

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 6, 2021, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Devah Pager was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **DEVAH PAGER**

BORN: March 1, 1972

DIED: November 2, 2018

Devah Pager was renowned for her research on hiring discrimination and the consequences of mass incarceration for the previously incarcerated. As Ta-Nehisi Coates remarked at a memorial event in 2019, Devah's work was revelatory in its ability to pierce through the veil of U.S. racial inequality through scientific rigor that generated incontrovertible evidence consistent with the lived experience of the disadvantaged. Devah's scholarship set a high standard for the social sciences through its seemingly effortless combination of creativity, rigor, relevance, and accessibility. To her colleagues and students, she was a role model—not only in terms of her brilliant research but also her lasting impact on public policy, her unwavering integrity, and the genuine joy and enthusiasm with which she embraced teaching, friendship, family, and life itself. At Harvard, Devah was Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at the Kennedy School, Professor of Sociology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Susan S. and Kenneth L. Wallach Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and director of the Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy.

For her dissertation at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Devah decided to conduct an experimental audit study to assess hiring discrimination against African Americans and applicants with a criminal record. This was an ambitious undertaking, requiring funding from multiple institutions and an enormous amount of planning and coordination—far more than is typical for a dissertation. But abandoning a course of action simply because it was overly difficult was not in Devah's nature. Undeterred, she sent four male college students to pose as applicants for entry-level jobs in Milwaukee: one African American pair and one white pair. The students were trained to interact with employers in a consistent manner and assigned comparable education and work histories. Each week, the members of each pair rotated which member presented themselves as having a criminal record.

The findings were ground-breaking. Devah showed that applicants with criminal records were substantially less likely to receive callbacks from employers, providing the most robust evidence to date of discrimination against the formerly incarcerated. Equally important, she demonstrated extensive racial discrimination by employers: African American applicants

without a criminal record were less likely to receive a callback than white applicants with a criminal record. Her findings were published in an influential *American Journal of Sociology* article and later a monograph titled *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration* and she was awarded the ASA Dissertation Award from the American Sociological Association. She went on to replicate and expand this research in a follow-up audit study in New York City, which she designed with her colleague, friend, and collaborator, Bruce Western. The results further strengthened the conclusions of the Milwaukee study—this time including not only white and African American but also Latino testers—and supplemented them with more extensive qualitative data on the racialized processes by which employers screen applicants and channel them to job opportunities.

The clarity of Devah's thinking is evident on every page of her numerous publications. It is not often that an article section entitled "Appendix A: Methodological Concerns" receives perennial rave reviews from graduate student readers, but Devah's does. In it, Devah outlines with laser-sharp precision every possible concern a reader might have about the study's conclusions and then systematically explains why none are likely to undermine the core findings. Such transparency and fearlessness were among the hallmarks of her work. It was through the steadfast pursuit of socially relevant scientific facts—discovered through meticulous research design and not simply assumed—that Devah achieved great professional success.

Beyond the walls of the academy, Devah's findings were quickly noticed by policymakers. They were cited by Howard Dean during his 2004 presidential campaign, helped shape the Second Chance Act of 2007 to help the formerly incarcerated enter the labor market, and informed the "ban the box" movement to eliminate questions about criminal records from job applications.

Devah's subsequent research continued to shed light on the pressing topics of racial inequality, labor markets and job search processes, hiring discrimination, and the consequences of mass incarceration. She attributed her lifelong passion for studying inequality to her contrasting experiences of a diverse upbringing in Honolulu and the segregation she observed in Los Angeles while pursuing a B.A. in psychology at UCLA, as well as her extensive work with disadvantaged communities in Los Angeles, Cape Town, and Madison. During her distinguished career, she became an acclaimed expert in field experiment methodology, helping to popularize this approach throughout the social sciences and inspiring a new generation of scholars to follow in her footsteps. In 2012, her research contributions were recognized with the William Julius Wilson Early Career Award from the American Sociological Association's Section on Inequality, Poverty, and Mobility.

Prior to joining Harvard, Devah served on the faculty at Northwestern University and Princeton University, diving headfirst into departmental life and leaving lasting imprints on the academic communities at all three institutions. As her many friends, colleagues, and

students would invariably attest, her smile was infectious and her genuine interest in others touched each person with whom she interacted. She was also impossible to say no to. More than one esteemed faculty member found themselves singing karaoke in front of their colleagues simply because Devah had asked them to do so.

The same qualities that made Devah a remarkable scholar and beloved colleague also contributed to her legendary mentorship. She consistently championed students' ideas and encouraged them never to lose sight of the important questions. Just as importantly, she made sure they knew how much faith she had in their potential. Her memory lives on in their research and teaching. She was an enthusiastic, warm, and generous friend and colleague right up to the tragic day when she passed away from pancreatic cancer at the age of 46.

Devah adored her family. She is survived by her husband, Michael Shohl; her son, Atticus; her father, David; and her brothers, Chet and Sean.

Respectfully submitted,

Bart Bonikowski

David Deming

David Ellwood

Robert Sampson

Alexandra Killewald, Chair