



2004

Tribute to Paul C. Van Booven

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Recommended Citation

Todd, Lee T. Jr.; Adams, Katherine; and Underwood, Richard H. (2004) "Tribute to Paul C. Van Booven," *Kentucky Law Journal*: Vol. 92 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj/vol92/iss4/2>

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KENTUCKY LAW JOURNAL

VOLUME 92

2003–2004

NUMBER 4

TRIBUTE TO PAUL C. VAN BOOVEN

Memories of Paul Van Booven

Celebrating the life of Paul C. Van Booven requires more than just a discussion of his vast knowledge of the law or his total devotion to the University of Kentucky, as extensive as both of those traits were in him. His professional contributions do, however, provide a baseline for considering his characteristics as a loving, caring, sensitive human being, because those two aspects of his life were inseparable.

I did not know Paul when I was named President of the University of Kentucky. After my selection, but before I took office, I worked out of an office in the King Alumni Building for a few months. One day I got a note that Paul Van Booven wanted to see me, so I went to his office in the Administration Building.

As I entered his office, Paul said, “Dr. Todd, we’ve had an open records request for your vita because you’re being put forward for full professorship. I was arranging that information and just happened to read through the material and found two letters you need to see personally.” One of the letters was from a student whom I had advised when I was a professor here and another was from another student who is now in North Carolina. Paul said, “I just didn’t want you to miss these,” so he had packaged up the material and copied the documents for me. As I left Paul’s office that day and contemplated his thoughtful gesture, I remember getting a warm feeling that only got warmer as I grew to know him better in the

next two and a half years in which it was my privilege and pleasure to work with him.

When it came time to fill the UK General Counsel's position on an acting basis, the position Paul was eventually appointed to on a full-time basis, the UK Administration went through the standard personnel selection process. I will never forget that we received many applications for the position, but well over half of them included a closing sentence that read something like, "If Paul Van Booven wants this position, please remove my application." That is an outstanding example of the kind of respect that people had for Paul.

A few weeks before Paul's death, I was in Eastern Kentucky meeting with a state legislator. He told me this story: "I came from Eastern Kentucky to go to the University of Kentucky and was scared to death. I wasn't sure I could make it; didn't know if I really fit, but I did pretty well as an undergraduate and wanted to go to law school. So I went over to the law building and was told I should see Mr. Van Booven. So I went in there and kind of nervously handed him my papers and he looked at them quietly and handed them back to me and said, 'You'll be okay.' From that moment on, he was my best friend, and I give him credit for getting me through law school." I heard that kind of story from several other persons during the memorial service for him held in Memorial Hall.

While he was sick, Paul continued to serve the university so courageously. He just did not miss work. He would come by my office and leave the following message: "Tell the president I'm going over to the hospital, but I'll have my cell phone on and I'll be back." There were a few occasions when I did have to call him and when I asked him how he was doing, he would reply, "Oh, I can't complain." And he didn't. Then he would answer the question and very likely that afternoon, after having a chemotherapy treatment, he would pop back in the office just to see if everything was okay.

The last time I saw Paul, he had summoned me again, but this time to his hospital room. When I arrived, he was lying in bed with a notepad in his hands. That meeting only took about fifteen minutes, but, as usual, he got a lot accomplished in that time. He gave me his views on the General Counsel's office and how it should be structured; some of the changes I should not make. He gave me his summary and his critique of the staff members he loved so much. He told me what a great job he felt they did. He thanked me for not mining Robinson Forest and then went on to talk about the forest a bit.

As I was shaking his hand and bidding him farewell, Paul said, "I've had a love affair with this university." I said, "Paul, I hope you know this

university has had a love affair with you, too.” I think he wanted to be at UK at the end. He could have gone back home with Hospice treatment, but I think he wanted to be here.

At that moment, I chose to tell Paul about something I had decided some months ago, that UK will name one of the rooms in the legal suite of the remodeled Main Building in his honor. Typically, Paul said “That’s not necessary, but I sure do appreciate it.” It is my hope that in naming the legal suite for Paul C. Van Booven, that his name will provide a constant reminder of how a legal office should be run—with professionalism and with personality, and with the love and caring that he extended to all of us while he was here.

