy is so special."

LESAUX: I also thought he was someone who was exceptionally thoughtful and a good listener in conversations.



LIZ CITY, ED.M.'04, ED.D.'07, SENIOR LECTURER: That first summer, he met with as many faculty as he could. What I remember from our lunch was that he really was such a good listener. This was my first real impression of him — what an amazing listener. I somehow told him my mom died when I was a kid. This wasn't coming out of left field, but it's not usually something I would share with a dean during our

first conversation. With Jim, it's okay to venture into odd places in the conversation that you might not with a person in a powerful position.

FAUST: Early on, I began having conversations with him. I remember one in particular over dinner at my house. We started talking about our families. He told me this extraordinary story about looking for his birth mother. He was in the middle of the process. He hadn't yet found his mother. He found the file, and Catholic services was going to start looking. For the rest of the spring, I was so involved in the saga. Every time I talked to him I'd say, 'Now what happened?' Of course, he found his mother; he united with her and found he had this whole other family. It was such a wonderful tale. And he's so funny about it. He said when he met his mother, he looked at her and thought he was looking in the mirror at himself wearing a wig.



MATT MILLER, ED.M.'01, ED.D.'06, ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING: Every meeting or conversation with Jim involves a moment of bursting out laughing. Even in the most tense and high-stakes situations, Jim finds a way to make me smile. All of the best stories, though, are ones I'm not sharing.

LAYTON: One of my favorites was the first faculty meeting of 2017, which took place in early Febru-

“HE REVELS IN HEARING THE MEANINGFUL DETAILS OF DAILY LIFE — MY NEPHEW JACOB’S SLEDDING ADVENTURES IN OUR BACKYARD — AND I CAME TO REALIZE THAT JIM UNDERSTANDS WHAT ACTUALLY MATTERS IN LIFE: OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE.”

MATT MILLER



ary. It was the first meeting since the presidential inauguration, and Jim opened things up by commenting that he should address the elephant in the room. Many people were struggling with how to make sense of things, feeling like the world was upside down. After going on like this for a minute or two, he caused the room to explode in laughter when he paused and said, “I’m talking, of course, about last night’s Super Bowl game,” which the Patriots had won in a stunning come-from-behind victory. As a New York Giants fan, it was a tough one for Jim to swallow.

CITY: Part of the way Jim is funny is with one-liners. Our preferred way to have a meeting is to go running. We were out running in Lincoln, where we both live, and we ran by a bunch of cows, which isn’t necessarily unusual in Lincoln. But then we turned the corner and saw a robot on the trail. Without missing a beat, Jim said, “That’s Lincoln for you. You have your cows, and you have your robots.”



KATIE RYAN, STAFF ATTORNEY AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL AND JIM’S WIFE: Most mornings it is Jim’s job to get our daughter Phebe on the bus for school. This often involves the two of them waiting at the end of our driveway for some minutes. The road is a busy one at 7:30 a.m., with commuters, parents driving their kids to school, a school bus or two, and neighbors all passing by. Jim is generally out there in either some odd-looking running outfit or some version of his PJs, waiting with Phebe. The best part of this little routine is that Jim dances and sings while waiting, oblivious to the people who are driving by watching. Phebe acts mortified but, most mornings, gets on the bus with a smile.

LAYTON: Shortly after his book *Wait, What?* was published, Jim did a book talk at the Harvard Coop. The dean’s office planned a “surprise” party for him after the talk. But then Monica Shack clued me in that Jim was in on the surprise, and that it was actually a surprise party to thank Matt Weber and Meredith Lamont for the roles they played that eventually led to the book. Meredith thought her job was to get Jim back to the office. After the talk was over, Jim texted Meredith and Matt to suggest they go out for a drink — knowing that she was worrying about how to get him back to the office, where a bunch of people were hiding in the dark. He felt pretty proud of himself, pulling off this little prank. He’s very competitive.



MATT WEBER, ED.M. '11, DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY: Right before we walked into what we thought would be Jim’s surprise book launch party, he pauses in front of the door, wryly smiles, and whispers, “You thought you were surprising me? I’m

actually surprising you.” To which he then bursts open the doors of the dean’s office to a full suite of revelers yelling surprise, including colleagues, faculty, friends, my parents, wife, and infant daughter. The depth of this man’s generosity extended to repurposing a party that rightly should’ve celebrated him into one of gratitude towards two of his employees. It was as selfless as it was sneaky.



KIM BRIDGES, ED.L.D. '18: He’s definitely generous. I initially met Jim in Virginia, when he was at UVA Law School and had written his first book, *Five Miles Away, A World Apart*. In the book, he uses a Richmond school for a case study. I was the school board member who represented that high school. I called him at his office, and I think he picked up the phone. He invited me to meet, to talk more, so I went to his office and we chatted for two or three hours. He didn’t know me from Adam or Eve but was so generous with his expertise and his time.



