



**NCCentral**  
UNIVERSITY

School of Law



## *Terris Riley*

**Hometown:** Dillon, South Carolina

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Law school was never in the cards for me, or so I thought. In 2017, after a series of life events, I began to seriously consider law school. I was 43. I spent the next 18 months studying for the LSAT, digging through decades of files and reading all I could on what the process would be like for a non-traditional student. I applied to 24 law schools and was accepted at 6. My husband drove me from city to city to visit different schools. On March 24, 2019, we walked through the doors of North Carolina Central University School of Law. I immediately knew this was it—this was the place for me. (I am a PROUD PBAP ALUMNI—it was a thrilling experience!)

At the age of 45, I relocated to North Carolina and began my law school journey on June 25, 2019, with Dean Kia Vernon and Article 2 of the UCC. After the first assessments, I decided to ditch law school. I packed up my car to come home—I told my family, “these people are crazy.” The thought of having to explain my decision to my advisor, Professor Mary Wright, I had an abrupt change of heart. My 2nd semester was off to an enthusiastic start... until the pandemic swept the nation. In the midst of this unprecedented global lockdown, my brother passed away unexpectedly. This was a huge blow. We were not allowed to visit him in the hospital. We never got to say goodbye. My professors and Deans supported me through this.

The isolation took its toll, and I felt my family drifting apart. My children were in SC. I was in NC, expecting to return to campus in the fall. I survived an entirely virtual 2L year, but my marriage did not. After my divorce over the summer, I was determined to give up. For some, divorce comes with grief. Grieving the loss of my brother and my marriage, battling the Covid-19 virus, not once, but twice—among other changes that come with age, I came to the end of myself. Despite my greatest efforts, I could not see a path forward. Once again, my law school stepped in to pull me back, push me up, and quieted my distractions so I could focus. They ignored all of the background noise. They ignored the sirens and lights. They silenced the turmoil and required me to focus. Pretty soon, I found myself able to ignore the turmoil, too. I recall Dean Vernon sternly saying, “Ms. Riley, listen to me. You didn’t get this far, to get this far. We’re finishing this and there will be no further discussion.”

Graduating is bittersweet for me. On the one hand, it means I finished what I started—in spite of the circumstances. On the other hand, it means saying “so long” to my leaders who have seen me at my worst, yet still required my best. It means saying “see ya later” to my Legal Eagle family and the safety of the nest I’ve grown to appreciate so much. After I pass the “little quiz in July,” I actually have to be a lawyer and do lawyer stuff...for real. The only thing that gives me solace is that I know I am an Eagle and I know I am well-prepared. Experience has taught me that nothing in life is perfect, but North Carolina Central University School of Law and the brilliant Deans, Professors, and Staff are, indeed, perfect for me.