

J. WILLIAM CONGER: THE LAGNIAPPE

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I had the opportunity to co-teach Civil Procedure with Bill during the last few months of his life. Initially, when Dean Laity asked whether I wanted to co-teach Civil Procedure with Bill, I was hesitant; frankly, I lacked confidence in my ability to effectively teach the subject. However, after discussing the opportunity with Bill, I quickly became enthusiastic about the prospect of teaching with him. He assuaged whatever hesitations I had (he had a unique ability to make others feel confident), and we immediately started meeting for class preparation.

During these meetings, of course we talked about subject coverage, class assignments, and the normal issues involved in teaching a class for the first time (neither Bill nor I had ever taught Civil Procedure before). What I remember and cherish most about these meetings, however, were our discussions about our teaching philosophies. We both shared a belief that a law professor could be rigorous yet kind. Bill was immensely concerned about civility in our profession, and he believed that we had a duty to model civility both inside and outside the classroom.

After having these discussions with Bill, I was eager to see him in action in the classroom. On the first day of class he announced that his intentions were not to humiliate, bully, or intimidate students. He spent a considerable amount of time that first day recognizing the anxiety of first-year law students. With that said, however, he also informed them he had high expectations of them, and he would not tolerate lack of preparation. He concluded his remarks by saying, "Plus, when students are not prepared, it hurts my feelings." He said this without a hint of sarcasm; he was being utterly sincere. Our students bought into his system. Not once during the semester did a student announce she was unprepared to brief a case or work through a jurisdictional problem. Nobody wanted to disappoint Bill.

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As the semester progressed, I felt the students fall in love with Bill. As they were learning about the rules of Civil Procedure, he was able to provide the context in which this information would be useful. He drew on his forty years of practice experience, and the students were enthralled by his stories. He often concluded these stories with the phrase, “that’s your lagniappe for today—just a little something extra.” I admit, the first time I heard him use the term “lagniappe,” I was not sure what it meant. After class I looked it up and learned that it is a term popular in Southern Louisiana meaning “[s]omething given over and above.”¹ I was struck by how perfectly this unusual term illustrated Bill’s approach to teaching. He was willing to extend himself and provide “just a little something extra” so that students could flourish.

My favorite time with Bill was the hour we spent together after class each Tuesday and Thursday. We used this time to discuss our class, but more memorable to me, was that we engaged in what Dean Couch has termed “The Conger Rehash.” Dean Couch described “The Conger Rehash” in her beautiful eulogy for Bill, and such discussions involved dissecting a memorable event in extraordinarily vivid detail. We had a particularly poignant “Conger Rehash” after the 2012 Oklahoma City University School of Law Awards Gala when he received the Justice Marian P. Opala Award for Lifetime Achievement in Law. Although Bill was aware he would be receiving this prestigious award at the gala, he did not know Dean Couch had plans to announce that the courtroom in the law school’s new downtown campus would be named after him. He was completely surprised by the announcement. As he told me about the honor, he wept with joy, describing the night as one of the happiest moments of his life.

As the semester neared its end, Bill started experiencing some severe problems with his back, and I became aware that he was in constant pain, resulting in exhaustion. Despite this tremendous pain, he never missed class, he never missed an appointment with a student, and he remained enthusiastic in the classroom. He still continued to practice the concept of “lagniappe” and give that “little something extra.”

On January 1 when I got the call that Bill had passed, I was heartbroken. He and I had grown close while teaching together. Not only was Bill a generous colleague but he was a loyal friend. His death was a personal loss for me. But, what saddened me more was the idea that

1. 8 THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 590 (2d ed. reprt. 1991).

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classes to come would not know him. I found it hard to imagine the law school without him. After a little time, I came to realize that although he would no longer be with us physically, we could carry him with us by honoring his generosity of spirit. I intend to honor him by carrying forward his spirit of lagniappe.



