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I first met Professor Conger when I came to visit OCU in the early part of 2009 for High Ideals. I wasn't sold on law school at all and I certainly wasn't sold on OCU or Oklahoma. But I was sold on taking a mini vacation from work so I came, and at dinner I was seated between another potential student and the keynote speaker for the evening, J. William Conger.

As we ate, the student on my left kept talking about how reading *Brown v. Board of Education* was what made her want to be a lawyer. I had never read any legal case, couldn't have told you anything about *Brown v. Board of Education* and I couldn't have named a single legal decision that had motivated me to do anything. I was a music business major who had been out of school almost a decade and was only considering law school because I hated my job and a J.D. seemed more practical than an M.B.A. So I sat quietly. Those of you who know me are shocked.

But, because Professor Conger was the kind of charismatic and welcoming person that wants everyone around him to feel included, he went out of his way to ask me about my life, my journey, and he made me feel like I was just as fascinating as any Supreme Court decision. We talked about everything from faith and living a life with meaning to lawyer jokes. You see, I love lawyer jokes. My best friend, my sister, and my brother-in-law are all attorneys, and way before I ever thought about becoming one myself, I loved to mock and ridicule the profession. One of my all-time favorites is in *Bee Movie* when the mosquito becomes an attorney and says, "I was already a blood-sucking parasite. All I needed was a briefcase!"¹ But Professor Conger spoke about the honor of the legal profession and how he wanted to live and practice in a way that would make lawyer jokes obsolete. In fact, his entire speech that evening was about that very topic—what an honor it was to be an attorney and how important it was for every member of the profession to guard and protect the reputation of the entire bar. I got teary-eyed and a little convicted but most of all, I got inspired. I left that dinner and called my

* Joni is first-year associate at Hartzog Conger Cason & Neville. She enjoyed lunching and laughing with Professor Conger while seeking his wise advice as often as possible and occasionally had crisis counseling in his crying chair. When she struggles with the stresses of practicing law, her mom sometimes asks her, "Well, what would Conger do?"

1. BEE MOVIE (DreamWorks Animation 2007).

mom. I said I wanted to go to OCU, work for Hartzog Conger, and I wanted Professor Conger to be my mentor.

When he and I would talk about this later, we'd both laugh because I never actually dreamed this would be my life—that I actually would end up in Oklahoma at OCU, that I would be blessed to clerk at the firm he built, that I would actually receive my permanent offer from Professor Conger himself. But most incredible of all, I was blessed for the time in his presence as a mentor. It's the thing that I'm most grateful for and what I mourn losing most of all. For the next few moments, I just want to share a few of the things I loved about Professor Conger.

First of all, I loved his stories. The man could tell a story and he always had the perfect anecdote for any situation you found yourself in. I remember having lunch with him right before I took the bar last summer, and he started telling me a story that I thought was meant to make me feel better, to encourage me. He talked about how success in law school and other academic endeavors usually translates to success on the bar. He said it would be an anomaly for someone like me not to pass. But then he told me while he was at LSU there was a fellow who finished in the top of his class, had always done well in school, studied hard and did all the right things, and somehow failed the bar. And so I waited for the punch line or for him to distinguish that story from my situation, but he seemed to be done. So I finally said, "Was that supposed to make me feel better?" And he said, "Well, I guess if you fail the bar, you can take comfort that your classmates will still be talking about how crazy it was 40 years from now," and he totally cracked up. But after he quit laughing and saw my crazy bar face, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "I believe in you and I'm not a bit worried." If he'd seen my MBE score, he'd have known he should have been.

I loved how passionate and emotional he was. Whatever you were feeling while you were with him, you knew he felt it right along with you. I saw those big beautiful blue eyes well up with tears on many occasions when he was telling about how proud he was of a former student or colleague or sharing the struggles of balancing a successful career and life outside of the office or the joy of being a lawyer. He was so proud to be an attorney—and not just the big stuff like litigating before the world court. He was proud of changing lives like working on adoptions.

