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Memorial: John J. McNeill (1949-2016)

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Memorial: John J. McNeill (1949–2016)

“Jack Made a Lasting and Unique Impact on the Pace Law Library”*

¶1 John McNeill, better known as Jack, died on January 18, 2016, after a lengthy battle with prostate cancer. Jack began working at Pace Law School (now known as Elisabeth Haub School of Law) in September 2000, where he initially served as head of reference services. Two years later, he was promoted to associate director, the position from which he retired in December 2015. He is survived by his sister and brother, two nephews, a niece, and five great-nieces and -nephews.

¶2 Jack was a native of Long Island, New York, and received a B.A. from New York University in 1982. He worked as a library assistant at New York University as an undergraduate and continued to work there as a student at New York Law School. After graduation from law school in 1987, Jack relocated to Florida, where he was the evening circulation supervisor at Florida Atlantic University. He later moved to St. Thomas University School of Law Library in Miami and earned an M.L.S. from the University of South Florida in 1994. At St. Thomas, Jack worked in several different positions—circulation/reserve librarian, faculty services coordinator, international law librarian, and webmaster. During this time, he was also running a private law practice, which enabled him to draw on his own real-life experiences when assisting patrons at the reference desk.

¶3 At Pace, Jack taught legal research in the first-year Legal Skills program. He served as liaison to the Environmental Law program, and wrote a blog (PEN-e) devoted to environmental law and related subject areas that was ranked as one of the top fifty environmental law blogs by LexisNexis in 2011. He provided coverage at the reference desk, and students knew they could ask him anything because he was very approachable; he always went out of his way to help them.

¶4 It is not an exaggeration to say that Jack’s fingerprints are all over the Pace Law Library. Jack’s mother was a gifted amateur painter, and Jack must have inherited some of her artistic talent and spatial awareness; he was able to visualize space in a way that eluded others. He played a major role during the library renovation project of 2006–2007, helping to develop a plan to reconfigure the physical plant and reorganize the collection after the architects the university had hired proved remarkably incapable of producing a workable design.

¶5 Jack’s knowledge of history and unbounded optimism about the future fueled his drive to institute the archival collections that are now housed in the Pace Law Library. He created the law school archives because he believed that the public record of the school should be preserved for the future. Jack was also concerned about preserving the legal history of the development of environmental law in New

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York State, and he secured a grant from New York State's Documentary Heritage Program for the David Sive Environmental Law Collection. Jack supervised the administration of the grant and was proud of Pace's role in making these archival records accessible to scholars.

¶6 Jack's interest in art was invaluable when we visited the law school storage area and discovered a number of attractive artworks that now hang in the library; he created educational and entertaining descriptions for each piece, tracking down information about artists and provenance with tenacity. Jack applied successfully for two traveling exhibitions that were displayed at Pace Law School: "Lincoln, the Constitution and the Civil War" (Spring 2012) and "Magna Carta: Enduring Legacy 1215–2015" (Fall 2015). The Lincoln exhibit was made possible by Jack's winning grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities—Small Grants to Libraries program.

¶7 Jack was an outgoing, friendly person and enjoyed being professionally active. In 1995–1996, he served as president of the South Florida Association of Law Libraries. He served as chair of AALL's Academic Libraries Special Interest Section in 2010–2011 and was vice chair/chair-elect the year before. Jack had a unique ability to connect with people and made friends wherever he worked; at conferences, someone was sure to inquire about Jack and ask to be remembered to him.

¶8 Jack loved to travel and planned his trips so that he could visit as many court libraries as possible on each journey. His interest in court libraries was not limited to how they were organized or the materials in the collection—he also wanted to know about their histories and to appreciate their architecture and design. He visited a number of our national parks and also enjoyed spending time with his family at New York's beautiful Lake George. After a colleague visited Ireland several years ago, she extolled the beauty of the country, the friendliness of the people, and the wonderful food. Shortly thereafter, Jack planned his own trip to Ireland, the only time he made a foreign trip. Jack was very proud of his Irish heritage and was moved by seeing the *Book of Kells*, Dublin and its stately Georgian architecture and jewel-like St. Stephen's Green, the Ring of Kerry, and some of the places where his ancestors had lived.

