



A life of .  
service

## For more than 28 years, Dean W. Gary Vause worked tirelessly to raise the bar at the law school he loved

Even as a youngster, W. Gary Vause knew something about lawyers. And he knew something else, too: He didn't want to work in the timber industry, like his father did.

W. Gary Vause, vice president and dean of Stetson University Law School, died May 9 at his Gulfport home, one day before Stetson's 103rd Spring Commencement. He recalled his youth and highlights of his lengthy career during an interview conducted a few weeks before his death.

"When I was a boy in Tallahassee, back in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was really something to be a lawyer," Dean Vause recalled. "A lawyer was a statesman, a leader in the community. I really looked up to the lawyers I knew through my father and my family."

But it was Dean Vause's father who motivated his son to pursue a good education. The elder Vause was a hard worker and a good provider, but he had not had the luxury of an education, and he earned his living through hard labor in the logging and timber industry. Sometimes the elder Vause would take his young son along to the worksite, where he would carry water to weary workers and do other chores.

"My father would say, 'Son, do you like doing this kind of work?' I would always say, 'No, I don't,'" Dean Vause said. "His answer was always the same — if you don't get an education you'll be doing this for the rest of your life. That was the biggest incentive I had to get out there. I knew I had to work and get a college education."

The dean's education began in the same six-room Tallahassee elementary school his mother had attended.

The Vauses could trace their Tallahassee roots to the early 1800s, when family members moved to the newly established north Florida capital city from South Carolina. The Vause Tallahassee farm remains in the family to this day.

Wanting a college education was one thing; financing it was another. Gary Vause began his college tuition strategy while he was still attending Leon High School. With a loan co-signed by his father, he bought a new 1958 Volkswagen and used it to deliver newspapers before and after school. During the next four years, he would rise at 4 a.m. daily and deliver the Tallahassee morning newspaper, the *Florida Times Union*. After school, he would deliver the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

"At one point, I had about one thousand papers on my route," the dean recalled. "I would remove the passenger seat to get all those papers into the VW."

During his last two years of high school and then his first two years at Florida State, a young Gary Vause traveled more 200,000 miles of county roads and used up four Volkswagens. But he had accomplished his goal — he earned enough money to become the first member of the Vause family to attend college.

After two years at Florida State, the Cuban Missile Crisis made international news, and Gary Vause felt a strong sense of duty.

"In my family we have a long tradition of military service," he said. "Being 20 years old, I felt it was my turn, so I enlisted in the Air Force." After a series of tests in various areas, the Air Force recommended a more extensive series of language tests. Gary Vause



Dean Vause first joined Stetson as assistant dean in August 1975 after establishing a thriving legal practice in Connecticut.



As associate dean, Vause played a critical role in establishing Stetson's international presence, including the LL.M. program.



In his four years as University Vice President and Dean, Vause launched a part-time program, \$12 million campaign, and the Tampa Law Center and Campus.



A true Renaissance man, Dean Gary Vause traveled to six continents over his lifetime. Above, Dean Vause travels via camel over a prairie in Inner Mongolia, China in Spring 1988.



A dedicated teacher, Dean Vause taught courses in international business law to a generation of Stetson students. He also delivered lectures and short courses in dozens of foreign countries, including China.



Dean Vause built relationships with local, state and federal officials to expand Stetson's reach and reputation. Above, Dean Vause presents a Stetson hat to U.S. Rep. Bill Young, who spoke at the December 2001 graduation.



One of Dean Vause's greatest legacies will be the Stetson Law Center and Campus under construction in downtown Tampa. Above, Second District Court of Appeals Chief Judge Chris Altenbernd, Dean Vause and Board of Overseers Chair Judge Thomas Stringer '74 sign the historic agreement that will make Stetson the first law school in Florida and one of the first in the nation to house a working court.

scored on top, and found himself in a one-year language program at Yale University.

"The Air Force gave me the option of studying Russian, Korean, Chinese and others," he recalled. "I chose Chinese. I would wear my uniform to class. I studied Chinese all day and studied more in a lab at night."

After completing the Yale program, the young airman was sent overseas as a part of a small intelligence unit that monitored Chinese Air Force communications. After his overseas tour of duty, Sergeant Vause was assigned to a base near Springfield, Mass. In January 1963, after an honorable discharge, he went directly to the University of Connecticut, first to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree and then to earn his J.D. degree. While at the University of Connecticut Law School, he edited the *Connecticut Law Review*, "enjoyed some good clerking experience," and developed an interest in collective bargaining law.

Upon graduation, the dean had offers from several law firms, but he decided instead to open his own practice in Hartford, Conn. "I was out of school for about six months when the University of Connecticut asked if I would teach a course in labor law," he said. "I taught as an adjunct for four-and-a-half years. I really liked it a lot and gained a lot of experience in practice at the same time."