DOMONIC ROLLINS, SENIOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION OFFICER: Jim wins people over by demonstrating a genuine care about them. I remember early in my time at HGSE, Jim would make it a point to ask me how I was doing, and he really meant it. I watched this care and concern about me show up in each of our one-on-one meetings by his remembering specifically something that was going on in my life and asking me about it. Whether that was a pending vacation with family or some big talk I was about to give, he would remember to ask.

MILLER: Absolutely. As part of the dean’s office, there was no major occasion in my life that Jim and his incredible right-hand “dean-whisperer” Monica Shack didn’t recognize. Book publication — surprise toast! Wedding — quick get-together in the dean’s office! Jim always asked me — always — how each visit of family members to Boston or trip to see out-of-town family had gone. And he revels in hearing the meaningful details of daily life — my nephew Jacob’s sledding adventures in our backyard — and I came to realize that Jim understands what actually matters in life: our relationships with people.

K. RYAN: That’s why it’s no surprise to me that personal stories are often the basis for Jim’s graduation speeches. Jim is a storyteller and has been as long as I have known him. He comes from a family for whom stories live on and on. The same stories get told year after year at Thanksgiving, at New Year’s, at weddings, at funerals, and they honestly never get old. They make everyone laugh and are a way of bringing a multigenerational family together at times when the lives of individuals are often going in so many different directions.

So, for Jim, I think telling stories about himself and his family is second nature. It is certainly, very often, a way to make people laugh, but I think it is also a way to invite people into his world outside of deaning and find connections.

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Over time, many found that Ryan had high expectations for himself and others.



BRIDGET TERRY LONG, PROFESSOR AND FORMER ACADEMIC DEAN: Jim is a perfectionist. He expects it of himself, and so this also carries over to others. That makes for an invigorating environment where you are constantly getting better and sharpening each other. I loved it! Absolutely loved it, and I've worked long enough to realize that such a work environment, led from the top, is rare.

LAYTON: He is a genuinely warm, loving human being, and he's fun to be around, but that's not the same as being easy; in fact, he can be quite challenging. You really have to be on your A game with Jim. He is uncompromising about how he wants to do things, demands a very high level of quality and execution, and has strong opinions about details large and small. Also, if you disagree with him, he will wear you down with inexorable logic and cogent argument, and, though it pains me to admit this, he's usually right. But on the other hand, if you screw up, he will point it out in a matter-of-fact way that isn't personal. And he is very forgiving and generous with credit and praise.

LONG: It's important to have an environment where it's safe to take risks and missteps aren't held over your head for long. Working with Jim is an excellent example of a learning environment. Also important has been the fact that the best idea carries, regardless of who it comes from. That puts the sole emphasis on figuring out what the best thing to do is and not being too concerned about who said what.

CITY: I've had major support from him, but also major disagreements. He'll tell me when he disagrees with me, which it's both respectful and helpful. He's a straight shooter.

MILLER: I reached a new depth of trust and respect for Jim in those times when I disagreed with him, and sometimes strongly disagreed with the premises on which he was basing a reasoned decision. I was always able to disagree agreeably with Jim.

CITY: He's also really great at asking the right questions, at putting his finger on the essence of the thing that needs to be asked. People forget that lead-

ership isn't just about having answers — it's about the right questions.

BRIDGES: We see this in class, with students, when he uses the Socratic method, always asking questions. When he teaches, he brings deep subject knowledge, but he also really wants to hear students' perspectives on something that he is the expert on.



MATTHEW SHAW, ED.M.'14, ED.D.'16, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY: I never took a class with Jim, but he graciously served on my dissertation committee. Jim is one of the sharpest interrogators of method and impact around. I won't share specific comments on my draft papers, but I will say he easily found points of logic I had hoped to obscure and asked complex questions of law that continue to motivate my work on law and minoritized groups. The incredible thing about Jim is that he is kind and generous in his questioning, no matter how direct it might be, and he invites dialogue.

BRIDGES: That makes sense. He has high expectations for himself and also his students. And they rise to the occasion. It was fun to watch students come up with increasingly thoughtful answers. He brings out the best in you.



RICH FROST, ED.M.'17, FORMER TEACHING FELLOW: Another reason that students respected him was that he didn't give off the picture of a cautious leader trying to please a thousand constituencies. He really put students first and was unafraid to demonstrate moral leadership when it really counted. I still remember his email in the aftermath of the travel ban: "We are a strong community — stronger, I am sure, than what I see as an irresponsible and legally dubious Executive Order." Especially given his legal background and expertise, students appreciated him taking an unambiguous position on an issue that really impacted a lot of their lives.

