

SERVICE ABOVE SELF

Bernard M. Jones*

“Service above self” is the motto and guiding principle of Rotary International and the words that most accurately describe the long and distinguished career of my dear friend and mentor Dean Emeritus and Professor of Law, Lawrence K. Hellman.

Forty years of service is a tremendous feat, but it holds greater significance in the context of academia. Whether academician or administrator, all will concede that university life is not for the faint of heart. It is a tough environment that demands a certain type of leader – one who rises above the politics, pettiness, and peculiar personalities for the benefit of the greater good. As Dean, Larry Hellman was that person. He navigated through the ever-changing seas and always remained committed to the service. That demonstrated commitment inspired me to leave a successful litigation practice to join his administration.

It was as his Associate Dean for Admissions and External Affairs that I really came to know and appreciate Dean Hellman’s leadership. I joined the administration during turbulent times. The nation was experiencing an unprecedented financial crisis and the world of legal education was trying to adjust to the realities of the day. The only certainty about the present or the future was that both were uncertain. While panic ensued in the OCU Law community, Dean Hellman remained committed to the mission. He was confident that we would make it through and that our best days lay ahead. Larry realized that today’s challenges present tomorrow’s opportunities, and so the future ought to be our focus.

And focus on the future we did. Instead of wallowing in the challenges of the day, we turned our attention to initiatives that would enhance the quality of the educational experience for current and prospective students. One such initiative was the Oklahoma Innocence Project. While

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recognizing the Project's cause was worthy and just, I questioned the wisdom of devoting time and fundraising resources to this venture given that the character and very existence of legal education as we knew it was under duress. But Dean Hellman held firm to his convictions, realizing that the right time to do the right thing was right now. And so that's what we did. We traveled, cultivated relationships, fundraised, and soon brought to fruition the Oklahoma Innocence Project, which not only enhanced the reputation of OCU Law but has changed the very character of our State. Dean Hellman had the courage of his convictions and for that, we should all be grateful.

Dean Hellman's convictions were not limited to OCU Law's academic offerings. Larry also prioritized diversity in and beyond the school of law. While many questioned these initiatives, Larry never flinched at my recommendation to embrace innovative strategies for reaching diverse people. We participated in diversity pipeline projects, expanded our outreach efforts to include historically black colleges and universities, hosted and co-sponsored forums on diversity, and offered scholarships celebrating diverse perspectives. Many failed to appreciate these initiatives. Yet despite our detractors and through Dean Hellman's leadership, we achieved tremendous successes that ushered in the best credentialed, most diverse classes in the history of the law school. While some noted that this emphasis in diversity aligned with the institution's strategic plan, I can attest that strategic planning was not what motivated Dean Hellman. No, Larry's passion was demonstrative of his character, convictions, and his commitment to serving the legal profession by helping to make it more just and inclusive.

Though several years have passed, I often reflect on my tenure with Dean Hellman. I suppose it is fair to say that I am where I am today due to his guidance. He cultivated my career in academia and fostered my professional and personal growth. He instilled in me the importance of doing what is right, thinking big, and always imagining the possibilities that were not readily apparent. I am beyond appreciative for this sage advice and for his many contributions to my personal and professional success.

So, to Dean Hellman, I say thank you and job well done. I am grateful and proud to have worked for and been mentored by you. And I thank you for the blessing that you and Gay have been to me and my family. But above all else, I thank you for demonstrating to us all what it means to place service above self.