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Tribute to Barbara Salken

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Tribute

What can one say about Barbara Salken? To recite her “tangible” accomplishments as a teacher, scholar, and colleague is almost certainly to miss the point and to understate her contributions. Any attempt to convey a real sense of her as a person through words on a page is doomed to failure. This is a person of whom one can truly say, “You had to be there.”

Students were the center of Barbara’s professional life for all her thirteen years with us. I number among my colleagues many gifted and generous teachers. It in no respect denigrates their professionalism or dedication to observe that none of us worked harder than Barbara to ensure that each class meeting was as good as it could be and finely tuned to promoting genuine understanding and enjoyment of the subject. We all know what kind of classes Barbara taught; it says quite a lot that she won the Outstanding Professor award three times in seven years—twice after she became ill but continued to teach with undiminished enthusiasm. And yet, she would return to her office after a class and spend hours trying to figure out how she could make it better the next time she taught the course. There was no sense in her of “having the course under control,” and perhaps she was so good precisely because she never thought she was good enough.

One incident in her last year demonstrates as well as anything can her fanatic devotion to doing the best she could for her students. Following an exhausting spring semester, Barbara nonetheless decided that she was dissatisfied with the evidence casebook she had been using, and she resolved to adopt a new book for the fall semester. As any teacher will attest, picking up a new book, even in a course one has taught many times, is a formidable undertaking. There are many good things that may come from doing so: it may reinvigorate the teacher or offer a new and deeper perspective on the substance of the course; if the professor has chosen well, the students almost certainly benefit. No one, though, has ever said it is easy. Barbara didn’t care about the additional work that such a path demanded, even with her diminishing energy. All she cared about was that

she thought she could do better for her students, so she made the change. Even as I admired her spirit and was awestruck by her energy output, I had to wonder whether I was witnessing dedication, masochism, insanity, or perhaps a mixture of the three. But it was for her students (then unmet), and so it had to be done. No profession can have enough members who approach their work that way, and none can afford the loss of even one.

This note would not be complete without acknowledgment of the contributions to Barbara that her students made year after year. Part of Barbara's ability to expend the enormous amounts of energy she did after she became ill came from the support of her classes. Many students have commented on how Barbara was able to make each of them feel important as a person when they were in her classes; that was one of her great gifts. In return, she drew on their love and admiration, which helped her far more than her students likely can make themselves believe. But it is a fact and deserves joyous affirmation. All of us, at various times, wished we could "do something" to help during Barbara's struggle. Barbara's students, current and former, did something, and they did so most emphatically. They did it by appreciating Barbara, by working hard for her and with her, and by offering her their energy and enthusiasm to help sustain her own. If that sort of symbiotic relationship isn't what teaching is about, then it isn't about anything.

—Don Doernberg