Paul will be remembered as one of the most capable, one of the most respected, and most beloved servants of this institution. I will miss him tremendously and I cherish the time that we had together.

*Lee T. Todd, Jr.**

I did not get to know Paul Van Booven while I was in law school, although I clearly recall our first meeting. With no previous introduction, he walked up to me and greeted me by name. I subsequently learned that he studied the picture board and attempted to learn the names and faces of as many law students as possible for just this purpose. He then proceeded to tell me that, unlike most law students, I looked just like my picture on the picture board. I thought it looked like the mug shot of a depraved criminal caught after weeks of being on the run, so I was not initially flattered. Heaven knows that in his role as associate dean of the law school he successfully dealt with a wide variety of law student frailties and egos, but our meeting set the tone for my dealings with Paul. I should expect the plain, unvarnished truth from him, even if it was not particularly what I wanted to hear. The fact that he took the time to study names and faces of incoming law students and was able to greet so many of us by name demonstrated his work ethic and desire to learn more about the situation. This marked not only his involvement with students, but also his subsequent practice of law for the University of Kentucky.

Some years after graduation, when I was ready for a change and Paul had become an in-house attorney, I started talking with him about coming to work in the university’s legal office. I was particularly interested in how

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he practiced law, and whether UK's legal office would be a good place to work. As those of you that practice in small offices or groups know, you spend many hours with the other attorneys in your office. Not only do you need to be sure that your colleagues are not going to embarrass you, bankrupt you, or generally drive you crazy, you would also like to find someone that you can respect, learn from, and actually enjoy being around. After many hours of conversation, I was convinced that his philosophy of the law was quite appealing and that I would be happy to work with him. I was never disappointed, and I can say with no hesitation that Paul Van Booven embodied all of the best things about being a lawyer and practicing law. During the almost nine years we worked together, I respected him, learned from him, and totally enjoyed his company. As one of his university colleagues said, as a compliment to Paul and surely a challenge to the rest of us, "If all attorneys were like Paul Van Booven, there would be no attorney jokes."

Some of his admirable qualities were demonstrated by several favorite sayings. One was, "No, we're not going to do that." This applied to any situation where the client proposed to take a course of action Paul felt was not appropriate, and he had no hesitation in telling anyone from the president to the janitor that certain things were just not going to occur. If, after having received clear directions, the client failed to follow the right path or perhaps took a foolish side route, he or she was likely to be faced with an intense but quizzical, "Why for did you do that?" That question was almost always very hard to answer, but clients and colleagues with any type of problem were invariably comforted by Paul's direct style and advice. After Paul listened to a complicated tale of woe with no ready solutions, many a distraught client was reassured by his firm, "Not to worry."

Paul approached law much like the saying he had posted on his bulletin board for many years: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all of the evidence. It biases the judgment." If you approached him to discuss a situation, he would first challenge you to establish that you had gathered all of the facts. Clients who intentionally withheld relevant facts in an attempt to help his or her case were a particular irritant. That offending party could expect a rather severe remonstrance once the facts were uncovered. His other pet peeve was attorneys who could not or would not be truthful, and show a modicum of respect for the law and their fellow practitioners. In a few instances his rightful outrage would lead to the use of another phrase that we sometimes shared, "Make mine a double." And when one or sometimes both of us were particularly "fussed" by such a

situation, we would adjourn from our office to so indulge. Natural good humors were quickly restored by the change of scenery.

At this time when many attorneys seem to want to do anything other than practice law, Paul truly loved his job. In addition to his love of the law and the university, he frequently found a way to bring together several of his interests at the same time. Paul became the Robinson Forest attorney, and he taught himself about ancient land patents, boundary disputes, timber operations, and all things associated with Robinson Forest. But he didn't stop with learning about what was on paper; he got into his little BMW and with no advance warning, headed to the mountains to see for himself. It wasn't long before he had a large four-wheel drive pick-up truck and regularly headed for the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. He said it was legal work, but no one who watched the great glee on his face at the prospect of traipsing through some part of the woods to look at a boundary or an old mining operation could totally believe that. When it became possible for UK to participate in the first wild elk release program in Kentucky, Paul was immediately in the middle of the agreement; not only representing UK through the paperwork, but also being present when the first elk left the truck.

