Professor Lani Guinier grew up in Queens, New York, the daughter of a Jewish mother and an African-American father. Her upbringing was marked by an acute awareness of her mixed heritage and its effect on society. Inspired by her father’s experiences as an African-American living in the United States, she became a powerful, national voice for racial reconciliation.

Professor Guinier’s years in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice and as a voting rights litigator for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund laid the groundwork for her controversial views on the amendments to the Voting Rights Act. She espoused a vision of race relations as a conversation in which people declare a willingness to listen respectfully to others—so the majority’s rule should not obliterate the minority’s voice.

Despite her efforts at reconciliation throughout the years, her views were misinterpreted and defamed during her nomination for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. The experience of being denied the opportunity to publicly defend her views led her to create Commonplace, a national non-profit organization where people can learn to communicate across barriers created by racial, gender and social differences. Her focus is to revitalize public discourse and emphasize citizen problem-solving.

As a tenured professor at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, she plays the role of coalition builder. Colleagues and students describe Professor Guinier’s approach to teaching as identifying differences and then working towards communalities. Professor Guinier views herself as a bridge-builder using divisive issues to connect.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the recent publication of her first book, “Becoming Gentlemen: Women’s Experiences at One Ivy League Law School.” Her findings that ivy league law schools present an alienating and hostile environment for women were, once again, controversial. Her courage alone has influenced her female students to speak up and give voice to women in law school. Professor Guinier is both a mentor and an advocate for the rights of women attorneys.

Professor Guinier received her B.A. from Radcliffe College (1971) and her J.D. from Yale Law School (1974). She and her husband, Nolza Bowie, have one son.