

2013] *Excerpts from January 7, 2013, Memorial Service*

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Tom McDaniel*

Well, it's a difficult day. Sherry, Christen, Jennifer, Erin, all of the Conger family, your Bill, our Bill, was a man for all seasons. He was highly respected, admired, and loved by many, as you can see, including Brenda and me. I'm honored to be included among his friends and to be asked to be a part of this very special day. I begin by borrowing some words from one of his favorite poets:

*Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.*¹

Those words reminded me, and I would assume remind everyone gathered here today, of what a really special and unique human being Bill Conger was: a man that was devoted to his family, to his friends, to his profession; blessed with a keen mind, a generous spirit, and that special heart, the heart of a servant. It's with some deal of pride that I share with you today some of the footprints that I think he left for all of us to follow.

It's really great, Sherry, that you decided to come to this chapel, a place with which he was so familiar, a place that he often came. He came here for Vespers² with you; he came here for many university events over the years. Even the midyear Law School commencement was held here. He made me promise to never come to this building without saying (and especially on a day like today when we heard the beautiful pipe organ), "Aren't we lucky that Wanda Bass gave us that beautiful pipe organ for all of us to enjoy today?" Well, he loved this place. We have chapel every week, where the Oklahoma City University family gathers at 1:00, and Bill was a frequent visitor, a frequent worshipper, always sitting in the back. He liked to sit back there so he could see the beautiful stained glass windows representing the four seasons of the year. So here we are, in a place that Bill truly loved, surrounded by people that he loved, to say goodbye, each in our own way, and to celebrate a life that was well-lived.

* Close friend and colleague who served as President of Oklahoma City University during Bill Conger's tenure as General Counsel and Professor of Law.

1. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, *A Psalm of Life*, in FAVORITE POEMS 12, 13 (London, George Routledge & Sons 1878).

2. The Christmas Vespers concert is presented by Oklahoma City University musicians each December in the Bishop W. Angie Smith Chapel.

Well, as all of us know, Bill had a gift for connecting with others, and more importantly, most importantly, he had a gift for *staying* connected. He was that football player that fell in love with the homecoming queen, so he married her and then spent the rest of his life with her. He's that guy who, from his high school days and his college days, established and made friendships which have lasted the rest of his life. And I guess I just have to say that there is ample evidence here today that he built relationships in the legal community that would be underscored by all of you here today. I have to say, Sherry, I believe that there would be a tear of pride in his eye as he saw the wonderful group of people who have gathered here to remember him.

Well, Bill came to the OCU family a decade ago now. He was already established in his profession. It was the autumn of his life. He was a founding partner and a named partner in one of Oklahoma's leading law firms.³ I think that there were many people who found it strange (Sherry may have been one of them) that he would leave the firm that he founded, that cushy corner office that the partners have, and take less money (Bernie Patterson⁴ would say a lot less money) to come to this university. We were able to persuade him that we needed his wise counsel, that by his coming, the image of our law school would be lifted in the community and in the state. More importantly, we convinced him that he could teach, he could mentor, and he could inspire a whole new generation of students who dreamed of being a lawyer just like Bill Conger. And the miracle was he came. He came.



3. Bill Conger was a founding partner of the Oklahoma City firm Hartzog Conger Cason & Neville.

4. Bernie Patterson was Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs of Oklahoma City University from 2002 until June 2010.

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As we reflect on the day, it was a decision that he relished, and it provided an opportunity that he wholeheartedly embraced. While he was here, he was elected and served as president of the Oklahoma Bar Association. While he was here, he was inducted into the American College of Trial Lawyers. While he was here, this university conferred upon him an honorary Doctor of Laws degree, and, very recently, Dean Couch announced that the Moot Courtroom in OCU's new law school facility will bear his name. As we now look back on it, the timing was exquisite. Bill was overwhelmed. It ensures for all of us that as long as there is an Oklahoma City University, be it 100 years or 1,000, Bill's contribution to this university will be remembered.

And perhaps his most lasting legacy will be his impact, his influence, on the hundreds of young law students whose lives he touched while he was here. Like the rest of us, they were attracted to him. He connected. He stayed connected. They flocked to his classes. They flocked to his office. In 2005, when the students selected him as the Law Professor of the Year, the young woman, Ashley Bowen (now Ashley Bowen Murphy), who was to present him the award, broke down in presenting it to him, filled with the emotion of the hour. So did Bill. So did Bill. His ability to relate to students, I believe, will be that lasting legacy that will have an impact on the bench and the bar in our state and far beyond for many years to come. Over the past months, as the autumn of his life faded into the winter of his life, he continued to teach, grading papers on January 1, 2013. Grading papers...

During these pending winter days of his life, we talked more. We talked every week. We had lunch. On one of those recent days, the subject sort of shifted to regrets. "Any regrets?" I asked him. With that twinkle in those killer blue eyes, he said, "Well... I, I always wished I could hit a golf ball like my brother George Robert. I always wished I could've gone to a party and sat down at the piano and been a big hit there like Burns Hargis or Robert Henry." And he said, "I'm ashamed to admit that I even often wished for my friend Frank Hill's Thunder tickets." And more soberly perhaps, he said, "I wish I had said 'thank you' more to Maggie for all of her spiritual support over these last few years, and to my great friend and my great doctor, Charlie Bethea, for all the many considerations and care that he gave to me." But he said, "All in all, no regrets. No regrets. I've loved my life with Sherry and my girls and my family and my friends. I've loved those lazy sunny days at Grand Lake. I've loved those trips with my buddies to hear the blues festivals in

the South. I loved that time when Heritage Hall was in its infancy and we were trying to shepherd it to be the place we all dreamed it would be.” And he said, “I loved being a lawyer and a teacher. No regrets.”



No regrets. Perhaps that’s the place I should close—no regrets. Sherry, I borrow words from a musical that Bill and I saw here at OCU, *Children of Eden*; there’s a song from that show called *The Hardest Part of Love*,⁵ and the lyrics are these:

*You cannot close the acorn
once the oak begins to grow
And you cannot close your heart
to what it fears and needs to know
That the hardest part of love...
is the letting go.*

Letting go is really hard for us all here today, but we do so with the footprints, the memories that are etched in our consciousness, and the love that he has left embedded in each of our hearts. Bill Conger, a man for all seasons.

5. STEPHEN SCHWARTZ, *CHILDREN OF EDEN* (RCA VICTOR BROADWAY 1998).