

## COLLEAGUE, CAPTAIN, FRIEND

### Michael Allan Wolf\*

In the winter of 1982, when I first stepped foot in Oklahoma City to interview for a position on the law faculty at OCU, I never would have dreamed that the young professor who warmly welcomed me into his home for Friday night dinner, followed by Shabbat services at the family's temple, would become a dear friend and an important transitional figure in the history of the law school. Larry Hellman, with Gay at his side as an equally impressive partner, is a force to be reckoned with, his quiet demeanor and deferential manner notwithstanding.

After the faculty and administration decided to offer me my first law teaching opportunity, my wife, toddler son, and I made the trip from the east coast to the Sooner State, much like Larry and Gay did a few years before. But there was a big difference: the Hellmans were returning home, making a lifetime commitment to improving the lives of thousands of Oklahomans within and outside the university. After five too-brief years, we imitated Gay and Larry once again when we headed first to my wife Betty's native Virginia and then to Florida where I was born and raised. The hardest part about leaving Oklahoma was not being able to see the Hellmans, the LeFrancoises, and our other dear friends on a regular basis.

Between 1982 and 1987, Art, Larry, and I shared several dozen lunches and dinners. The conversations had a recurring pattern. Art and I would begin and end the sessions with jokes, often at Larry's expense (he never should have told us that he *actually met* Babe Ruth!), and in the middle we would complain about the ways in which the law school was not improving fast enough. This part of the discussion would distress Larry even more than the jokes, as he was determined even then to advance the quality of legal education despite the school's significant financial and

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\* Richard E. Nelson Eminent Scholar Chair in Local Government, University of Florida Levin College of Law; Assistant Professor (1982-1985), Associate Professor (1983-1988), Oklahoma City University School of Law.

administrative challenges. But Larry would get the last laugh.

What Larry saw then, and what Art perceived and acted on later, was that the foundations for advancement were already in place. First, OCU grads had a reputation in the state and regional bar for receiving a solid, well-rounded legal education. In other words, the organized bar was already on board. Second, many members of the OCU faculty, then and today, were willing to sacrifice time, energy, and money to the cause of providing a first-class education for a student body whose diverse profile, particularly in the evening program, did not mirror those at snobbier law schools. I still miss being able to teach dozens of students whose real-life experiences enhance the learning for professor and student in ways that no casebook or hornbook can do.

We could not see it at the time, but in the 1980s, OCU was already on an upward arc. I have said often during my nearly forty-year career as a law professor that I have never been on, or seen, a faculty that was more intellectually curious than the one at OCU. There were veterans who understood that change was necessary for advancement and growth, such as Marj Downing and Richard Coulson, wonderful mentors who took the time to shepherd a newbie in need. Peter Dillon, Dennis Arrow, Alvin Harrell, Nancy Kenderdine, and Mike Gibson imparted important lessons that I apply to this day in my teaching and scholarship; and a bevy of newcomers who came and went after a few years—particularly Rob Natelson and David DeWolf—formed with me a group of OCUers in Exile who stayed in touch even after leaving town.

Looking back, I can see that there was one figure that, more than any other, linked the past to the present and the future of the state, the city, the university, and the law school that he loved and to whom he gave his all—Larry Hellman. He was an Oklahoma native who was educated in Virginia and Illinois, took his ample legal talents to Washington, D.C., and then came home to help improve OCU and adapt the school to the new realities of American legal education. As a tenured professor in a school that itself did not yet have tenure (that came later, as symbolized by the school's admission to the AALS, during his deanship), Larry demonstrated a strong commitment to scholarship, but without sacrificing the traditional OCU concern for those who actually practice our profession, best illustrated by a legal ethics column that he wrote for twenty-eight years!

I have always admired Larry, and I believe that, like me, many others feel that they never want to disappoint him—he is the team captain, and we are the teammates that look up to him and never want to let him down.

But OCU is not Larry's most important team—that would be his family. Betty and I were fortunate to see the love and respect that Gay and Larry showed for Larry's father and Gay's parents. We raised toddlers and newborns together who, before we knew or were ready for it, grew into adults who started a new generation. We cherish the moments when the Hellmans and Wolfs can exchange hugs and stories in person, here and as far away as jolly old England.

Speaking of foreign intrigues, Larry has long been OCU law's ambassador abroad, particularly in China. At home, still full of energy after a long and productive deanship, Larry adopted the Oklahoma Innocence Project as his important new cause, taking great strides to redress longstanding wrongs. In this and other ways, Larry and Gay showed their commitment to *tikkun olam*, repairing this world.

That brings me back to where I started this celebratory essay, to the Friday night that was my introduction to the Hellman family. Perhaps the greatest compliment that I can give to Larry is that he is truly a *mensch*, literally a human, figuratively so much more. In October 2003, the *National Law Journal* published Larry's "Yom Kippur Lessons."<sup>1</sup> I reviewed the article in preparation for this essay, as it turns out in the days before Yom Kippur 5781. As with so much of Larry's scholarship, I learned a lot that was important and meaningful.

After reviewing Jewish beliefs and practices leading up to and including the Day of Atonement, Larry wrote, "Wouldn't it be nice if, once a year, we lawyers could just forget all of our prior confrontations with each other? This would allow us to go forward treating each other more civilly."<sup>2</sup> There he is, just like I first saw him in 1982, just like he is today: Larry Hellman, the optimist who believes in the potential for human improvement, the lawyer who holds himself and all other lawyers to a high standard, and the Jew who is proud of his faith, his heritage, and his obligations to his world. If on that day long ago the Babe could have seen these qualities, he, like all of us today, would have been so impressed.

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1. Lawrence K. Hellman, *Yom Kippur Lessons*, NAT'L L.J., Oct. 3, 2005, at 31.

2. *Id.*