LONG: I recall the announcement about the United States barring entry to individuals from certain countries in fall 2017. We all jumped into action. I remember drafting emails and taking calls from a children's birthday party that Sunday in the rush to

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DREW FAUST

respond. Through it all, Jim was clear on the stakes, had some thoughts about the policy implications and options, and was quick to make sure our community, both at the individual level and in terms of the larger messaging, knew that we had his support and his action.

LESAUX: He's a dean, but he's also a scholar grappling with issues. He never comes off as if he has the answers. He's a very approachable human being. There's not a lot of psychological distance between him and others. It's not an agenda on his part. It's a commitment to progress.

LONG: It's obvious that Jim is whip-smart. He can do mental gymnastics over the most prepared opponent when it comes to questions of the law and most education policy. You know when he is listening closely that he is about to simplify the most complex issue or question into a clear sense of what's true, what's right, and what should be done next. It is both his intellect and moral compass together that have set him apart. And those qualities were incredibly valuable during the election season and early days of the new presidential administration. This was a time of shock with unexpected proclamations and policy changes from Washington, and it seemed as though the rules were all being rewritten under us. Jim's steady resolve about our core mission and clear thinking about what we could do

as a school were, and continue to be, comforting and reassuring during these turbulent times.

CITY: Jim supports the things he thinks are right, even if it gets challenging or hard. Even if he's hearing negative things from faculty or students, if he thinks it's the right thing, he has your back. That's really important.

FAUST: I should say something we probably all take for granted: He is super smart. I've seen him make intellectual arguments that are just searing in their insight, but he's also a person of enormous heart. So that combination of intellect and heart is a very special one.

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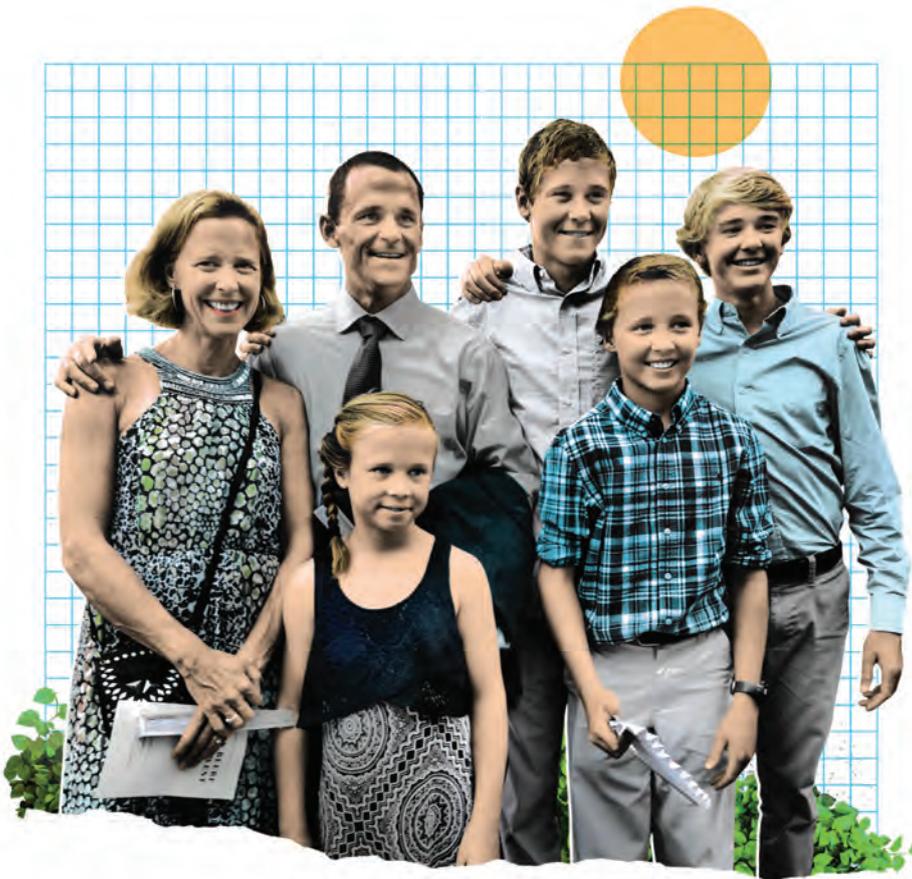
Ryan wrote in his second book, Wait, What?, that he came to the Ed School without much of a vision. Many felt he undersold his plans.

LONG: I believe Jim when he says he initially did not have a vision, but I know he had a belief. He came to the Ed School with purpose and faith that education can change the world. And he took us at our word that we wanted to use our talents to contribute to improving education.

