

A BEST FRIEND RECALLED

Thomas Sullivan*

I once told Gary Vause what a New York City firefighter said after the department's chaplain was killed by falling debris from the twin towers while ministering to a victim of the World Trade Center attack. The firefighter recalled the chaplain suggesting to firefighters that if they wanted to make God laugh, all they had to do was to tell him what their plans were for tomorrow. Gary appreciated this anecdote about life's essential irony. When it became clear that his death was imminent, Gary's one comment to me on the matter was that he was "philosophical about such things." If he was angry about the hand he had been dealt, it was not out of self-pity, but because he loved his wife, his family, and life, and because there was still much work to be done.

It was sometime in the 1970–1971 academic year that my friendship with Gary began. I was studying in the library of the University of Connecticut School of Law (UCONN) and Gary approached me, in his affable way, to say hello. I had returned to UCONN as a second-year law student under the school's readmission program for students who had been inducted into the military after completing their first year of law school. Gary and I had become acquainted two years earlier as first-year law students, so we knew one another by sight. Over lunch, he told me that he was a sole practitioner and also General Counsel for the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE). That summer, Gary got me a job with CABE, and I was assigned to "analyze" Connecticut school board-teacher union contracts. That work was my introduction to labor relations and employment law in the public schools, an area of the law hardly known at that time and not yet taught in law school.

After my admission to the bar and a short stint as a general practitioner in New Haven, Gary asked me to join him in the

* © 2003, Thomas Sullivan. All rights reserved. Partner, Sullivan, Schoen, Campana & Connon, L.L.C. B.A., Fairfield University, 1967; J.D., *with honors*, University of Connecticut School of Law, 1972.

practice of law. I gladly accepted, as by now we had become fast friends and Gary's practice, with its emphasis on education law and public sector labor relations, provided a cutting-edge opportunity. Gary and I practiced law together in Connecticut for a few years until circumstances drew him back to his native state, Florida, in 1974. Nevertheless, our friendship grew. As Director of the Center for Dispute Resolution, Gary appointed me to the Center's Advisory Council, and I often traveled to Gulfport to consult with him on programs for the Center and to be an occasional presenter in some of those programs. Of course, these trips were also a welcome break from law practice for me and from law school administration for Gary.

Of the many places Gary introduced me to on my early trips to Florida, the place we visited most was Busch Gardens. Here we would walk and talk, ride the roller-coasters, and wet our whistles at the hospitality house. Gary loved to ride the roller-coasters. The *Python* was his favorite, until the *Montu* appeared. But the conversations were the best part of these Busch Gardens adventures. Always solicitous of how I was doing and how the law practice was going, Gary would not speak of himself or of his work at Stetson University College of Law until I broached these topics. Then, he would tell me things in his measured manner, with as few words as necessary to make the point, and a dialectical process would begin. "Tom, I'm thinking about dealing with the problem this way, what do you think?" I knew it was likely that Gary had already decided how to deal with the problem, but perhaps he felt that hearing from his old buddy might provide useful reinforcement. I enjoyed this little game of ours, not the least because Gary's description of a situation or personality was always entertaining. Gary had a Southern brand of homespun humor that was part Mark Twain and part Will Rogers. He could turn a phrase like no one else I knew, and the result was often highly amusing. This was not artfulness, just Gary's way of conversing.

My time with Gary was not confined to Busch Gardens or the other Florida attractions we visited through the years. Gary loved New York City, and when he came to the City on business, I would meet him and his wife Celia for a Broadway show and a visit to one of Gary's favorite Manhattan restaurants. On these trips and on other trips to places Gary loved to visit, such as Boston, Newport, Washington D.C., and New Orleans, the dialectic would resume. Celia was always most gracious in encouraging the

“two buddies” to spend some time together. On the lower East Side of New York, where my parents were raised, was McSorley’s Tavern, a New York City landmark that Gary loved the moment I introduced him to it. Celia had no interest in drinking establishments, but would gladly agree to shop in Midtown while Gary and I resumed the dialectical process over a mug of McSorley’s ale.

Celia always encouraged me to visit Florida. She knew that, when I did, Gary would take a few days off from work, and she felt this was good for him. I readily obliged at every opportunity. On those occasions when Celia would make a trip without Gary to visit her family in Brazil, she always encouraged the two of us to plan a trip of our own. With Celia’s loving guidance, my friendship with Gary thrived, and I will always be grateful to her for that.

On our last visit, shortly before his death, Gary briefly left home for the office to deal with a difficult issue for which he was responsible as Dean, one that could have been delegated under the circumstances. Though physically frail and dependent on Celia to drive him to the office, and although he dreaded what he had to do, Gary was determined to handle the matter himself because he considered it his duty to do so. It was an act of courage and dedication, and so characteristic of Gary, though to think of it in those terms would never have occurred to him.

Gary and I came from different places. He was a good old boy from the Deep South, and I was a Brooklyn-born Yankee raised in New England. But we were both blessed with parents who taught us that, as my father used to say, “Hard work isn’t easy.” For Gary, only family and friendship were more important than work. He knew that nothing of significance could be accomplished without tireless dedication, whether it was the realization of a downtown campus for the law school or writing a scholarly piece on international trade. Gary’s enormous accomplishments at Stetson, the fruit of his tireless dedication, are part of his legacy as is the success of the law practice he founded in Hartford. Though it no longer bears his name, the Hartford firm bears Gary’s imprint, just as Stetson always will. But more importantly, Gary leaves the indelible imprint of himself on our lives. Gary’s life was in the entrepreneurial spirit of the country he loved, but he also lived life in the spirit of giving. He was a man of action who accomplished much, but as he did, he was ever mindful of the interests of others. To me, he was both friend and mentor, and I know he

would have done anything for me, provided he was convinced that it was for the best.