Perhaps one of the reasons Paul was fun to be around and made people enjoy his company was his willingness to fully participate in any situation he found himself in, and to enjoy himself while doing it. While most of his favorite hobbies seemed rather rough and tumble (hunting, hiking, forestry, shooting, to name a few), he could also be home and family oriented. Two years ago, Paul and I agreed that a “homey” office Christmas party would be preferable to going out somewhere, and that my home would be the venue, and he would be my assistant. I did not have high expectations for my assistant. When Paul arrived several hours before the party, the stuffed turkey breast had failed to thaw and every home and culinary disaster that could have happened, had happened. I was in full-blown crisis mode, and fun did not appear to be on the agenda. Without being asked or directed, Paul—who to my knowledge had no particular cooking skills—immediately started putting away unneeded articles, donned an apron, uncorked a bottle of wine, and calmly asked “What next?” He proceeded to take orders as quickly as I could give them. In very short order, we were giggling and working. When the office company arrived, everything was ready and a great time was had by all. Paul's immediate willingness to jump in, remain calm, help, and to enjoy himself while doing it saved the day.

A tribute to Paul Van Booven would not be complete without a description of how he dealt with his illness. All of us that knew and loved him can only hope that if we face the same challenges, we would be half as

courageous as he was. Upon learning of his diagnosis, many of us were very distraught. Paul comforted us (as he did throughout his illness) and assured us that he would fight this thing and that there were still good times to be had. He retained that attitude throughout his illness, and when asked how he was, would almost invariably respond, "I can't complain." This was through multiple surgeries, experimental medications, infusion pumps, chemotherapy, and likely numerous indignities to the person that we never heard about. Through four years of a direct battle with cancer, I never heard him complain, never heard him question why, never heard him take it any way other than one day at a time. He was very direct, but always positive, about what was going on with his treatment. He routinely went for chemotherapy treatments and returned directly to work, cheerfully tackling issues and solving problems on behalf of the university. Paul was always a workaholic, and he did not allow a little battle with cancer to change his love of the law, the university, and his friends and colleagues.

Paul's death has created a tremendous hole in the lives of many of us. Former students, classmates, faculty, all of us in the University's legal office, neighbors, and contacts from all walks of life counted him as a close friend. We will miss so many things about him, including his enthusiasm, wit, humor, intelligence, and way of dealing with difficult situations and personalities. He approached problems assuming they could and should be worked out fairly for both parties. He also expected that all of the people he dealt with were going to do the right thing, and almost everyone wanted to live up to that expectation. He set very high standards for how we should conduct ourselves in the practice of law and in the enjoyment of life. And he left us too soon.

*Katherine Adams***

I am pretty much a solitaire. Other than my wife, I have no really close friends. But I guess Paul Van Booven was as much a friend to me as anyone here at the University has been. I remember that he was the one who encouraged me to take the job as a brand new assistant professor when I was pretty sure that I was making a big mistake.

Paul was always good to me. Paul was always good to everyone. He was always there to talk to, and he was a problem solver. He worked all of the time—too much. The Law School, and the University, meant everything

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to Paul. But in the end, Paul was something of a stranger to me. He was a graduate of the Scouts; I was a graduate of the Phoenix Program. Not much in common there. Still, I came to respect Paul, and I am one of those who still look back wistfully to the days when we could concentrate on the classroom and research, secure in the knowledge that he was taking care of everything else.

I wish I could regale you with personal anecdotes about my interactions with Paul, but I will have to leave that to others. All I can think about is how much I lost by not knowing him better, and how much I lost by not being a better friend. He was gone too soon.

*Richard H. Underwood****

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