During that time, his law firm was growing at the rate of one new lawyer per year. But in 1974, after a number of years as a successful attorney, he traveled back to his home state to take the Florida bar exam. Afterwards, he visited his sister Suzanne, who then lived in Tampa. While on an afternoon drive together, the two decided to visit Stetson University College of Law.

"I had heard a lot about Stetson and wanted to see it," he recalled. "So we stopped by with no appointment, and there sits Dorothy Bishop at her same desk. I asked her if the dean was available. She gave me a rather serious look and said, 'Do you have an appointment?' I said, 'Well, no, actually I don't.' But she went in and talked to the dean and came back and told me the dean would see me. It was Dean Richard Dillon."

"During that conversation, Dean Dillon told me about a problem he had with a new federal law. It just so happened that was what I did in my practice. We sat down together with the problem and in about 15 minutes, I gave him the answer he needed. So that's the way we started our relationship — pure serendipity."

A few months later, Dean Dillon asked Gary Vause to join the Stetson Law faculty as assistant dean. Dean Dillon wanted someone who had a combination of teaching, publication, administrative and practical experience. The firm of Vause, Sullivan, Lettick and Schoen lost its founding partner, but the

team would remain close friends.

When Dean Vause joined Stetson in August 1975, the student body was comprised of about 400 students. The school had three full-time administrators; the dean, assistant dean and business manager. "I handled anything the dean needed me to handle and taught one or two courses per semester," he said. "I enjoyed the combination of teaching and administration."

Stetson's faculty carried a very heavy teaching load, making it very difficult for members to find the time to publish articles. Most other law schools faced the same challenges in those days, Dean Vause said. "We subsequently made the decision, Dean Dillon and I, to hire faculty members who could bring more publication and scholarship to the classroom," he said. "We recognized the need to change the profile of Stetson."

Stetson's profile has changed significantly since then. Many programs were built out of a catalog of international contacts established by Dean Vause, who was frequently sought out by foreign governments and educational institutions to teach or lecture.

"I saw an important priority to develop a profile on the international scene for Stetson," he said. "Many law schools had developed summer abroad programs but we had none. We did not have graduate programs. We had an occasional speaker on international matters. I had taught international business transactions since 1985 and I could see that there was growing interest in that. I began to push hard for summer abroad programs, for formal exchange programs with foreign universities, for official visitation programs and for an LL.M. program in international law. They all came to fruition."

Dean Vause continued to pursue Stetson's international profile when he became associate dean of international programs in 1997, and when he was named Stetson's vice president and dean in 1999.

"The school has changed dramatically since my first days and has become much more competitive," he said. "As the years passed, law applicants became more demanding, and expected more for their investment. There are many more law schools now, 10 of them in Florida, so that has meant that law schools have had to give attention to matters they were able to neglect 25 or 30 years ago, such as student services or career placement."

"We have a very different attitude today. Stetson now

has one of the strongest academic support programs in the country. Those types of changes have occurred in part because of competition, but also because of shifts in what society feels is important."

Dean Vause said Stetson now pays more attention to student services, to helping students in need, and to career placement and scholarships. "It is a much more caring environment, and I feel I had a part in that," he said. "I feel the law school is more business-like and professional about the way it does things, and is a much better steward of the resources it is given."

Dean Vause also took great pride in the relationship that Stetson now maintains with its graduates, and enjoyed seeing grads come back to the campus to take part in the Stetson community.

"It makes you feel good to see people that you taught maintain a relationship with the institution," he said. "There is that very personal reason to maintain good alumni relations. Alumni help us in so many ways, not only monetarily. For example, they can recommend good students to us. I've seen this happen many, many times. A student who could go to any one of the top 10 law schools in the country would apply to Stetson because an alum had said, 'You ought to go to Stetson.'"

Alumni are also indispensable allies when it comes to making and maintaining long-term alliances for the law school. And, he said, alumni always benefit when the school's fortunes go up.

"That Stetson law degree is going to be there permanently," he said. "It will never change to any other school. If Stetson's reputation takes a nose dive, that degree takes a nose dive. If Stetson continues to go upward and improve its reputation, than the reputation of that degree improves, as well. It has the potential to be a mutually supportive and mutually satisfactory relationship."

During his 28 years at Stetson, he served as professor of law, assistant dean, associate dean, director of the Center for Dispute Resolution, associate dean of international programs, university vice president and dean.

In the years he was at Stetson, Dean Vause led a small Florida law school to national and international prominence. Along the way, he touched the lives of many students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends. He will be missed, but his legacy will live on.

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*"Gary was respected  
by all, and was a  
dear colleague and  
friend."*

*- H. DOUGLAS LEE -*

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