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CONTACT: Mark D. Weinstein
Executive Director of Public Relations
[937-766-8800](tel:937-766-8800) (o)
[937-532-6885](tel:937-532-6885) (m)
Mweinstein@cedarville.edu
@cedarvillenews

Violent Crime Victim Turns Difficulty Into Service

CEDARVILLE, OHIO – At age 16, Jenna Ellis was the victim of a violent crime. The details of the incident aren't something she shares much. But what's happened in her life since is one of the more inspiring stories you'll hear anywhere.

While the situation would be difficult to work through at any stage of life, Ellis purposed even at her young age to use her story to further the Gospel of Christ. That path has led to a successful career as an author, lawyer and college professor. But perhaps most importantly, her path has led to forgiveness and ministry.

On Monday, April 4, Ellis will return to campus for the first time in more than a decade when she presents "The Constitution and Its Origins," a one-hour seminar focusing on the biblical worldview within our nation's founding documents.

The seminar, which is free and open to the public, will take place at 7 p.m. the Center for Biblical and Theological Studies (BTS 104).

At the beginning of the criminal proceedings against the perpetrator, who ultimately pled guilty, Ellis found a mentor in Robert Shapiro, who served as a prosecutor for the District Attorney's Office in Boulder, Colorado.

"I have always been interested in law, but through my interactions with Rob, I was able to gain a greater appreciation and understanding of criminal law," said Ellis. "The impact he had on me was so great that once my case concluded, I began to volunteer for the district attorney's office as a victim advocate."

In 2003, Ellis moved to the Midwest to begin her college studies at Cedarville University. In the meantime, she received a significant financial award from her civil case. While she could have used the money for her own benefit, she was struck by a Cedarville University chapel message and decided to fund an endowed scholarship at Cedarville.

"I remember sitting in chapel and hearing that if we were able to each minister to just three people, and those three people each minister to three more, we would make a huge impact," said Ellis. "I wanted the money to mean something more. Starting a scholarship endowment was a way for me to heed that call to minister to others, and ultimately, further the Gospel of Christ through others' ministries."

Following the ruling in her civil case, Ellis received a phone call from Shapiro, who served as chief prosecutor on her case. He informed her there was an issue in the case where she was given the opportunity to have input on how the District Attorney's office handled it.

"It wasn't until that point that I realized how important it was for me to forgive," said Ellis. "Even though the person who had hurt me had never asked for forgiveness, I didn't want to be the cause of any grief in their life."

Ellis transferred to Colorado State University in 2004 to major in journalism, a program that Cedarville did not offer at the time. Although she didn't graduate from Cedarville, her contribution to students has made a great impact.

After graduating from Colorado State, Ellis pursued her law degree from the University of Richmond School of Law and has spent time practicing as both a prosecutor and criminal defense attorney.

Although the victim of a crime, Ellis firmly believes in the Constitutional right to due process and the presumption of innocence. She has served longer as a criminal defense attorney than she did as a prosecutor, and says she found an equally great ministry in helping those who are going through the justice system.

Ellis also considers Constitutional Law a facet of her ministry, specifically contributing to educating Christians on the biblical worldview basis of the U.S. Constitution. She authored a book, "The Legal Basis for a Moral Constitution: A Guide for Christians to Understand America's Current Constitutional Crisis," and recently accepted a position as a full-time faculty member at Colorado Christian University in Lakewood, Colorado.

The scholarship is also a significant and continuing ministry.

"No matter what we go through, God always has a purpose and a reason," said Ellis. "It's not to hinder us, but to put us on the right path to grow closer to Him, and to share our story with others."

Today, the Jenna Lynn Ellis Award provides a one-time scholarship to a rising junior or senior who carries a minimum 3.30 cumulative grade point average and wishes to pursue a career in law, with an emphasis in victim advocacy or criminal prosecution.

"I'm thrilled to have had the opportunity to create a scholarship that helps students pursue their own calling for Christ," said Ellis. "This is part of my ministry, and God has used the events in my life to provide a way for me to make an impact on others."

Ellis will remain on campus for Academic Honors Day on Tuesday, April 5, when the recipient of this year's award will be announced. To learn more about her ministry and work, visit www.jennaellis.org.

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 3,711 undergraduate, graduate, and online students in more than 100 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings, and leading student satisfaction ratings. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.