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Tribute from the Students

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Martin: Martin: Tribute from the Students
TRIBUTE FROM THE STUDENTS

JOHN T. MARTIN*

I am honored to participate in the Missouri Law Review tribute to Joe E. Covington. My tribute to Dean Covington will not recount his many past, present, and continuing positions as professor, dean, leader in national bar activities, university administrator, and civic leader. Other contributors to this dedication have highlighted Joe Covington's active participation in areas of concern to the practicing members of the bar, the judiciary, the teaching profession, and law students, particularly those students who desire to be licensed to practice throughout the United States. Instead, I want to offer some personal observations and feelings about Joe Covington, especially some recollections concerning him when he was Dean of the University of Missouri School of Law.

The letter a couple of months ago from the Law Review began with the statement, "Joe Covington is retiring after the 1981-1982 school year." My reaction was one of surprise. He couldn't be old enough to retire! He was dean of the law school when I graduated only a couple-or-so years ago. He couldn't have aged that quickly, as I certainly hadn't. So what if Martindale-Hubbell's biographical information indicates that Joe is eligible for retirement. What do they know?

It was only a few years ago (okay—maybe twenty) when I met Dean Covington. It was fall, in the morning. I drove from Springfield to Columbia in my new car, which was the first I had ever owned and which I drove for the next ten years. I was twenty-five years old, married, and had three children. I had what many regarded as a good job with potential in the radio business. I also had a crazy desire to attend law school.

I was not a prime candidate for acceptance by the law school. Although I was an adept professional student, fraternity and student government member, the rest of my undergraduate scholastic record was less than distinguished. The standards for admission to the law school at that time escape me, but obviously a concern about whether I met them prompted a conference with the Dean that fall day.

After reviewing my application for admission and my undergraduate record, the Dean would have had good cause to be negative or even absent from the office. He didn't state specifically that my undergraduate grade averages were lousy, but simply said that those grades, standing alone, would not permit my acceptance by the School of Law. At that time, the L.S.A.T.

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test was advisory only. Dean Covington indicated that he was encouraged by those test results, but was planning to rely on recommendations from faculty members and the dean of the college at my undergraduate school and on his personal interview with me.

Obviously, I'm prejudiced on behalf of Joe Covington because although he could have prevented me from entering law school, I believe that he indeed sold the law school faculty on admitting me.

I remember another meeting in the Dean's office after I was admitted to law school. The Dean called me in and said he had heard a rumor that I was taking full-time employment while in law school. He suggested that it might be difficult to make my grades while working. Based on my undergraduate record, he had a basis for concern. But when I reminded him of my hungry family, the Dean graciously adopted a wait-and-see attitude and said we would look at the grades. Fortunately, the grades were favorable.

Then, a couple of years later, came another meeting that I don't think I'll ever forget. The Dean cautiously asked if I might be interested in becoming Editor in Chief of the Missouri Law Review. Dean Covington knew of the prestige and employment opportunities that the editorship might provide. He explained, however, that my law school program, which emphasized attending summer school classes to enable me to graduate early, was not usual for an Editor in Chief. Therefore, he told me to reconsider the time I planned to spend in law school and suggested that I stay in school for an additional semester. Family considerations and my financial situation, however, made spending several additional months in law school impossible. Dean Covington then proposed that I share the position of Editor in Chief with one of my fellow students, who had started a semester after me and who had a tremendous academic record. I was able to graduate in mid-year and still have the opportunity to gain the advantages of being Editor in Chief.

I recall dealing with the Dean when I was a law school student, as a member of the student Board of Governors, as Chairman of the Honor Code Committee, and as Editor in Chief of the Law Review. There are certain definite impressions I have twenty years later.

In undergraduate school, we had a phrase "straight arrow," which meant you could count on the word of a person. Joe Covington was a straight arrow. You might not agree with his position or the direction of his arrow, but once he had completed deliberations, you could count on the consistency of the position he took.

If a student approached him with a problem either as an individual or as the representative of a group of students or a student organization, the Dean would put other matters aside and pay careful attention to the problem. He did not try to excuse the student early or limit his time.

While he maintained an impartial attitude when differences of opinion arose between students and the faculty, he also did his best to conciliate and

compromise when possible. He occasionally recommended that students meet with a faculty member or a small group of faculty members to sort out the problems. At those meetings, he made certain the students had ample opportunity to express themselves freely.

The procedures of the Honor Code Committee were developed by the students. Investigations and hearings were also carried out by the students. The recommendations of the Honor Code Committee then went to the dean and the law school faculty. Dean Covington was very cautious about the invocation of severe penalties until he reviewed the investigation and reasons for findings of violations in great detail. He protected the rights of each individual law student—sometimes to the frustration of the committee members when further investigation and more evidence were required. Although he sometimes disagreed with members of the committee concerning the completeness of an investigation, the Dean supported the committee's ultimate decisions 100%.

The Board of Governors at the law school never had a lot of power, and I don't recall that it ever accomplished a lot. But this certainly wasn't the fault of Dean Covington, who regularly encouraged the students to take on projects and make recommendations concerning any proposed change in administrative or procedural details at the law school. The Board of Governors' lack of significant accomplishments resulted from a dearth of positive proposals by the students rather than from any fault of the Dean or the faculty.

Since my graduation from law school, I have had a close relationship with Joe Covington even though I don't see him very often. But my respect grows even greater as I hear what other former students and faculty members have to say about him. Joe Covington is to be admired for the time and the effort he has devoted to law students as both professor and dean. He has made immense contributions to students, lawyers, teachers, and bar organizations throughout the United States and will continue to do so. It is not at all difficult for me to compose a tribute to Joe Covington. I am grateful for his assistance in helping me to become a lawyer. If his will and guidance is a factor, I will be a good lawyer. I know the readers of this tribute have had similar experiences with Joe Covington and join me in saying, "Thanks, Dean!!"