I loved his laugh. Some of you will have to forgive me but when I hear the line from the Taylor Swift song—"you throw your head back

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laughing like a little kid”²—it always makes me think of how Professor Conger laughed. He was so full of childlike innocence and joy and love for life. He loved to tease. When he asked me to assist him with research my 3L year, I made a spreadsheet of my schedule and when I envisioned working and sent it to him, apologizing for being so type A. He sent back an email that said “you are kind of nerdy but I like that about you.”

I love how open and accepting he was, especially for someone of his generation and given the level of success he had achieved. It would have been easy for him to judge or look down on those of us just entering the profession, but he didn’t. When OCU had the first Innocence Clinic Gala, Professor Conger invited me and a guest to sit at his table. For the first time in a long time I was ashamed of my tattoo. I didn’t want him to see it so much so that I actually went to a makeup counter and had them cover it. But I should have known better. When he passed away, a girl a few years ahead of me who had a beautiful, full color sleeve of tattoos posted that Professor Conger always said she had the prettiest arm in law school. He was just that cool.

I loved his style. I loved his seersucker suit and his bright pants and his spiffy ties. He always reminded me of Matlock but so much smoother and cooler—like Matlock meets James Bond.

I loved how he made an effort to get to know me and learn about my life and the lives of my classmates.

I loved how he liked to say “have joy” in cards, in emails, in conversations, and I loved how he lived that example. Professor Conger truly was one of the most joyful people I ever knew.

I loved how he embraced change—all the changes in the law, changes in Oklahoma, changes here at OCU.

I loved how proud he was of this university and his vision for this law school that he worked tirelessly to bring to pass. He was such a committed cheerleader and champion for all of us here and played a huge role in so many of the advancements that this law school has experienced.

I loved how thoughtful he was. He made great effort to reach out and encourage all of us. After the bar results came out, I got an email saying how proud he was of me. I heard from a number of friends from different states, he did the same for them. He took the time to find out when results were posted, check them, and follow up with us. And for a few of

2. TAYLOR SWIFT, *Begin Again*, on RED (Big Machine Records 2012).

my friends who didn't pass, he was quick to encourage them and offer to help them in any way he could. Then he did. He followed up with calls and emails, and when they were successful, he celebrated their successes with every bit as much enthusiasm and excitement as they did.

I loved and will always love Professor Conger for the same reasons so many of you loved and will always love him—because we all have these memories and stories and moments. I am just one of many who are forever changed because our paths crossed his. I am just one of many who will practice law differently, who will live differently than if I had not been blessed to know him. Everyone that got to know him as a friend or mentor or teacher or colleague was changed for the better. We all feel like we were special to him. That he cared about us. That he really saw us and saw something in us that was wonderful and powerful and unique. Sadly, that doesn't happen nearly enough. It truly is rare in life to find someone that impacts another someone in such a profound and eternal way. It is incredibly special when one human being's life inspires and empowers the life of another human being. But when one person impacts and inspires hundreds on that same powerful level, it's miraculous.

The thing I loved most of all about J. William Conger is that he loved God. And he lived and worked and served out of that love. From the very first moment I met him, we shared about faith, and the great majority of our conversations were in some way centered on God, His will for our lives, living a life that honors Him, making Him great even as we go about our day-to-day lives. And for a girl who wasn't sure about law school or OCU or even being an attorney, I knew from that first encounter that if I were ever an attorney, I'd want to be the kind that Professor Conger was.

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*³

And so the very thing that made him so charismatic and that drew all of us to him and that makes the loss of him so hard to bear is also the very thing that gives me great peace. Bill Conger lived his years on this earth well. He used his moments in this world to invest in his family and friends and all of us that were blessed to know him. He loved God, and by that love, he was able to love all of us so well. He was a miracle. He made us all witnesses to the miraculous. And for that I'm eternally grateful.

3. 1 John 4:7 (English Standard).