

A LESSON IN COURAGE

Robert D. Batey*

What I remember most about Dean W. Gary Vause is his courage.

Of course, like many law faculty, Gary had the courage of his convictions: When he thought he was right, he stuck to his guns, no matter what. Because we frequently disagreed, I was usually on the receiving end of this determination, as he affably, but implacably, overcame those who opposed him.

But I remember a different kind of courage, a physical one that is rare in academe. It first struck me about twenty years ago. We had a male student with serious mental problems who withdrew, then sought readmission, was denied, and asked for an on-campus meeting to reconsider the decision. The student showed up for the meeting on a warm summer day wearing an oversized leather jacket, which he would not unbutton. My first thought as I greeted him was that the jacket hid a gun or a bomb, and I was petrified.

Throughout the meeting, which was held in a small room with little opportunity for escape if the situation turned violent, I was very shaky. But Gary—fully aware of the danger—sat down near the student and rather casually asked him the questions necessary to justify our refusal to readmit him. After the student left, I complimented Gary on his exemplary behavior, but he characteristically belittled the threat he had faced so calmly.

I never forgot that episode. It made me think that Gary was a man capable of actions far beyond the ordinary. I often mused about whether he had a secret life as a government agent. Think about it: His military background, the special language training he received, his globe-trotting ways—and being a law professor would be a perfect cover for a CIA operative! These thoughts returned again in the early days of this spring when I realized I had not seen Gary in weeks. One of the things I actually considered—

* © 2003, Robert D. Batey. All rights reserved. Professor, Stetson University College of Law.

before the truth became known—was that he was off on some spy mission. A far-fetched notion, but for a man like Gary, not an impossible one.

But we soon learned that Gary was enacting a different kind of courage, one incomparably finer than my silly daydreams of derring-do. Facing a dread disease, he chose to soldier on through a rigorous course of chemotherapy, sharing his burden with very few, and enduring the inevitable petty indignities of being an academic administrator with a stoic, even good-natured, calm. And when he learned that he would lose his battle with cancer, he put his duties as Dean first, planning for a smooth transition while attempting to deceive us about his prognosis, so that we would not let concern for him obstruct our work as students and faculty or our joy in celebrating graduation.

Gary's last days were incredibly brave. He faced death with a surpassing equanimity. He was even capable of making little jokes—evoking W.C. Fields, for example, when talking about using the cane he was obliged to walk with to ward off children and small dogs—thus showing a wry sense of humor that many of us never fully appreciated. And he made a point of discussing his colon cancer, so that others would be conscious of the prevalence of the disease and the need to prevent and treat it.

After Hubert Humphrey lost his gallant fight with cancer, Walter Mondale said of the former Vice President that, “he taught us how to die.” Though I suspect Gary had little liking for either of these two politicians, Mondale's comment about Humphrey is even more true of Gary. He died with honor, humility, good humor, and good will; he was courageous to the last. It is a final lesson we should never forget.