LAYTON: I think in many ways Jim embraced the direction in which HGSE was already headed and then built on it. He inherited a school that was in a very strong position and had already worked through a lot of questions about its identity as a professional school with a primary mission of having an impact on education practice and policy. He embraced programs like the Ed.L.D. and resurrected Usable Knowledge. He agreed that building our online and professional education programs was going to be critical.

LONG: In the early days, I remember him meeting with various members of the community. From all accounts, he was getting to know us, and I think that was because his vision was based on elevating people. While he could have focused his plans on the institution or programs or buildings, he instead based it on people and community. He didn't say this explicitly, but a running theme has been to help people do their best work and thereby help the school to have a greater impact.

ROLLINS: He trusts and believes in the team. On the face, it would seem like every leader would trust and believe in their team, but often they don't. And as a result, second-guessing, micromanaging, and circumventing become the norm for that leader even though that's not their intention. Jim creates space for the team to see initiatives and projects



through, and trusts that the team will shepherd the interests.

LAYTON: He certainly moved us in new directions, too: recommitting HGSE to leadership in teacher preparation, most visibly through the Harvard Teacher Fellows Program; making serious commitments to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion; investing in our capacity to innovate in learning and teaching through the creation of Associate Dean Matt Miller's new role and the establishment of the Teaching and Learning Lab; and, most ambitiously, setting us on the course of re-envisioning master's education — not just for HGSE, but potentially as a model for other education schools and other organizations that prepare educators.

LESAUX: He didn't necessarily have a vision, but he had a mission. In many ways, he's really taken seriously our dual challenge: to both generate new knowledge driven by today's pressing problems and questions, and also use that knowledge in ways that will truly change education, placing that research at the core. His vision has placed that dual challenge in the best way possible.

ROLLINS: Jim's clarity about the significance of diversity, equity, and inclusion has certainly made my job easier. One can imagine that even in the most liberal environment, people still scrutinize diversity, equity, and inclusion. Jim's candor and honesty regarding HGSE's role in preparing and educating professionals to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in all facets of the education sector has made it easier for me to ask, push, critique, and advocate for some of the changes we need. At some point, Jim said that we at HGSE are about preparing anti-racist educators. For me, in my work, that's powerful.

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Although Ryan hasn't quite left yet — he leaves this summer and starts at UVA in August — there are many things that will be missed.

LAYTON: What I think I will miss the most is the palpable feeling he created that HGSE was about to take flight. He just created this sense of audacious potential and aspiration, which was both infectious and inspiring. I hope that HGSE will hold onto that in the years ahead.

LONG: What I will miss most are the kind and caring parts of Jim. From day one, Jim was clear that his family is his ultimate love and that at times, they would take precedence over school business. But his acknowledgement about the importance of family was not only for himself; he also respected that in others. I've had countless conversations with him

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LIZ CITY

about navigating parenthood. I figured he — as the father of four kids — has some expertise to share, and that has served to be true. While working together closely for four years, he has certainly witnessed the good, the bad, and the funny in my family life, and I don't think there is anyone my kids love more at Harvard than Jim Ryan. When visiting the dean's office, they would march directly into his office and start with a long list of questions and stories about recent activities. Jim was always game to play along, and he even proudly displayed in his office an art project my younger son made for him. My kids request playdates at his house because Jim's whole family has welcomed them from day one.

CITY: I remember that first winter he was here. We had many, many feet of snow. One day we got 17 inches of snow. I had a three-year-old, I was eight-months pregnant, and my husband was out of town. I was trapped at home. I pinged Jim. I was stuck and could I pay two of his sons to come over and shovel? He showed up with three sons and four shovels and the four of them shoveled me out. They wouldn't take the money. The fact that I was confident enough to ask him and the fact that he came over says a lot.

FAUST: We talk a lot about animals. He had three of his animals die this year. I told him the best solution was to get a new puppy. He went out and got a new puppy, and then Santa went out and got another puppy for Christmas. We began our meeting today with him showing me a video of his daughter reading a letter from Santa saying, “Some Christmas presents shouldn't stay too long in the sleigh, so I left this one in the garage.” Phebe goes and finds the puppy and starts weeping, and I was crying. A lot of heart.

WEBER: I was at an epic Bruce Springsteen stadium show at Gillette, and my phone buzzed. It was an hour into the show and a slow song was playing, so I thought it okay to check. It was an email from Jim with just an attachment, a photo of Bruce at the very same concert. I wrote back with an accompanying photo from my seats, a stated hope for some particular Bruce songs to be played, and a suggestion to maybe tweet about being there. A few songs later, my phone buzzed again. From Jim: “U got *Rosalita*. Don't work; enjoy. Bruce can't be tweeted anyway.” Jim Ryan is not just our boss but THE boss — the timeless rock star of Appian Way.