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JOHN LEVY—FRIEND, MENTOR AND INSPIRATION

INGRID M. HILLENGER

Other tributes in these pages will recognize and honor John Levy's many accomplishments, achievements and contributions—to the Law School, to the legal profession, to Legal Aid and to society at large. Here, I focus on John Levy, the person, and John Levy, my friend. Those who know John know that, unlike many others in the Legal Academy, "the Law" has not been his whole life. What follows are some randomly organized vignettes. I write them with warm memories and enormous gratitude for everything John has done for and meant to me and countless others.

* * *

I graduated from William and Mary Law School the year John Levy came. I went to law school because I wanted a skill to volunteer. My first encounter with John was when I asked him if I could volunteer at Legal Aid. He told me "no." I didn't like this man who was to become my best friend at William and Mary—not one little bit.

The next year, I was asked to teach Family Law on an adjunct basis. What did I know about *that* (or anything *else* for that matter)? I knew *John Levy* knew a lot about Family Law. I sought him out, even though I didn't like him. (Desperation knows few boundaries. First-time teachers know desperation first-hand.) John was patient. He was kind. He was funny. He was calming. He spent hours with me. He taught me everything I ever learned about Family Law. He got me through my first year of teaching. In a very real sense, I owe John my career. He not only nipped my volunteer-lawyering idea in the bud, but served as mentor, coach and cheering section at the beginning of what would turn out to be my professional life—teaching. This was but the first of *many* difficult situations in which John was my shepherd.

When I joined the William and Mary faculty full-time, the law school was still on the main campus. Some faculty offices were in other buildings. As junior, low-on-the-totem-pole folk, John and I were stationed in an outpost (Those were the days when we had to shoot and kill our lunch too). John and I are both morning people, much to the chagrin of our spouses. We would arrive at school around six o'clock. It wasn't long before we instituted our daily ritual—coffee and conversation in my office. The day didn't begin right if it didn't begin that way.

We talked about so many things over the years—teaching, the Law, the Law School, our colleagues, Law School politics, Legal Aid, Legal Aid politics, art, music, Africa, the Peace Corps, *real* politics, our kids, our pasts, our fears, our disappointments, our hopes. We traded classroom war stories. We discovered common bonds. John had lost his father at an early age. I had lost my mother. We both had a child who took our nonconformity to heart. Both of us were rabid yellow dog (Northeast Reform) Democrats. We were both “sixties” kids. We preferred blue jeans to “grown-up” clothes. We trusted people who worked with their hands more than people who wore suits. We were “do-ers,” not writers. Soon, in whatever law school activity one of us did, the other was dragged along. So, John roped me into judging the Client Counseling Competition every year and I corralled him into assisting in the planning and execution of multiple social events—picnics at Art and Betty White's “estate” on the water, cocktails at the Walcks' house overlooking the river, an annual pot-luck Christmas party in the Wren Building. It wasn't difficult to get John to help. He was always doing something for someone else, be it his clients at Legal Aid, his students, his friends or helping his wife Kaye with her Montessori and other work.

* * *

As fate would have it, John was chair of the Status Committee when I went up for tenure. By now, the Law School was in its present beautiful building. John's office was beside my office, and my office was across from the faculty lounge (such as it was at the time). This made for an easy “morning commute” for our Kaffee Klatsch. The Committee had sent my tenure piece out for “outside

review.” One morning, I came to school. I knew John was in too, but he did not come into my office. At first, I thought he was busy. But even if he was busy or off to Richmond or wherever, he would still pop in to say something like “Greetings. I have to run. Break a leg.” Something was wrong.

I went to his office. “Hey, John. I missed your visit this morning.” He did not make eye contact with me. “Is something wrong?” I said. There was a long silence. He still wasn’t looking at me. A spot on his desk had his full attention. “What’s the matter, John?” I said, feeling somewhat alarmed. Finally, he looked at me.

“We got your outside review back.”

“Oh,” clueless me responded. “And ...?”

“And ... it’s not good. In fact, it’s terrible.”

“Oh,” said I, sinking into the blue chair beside his desk.

“I didn’t want to tell you. I didn’t think I *could* tell you. I feel awful,” my friend said.

I don’t remember if I cried. It would have been unremarkable if I had because that is how comfortable John always made me feel. I *do* remember that John was the one who got me through that grim day and the days that followed when my career seemed to hang on the slenderest of threads. John was the one who made me respond to the reviewer’s criticisms. (He threatened to sit on me until I did it.) John was the one who led me *and* the process to a happy conclusion. I will never forget the pain in his eyes when he gave me the bad news. I will never forget his standing by me despite the bad news. John gives the word “friend” new meaning.

