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Tribute to Barbara Salken

Joseph W. Mazel*

When Professor Salken passed away a little over a month ago, after a long and valiant battle with cancer, the Law School and its students suffered a loss that will never be able to be completely filled. We lost not only a professor who was completely dedicated to her students' learning, but one of the most zealous advocates the students have had within the faculty and the administration. I had the privilege of seeing all of the facets of Professor Salken at Pace. I had Professor Salken as professor in two courses, as my faculty advisor, and also as a mentor and lobbyist during my term as President of the Student Bar. The fact that Professor Salken was one of the most loved professors here is shown by everyone who came out tonight. All one has to do is look around at the people in the room, the number of them and the look of sadness on all their faces to see the love we felt. As a student of hers it is easy to see why. When you're in a class as difficult as evidence can be, she had a way of making everything understandable. She led us to discovery, and you can see that she taught for the very moment. She could look out into the audience and see that spark behind our eyes, which signaled we finally understood what she was trying to teach us.

She was a role model, not in the mere and paltry pursuit of excellence, but in the pursuit of perfection. As often as she taught a course or gave a lecture, every class beforehand, she squirreled herself away in her office for hours to restudy the material, rework her notes and her lecture outline. In some cases, she completely revised them to find the perfect way. We, as students, gave one hundred and ten percent because she'd accept no less. Our desire to give one hundred and ten percent came not from any fear of retribution, punishment or scorn, but only because we wanted to meet her a third of the way with what she was putting into each class. We wanted to see the

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smile from her as much as she wanted to see the spark in our eyes. She was also a role model for being an ethical lawyer. When we would discuss a case, she would always ask “Does this feel right?” and always used her position to emphasize ethics and honesty in the profession—to urge us to strive toward being the model, ideal attorney versus the stereotypical one.

As an advisor, not only did you get all the advice you needed with respect to school and course selections, but we also got advice on hundreds of other topics including how to practice as an attorney once we got out and how to be a better human being in general. I remember at the same time she was planning Billy’s Bar Mitzvah I was planning my wedding. Often after I got the advice I’d come for, we shared stories about planning our events and the things that go wrong with them, as so often they do. She also shared tidbits with me of how to succeed in marriage, how to raise children, how to be a better spouse and be a better person overall. She took the extra step to know each of us she came in contact with, be it in class or as an advisee, personally. She treated us like her extended family and she would do anything she could for us.

However, the most interesting facet of Professor Salken that I didn’t get to see until I became SBA President was how hard she worked on behalf of our students outside of the classroom. It was a unique perspective and this would be the most difficult to describe.

In faculty meetings, she was always there arguing for and on our behalf for whatever would make life better for us or easier on us. One example with how far she went on our behalf, was in designing the class schedule for each year. When I first came on, I spoke to Dean Mushlin and thought it would be nice to have some student input on the schedule. I had no idea exactly how much he would welcome it. When Dean Mushlin mentioned it to Professor Salken, who helped Dean Mushlin with the schedule, she searched me out in the hall and asked me when we wanted to sit down and meet. She embraced the idea right away. We had several meetings over the semester and each time we brought up something, as students, that we thought could be improved in the schedule, she incorporated it and worried about how she’d explain to the Deans later on. It

took hours of work, but in the end we have a much better schedule.

A second example is the effort she put forth in helping save the Prosecution of Domestic Violence Clinic. Early last spring, because of budgetary shortfalls, it was on the chopping block. Only through her help, dedication, and support were we able to save it. When I made the presentation to the Dean, she helped me marshall my facts and rehearse the delivery. She also went one step further to insure that it stayed around in perpetuity. She met with Robert Morgenthau, the Manhattan D.A., and got him to cut the course cost in half to make sure that it continued on and because she knew how valuable and important it was to the students here.

And although there are many more stories, and since I've probably gone on too long already, I want to wrap up. But before I conclude, I want to thank for myself and on behalf of the student body, Professor Salken's husband Matt, her son Billy and the rest of her family for being so selfless and generous to share some of her remaining precious moments with us right up to the very end.