¶9 Jack frequently returned to Florida, where he had a wide circle of friends. While living in Miami, Jack particularly enjoyed attending the annual SunFest, a music and arts festival; beautifully framed SunFest posters brightened Jack's office at Pace and were a vivid reminder of a place he loved. Jack found Florida's warm winters much more to his liking than New York's long, dismal winters. He often spent a week in Florida during Pace's February break and always returned to work visibly recharged. Jack eventually purchased an apartment near the beach; unfortunately, as his illness progressed, he was not able to spend much time there.

¶10 When his illness began to take a heavy toll on him, Jack was sustained by his deep religious faith. He had been devastated by his diagnosis, but did not complain about his bad luck; rather, he learned all he could about his condition and set about seeking treatment. No matter how bad things got, he would smile and say, "Not to worry. It's all good." His positive attitude was an inspiration.

¶11 Jack enjoyed working with Pace's students and faculty, several of whom shared remembrances of Jack on the library's blog and Facebook page. As Professor Peter Widulski put it in his remembrance of Jack, "I met with him many times when he was dealing with the extraordinary suffering and hardships caused by his illness. He endured this suffering with patience and courage. I never heard a word of anger or resentment cross his lips." Walter Lake, a student, summed up the Pace community's reaction to Jack's death: "He was always so helpful and thoughtful. His contributions to the Pace Law Library and to the individual research capabilities of the Library's students and alumni were significant and long-lasting. . . . [H]e was indeed a true gentleman—always gracious, caring and kind. He set a sterling example."

¶12 Everyone who knew Jack will attest to his sweet, gentle nature, his patience, and his kindness. In every sense of the word, he was a gentleman. Jack made a lasting and unique impact on the Pace Law Library and the Pace community, and he will be missed.—*Marie Stefanini Newman*¹ and *Vicky Gannon*²

"I Miss His Wise Counsel and Sense of Humor"

¶13 Jack McNeill was a compassionate, gentle person who was easy to talk to and a true friend to everyone he came in contact with at work. His faith underpinned all his interactions. He took nothing for granted, even the prayers that we sent his way. I remember meeting him at breakfast at the AALL convention before he came to work at Pace. I felt comfortable with him immediately. He squired several of us around Orlando and happily drove us to the Morse Museum without complaint. He was a calm and steadying influence in the time leading up to our renovations. Best of all, he was always ready to listen to our problems, large and small, and interested in our lives. I miss his wise counsel and sense of humor. At his wake, we were surrounded by wonderful photos of Jack at all stages of his life. The priest reminded us that we could still confide in Jack. I like to think that he can still favor us with his peace.—*Alice Pidgeon*³

"Jack Loved Cars"***

¶14 Jack loved cars, motorcycles, and music, and we always knew it was his cell phone ringing when we heard reggae music coming from his office. I vividly remember when he took some of the reference staff on a joy ride in his bright yellow Mustang convertible. Luckily, he did not get a speeding ticket that day, and we returned wind-blown and exhilarated.

1. Law Library Director and Professor of Law, Elisabeth Haub School of Law, Pace University, White Plains, New York.

2. Head of Circulation/Reference Librarian, Elisabeth Haub School of Law, Pace University, White Plains, New York.

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3. Head of Technical Services, Elisabeth Haub School of Law, Pace University, White Plains, New York.

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¶15 My favorite Jack story is one he related to me a couple of years ago when he returned from his trip to Ireland. He told me that he had a blast driving around the narrow country roads, and I asked him whether he was nervous driving in Ireland. He said of course not, that when he rented the car he made sure he bought the kind of insurance that, when he returned the car to the rental company all banged up, the agent would thank him and tell him that he was welcome to rent from them any time. I can only imagine what that rental car looked like.