* * *

John likes to work with his hands. His specialty is cedar wood carvings. In fact, the quickest way to get John excited is to find him another dead cedar tree. Over the years, John has made walking sticks, mantle pieces¹ and schools of “feely fish.” A feely fish is a piece of cedar that John carves, following the lines of the wood, into a fish shape. There are big feely fish and little ones. John always

1. See, e.g., the cedar mantle piece in Barrett’s Seafood Restaurant on South Boundary Street.

keeps a basket full of them in his house. Visitors rarely leave without one. (When I asked my kids, now grown, what they remember about John, all three independently said "feely fish.") One strokes, feels, rubs or simply holds a feely fish. The person who does so benefits from the experience. It produces a state of calm. The feely fish also benefits. The oil from human hands makes the cedar wood darker. The more a feely fish is handled, the darker and richer its hue. There's a metaphor there. John knew it all along.

Just as John believes every person is entitled to respect, so, too, every piece of wood. When the Law School was first built, it had a parquet floor. The floor suffered an early demise. Watering the plants caused pieces of parquet to pop up. After several attempts to re-glue them, the decision was made to tear the wood floor up and replace it with terrazzo. John singlehandedly manned a parquet rescue operation. He saved thousand of pieces of parquet from the trash heap. To this day, I carry a little piece of Marshall-Wythe with me, a parquet key chain, made by John Waste-Not-Want-Not Levy.

* * *

Then there were the fossiling expeditions and quests for shark's teeth that John led. All the Law School children went on one or more Levy fossiling expeditions. John had identified certain areas as good for fossiling. One was a beach in Surry County. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, John would lead his charges down to the beach. He would roll up his pant legs. The kids would roll up theirs. And for the next two hours or so, kids would run to John with a handful of "stuff" and say, "Is this one?" Nine times out of ten, it wasn't, but John would carefully examine each find, describe what he thought it was and compliment the finder. Kids love John as much as adults do.

* * *

One cannot think about John Levy without thinking of Kaye, his wife. And one cannot think of Kaye and John without thinking "that's what a good marriage looks like." Those of us lucky enough

to know them find inspiration in their palpable love, commitment and dedication to each other. Whatever Kaye is doing, John not only supports, but becomes involved in himself, and vice versa. So, John knows a lot about the Montessori method and infant massage. Kaye is intimately familiar with the politics of Legal Aid and the Law School. She has graciously hosted many gatherings—of Law School and Legal Aid folk.

Along with being devoted to one another, to their children, Shanti and Adam, and now to their two grandchildren, John and Kaye are committed to the same ideals. Try to leave people and things better than you found them. Live simply. Live in harmony with others and the environment. For those who know them, it comes as no surprise that their dream house, built on a river bank in Gloucester, does not have central heat or air-conditioning. It does have a turret, though, and beautiful cedar carvings through-out.

* * *

In one Libel Night Show, “John” came out on stage dressed in blue jeans and strumming a guitar. He had a white mop-head for hair. The portrayal was not only funny but “on point.” John is the living embodiment of all that was good about the sixties. But John would have been who he is without the sixties. John’s father was a lawyer who worked under (and for) the New Deal. John was determined to carry on his father’s legacy and he did. John has lived his life in service to others, in particular, service to the forgotten in our society. First, there was the Peace Corps in Africa. Then, there was Legal Aid. And then he began teaching and inspiring others—to practice poverty law, or to practice law with integrity, passion and compassion. He has made a difference in the lives of countless people—clients, students, colleagues, friends. He has inspired the rest of us to try to follow his example. I know there are many legal aid attorneys who wouldn’t be doing what they are doing but for John. And I wouldn’t be doing what I am doing but for John.

John is fond of saying: “I don’t know what I want to do when I grow up.” Recently, Kaye asked him: “Why don’t you find out?” And so, John Levy has decided to retire. It is a real loss for the Law

School and the Academy, but our loss will be someone else's gain. Of that, we can be sure.

They say what goes around comes around. Those of us whose lives John has touched in such profound ways hope it holds true for him. John Levy deserves only the best because he has given his best to all of us.

I know I write for everyone when I wish John everything good in the next phase of his life.

Greetings, John. And Peace. And Godspeed.