¶16 RIP, Jack.—Cynthia Pittson⁴

“It’s All Good”

¶17 When Jack McNeill first came to Pace Law Library, I was the one who was asked to assist and accompany him in finding his first home in Westchester. I remember Jack as seeming quiet and nervous; perhaps it was because he was so unfamiliar with his new surroundings or probably because he had to spend a lot of time in a car with a very rambunctious and animated Italian woman—not quite sure which. I remember looking at him and thinking, “What a nice and gentle soul.”

¶18 Jack was a very courageous and religious man with a huge heart, a sweet smile, and a very witty sense of humor who always seemed to find laughter and peace in dealing with the many different circumstances of life. His eyes and expressions automatically had a way of communicating his kindness and compassion, and his sincere devotion and determination to follow his beliefs and to assist, aid, and support others enduringly had a way of putting one at ease.

¶19 Jack’s conviction and commitment to supply individuals with a life of hope, care, and recognition were what drove him to be the voice, the strength, and the defender of the many less fortunate. He was involved in organizations and events that helped to educate people of the horrific turmoil, struggles, and suffering that are taking place all over our world, and his messages of urgency can be found resonating through the many facets of multimedia.

¶20 Jack was a fighter, and he didn’t want others to worry as he became more and more ill. Jack’s efforts to soothe and instill optimism and reassurance, by which he maintained the phrase, “It’s all good,” was his way of instilling in us his faith, admiration, and love for God.

¶21 Jack’s inspiration to stimulate laughter and fun was always evident. He would continually repeat the words, “Are we all happy?” as he walked by or into a room, and his announcement of funny lines like, “What—no cookies?” as he approached an empty desk or table were unfailingly successful in circulating a sense of fun and encouragement for his fellow coworkers. Jack so loved to joke around, and his amusing disposition never failed either him or us.—*Maria Cuccurullo*⁵

4. Head of Reference Services, Elisabeth Haub School of Law, Pace University, White Plains, New York.

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5. Technical Services Assistant, Elisabeth Haub School of Law, Pace University, White Plains, New York.

“We Shared a Very Special Bond”*

¶22 I first met Jack McNeill in July 2005, when I joined Pace Law Library. His sweet smile will be permanently imbedded in my head. Jack was one of the kindest people I will ever know. He was sweet, gentle, and understanding. Jack was not just my colleague but also my friend, and we shared a very special bond. He always supported me and always advised me to never stop and to keep going after my dreams.

¶23 I miss Jack McNeill every day. Jack was a true fighter and never ever complained. Jack will be missed here at Pace, and his words, “Don’t worry about a thing, it’s going to be all right, be happy,” belonged to a favorite song of his. When he would ask me, “How you doing?” and I would tell him I was trying to hang in there, his helpful words, “Come on, stop hanging and get on up there,” would always make me feel better. Jack gave me and so many others the strength to keep going and never look back.—*Pamela Harcharan*⁶

“Willingness to Take on New Challenges”**

¶24 I first met John McNeill in my interview with the librarians at St. Thomas University. I quickly learned that no one called him John—he was just Jack. I had the great pleasure of working with Jack at St. Thomas University. I remember Jack arriving to work on his motorcycle, commuting from Palm Beach County. I think that one of the things that had attracted him to South Florida was the ability to ride his motorcycle throughout the year. He was quiet and unassuming, but as I got to know him, I was struck by the depth of his experience and his willingness to take on new challenges. He had a charm that endeared him to the law students and faculty at St. Thomas, and though a quiet and thoughtful librarian, I learned that he was much more: a great friend, willing to take on new challenges and to engage in change from a young director with a lot of ideas. I treasure the chance meetings at conferences as we both moved on in our careers. These meetings often ended in us having lunch together, and I always enjoyed the chance to catch up, reminisce, and enjoy each other’s company.—*Gordon Russell*⁷

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6. Collection Maintenance Coordinator/ILL Assistant, Elisabeth Haub School of Law, Pace University, White Plains, New York.

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7. Associate Dean, Library Director and Professor of Law, Duncan School of Law, Lincoln Memorial University, Knoxville, Tennessee.