

AN ORAL TRIBUTE ANNOTATED

James J. Brown*

I made the oral tribute to Dean W. Gary Vause on Monday, May 12, 2003, at the Most Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church in Gulfport, Florida. The oral tribute appears on the left side of this and subsequent pages. In addition, on the right, I have annotated selected paragraphs to illuminate Gary for those who did not have the privilege of knowing him.

Celia, thank you for this honor.—Family members—Friends.

Twenty-two years of being his colleague started coming back into focus as the shocking disorientation of his accelerated final days had slowly receded. That focus was quickened by Celia Vause's request that I be one of four faculty colleagues to speak at the memorial service—a request that I assumed also reflected Gary's wishes in his final days. What had I done to earn this place of honor? How was it that I was so surprised at the call?

Initially, I knew that this honor was not based on a long and deep social friendship. Our families were friends, but not more than that. We did not gather for personal celebrations, like anniversaries. So the request had to be based on other factors, some of which I could only guess. Because Gary was a very private person, as you know from others in this issue, I will never know for certain. As I speculated, I began to visualize him.

From twenty-two years of being his colleague, I see in my mind's eye scattered aspects of Gary as ripples he created in our Stetson pond—ripples that washed

I saw in my mind's eye scattered aspects of Gary, the man. But how was I going to understand him from these glimpses? How was I to interpret these to comprehend his influence? I knew that I had to bring all of these fragments into a sharper focus to counteract the vagaries of memory and time. They were like puzzle pieces that, if assembled into a picture, would help me define Gary's strengths and influence.

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over me—so I will *organize and highlight* them now because I never want to forget them.

In my mind's eye is a Thanksgiving dinner, soon after his Mother had passed; there were a few non-academic friends, two students without nearby families—I see a relaxed, smiling Gary taking a big second helping of Millie's, my wife's, garlic and cheese grits—baked toasty brown on the top and crispy on the sides—he was a true Florida boy!!

But a very special one; I saw it in his WALK, in his BEARING, {Oh, how I longed to be so TALL}, in his DE-MEANOR.

I still see his **style, class, and dignity.** He looked and acted the role model for

Gary usually projected a dignified, reserved image. From my first meeting with him to those meetings much later, this is how I had seen him. He was not the sort of person who “gave you the glad hand” or unreservedly patted you on the back at any opportunity. Recognition, and possibly praise, was limited or reserved for special occasions—usually unexpected moments. He let you know in subtle ways that you were doing right, such as by a choice appointment, which was a sure sign of his trust in you and your judgment. Evidently, a prime source of his perceptions were his many observations of us at faculty and committee meetings. The extent to which we projected an objectivity and balance, even when opposing popular but irrational views, must have comprised Gary's judgment of us.

As the years passed, when our meetings were just the two of us, the reserve was overshadowed by a broad smile, deliberate handshake, and relaxed manner. He became animated in his demeanor while maintaining his characteristic class and dignity.

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future professionals.

In our school, I see him **affecting change** by facilitating it, not dictating it. He used suggestion most often, not the power of the offices he held. I remember a time in the mid-80s when he was Associate Dean—acting as an ombudsman to work quietly between differing sides. He affected change for this faculty.

Gary affected change, which when one is an associate dean or dean, means resolving problems that have the potential for creating time-consuming complications. I remember one instance in which some of my students became very exercised over the amount of course work I expected of them. They thought that in comparison to other courses, I was overzealous or naive about what they could reasonably achieve in any week. So, into the Associate Dean's office went the more vocal few from this second-year class seeking relief from their perceived academic burden. Gary listened patiently, no doubt, and eventually said something like this: "Well, since you have not sought to air your grievance with your professor, I will look into it for you." He would use his office as an intermediary conduit—like an ombudsman—to bridge an evident lack of communication.

Soon thereafter, Gary came to my office for a quiet, closed-door chat. I remember it as a pleasant, albeit surprising one. Gary did not rail against the students, generally or specifically, nor did he berate my efforts to cause them to explore supplementary sources to their casebook reading assignments. Instead, our conversation about the class subject matter, one that he had taught, was focused upon my academic objectives. He injected the student concerns only as a means for isolating components of my objectives. As I remember, he suggested that I might rethink my weekly assignments and expectations against those goals. He neither said that I was being too harsh nor unrealistically naive. He neither told me what to do nor suggested a different course of conduct. He merely caused me to see the various aspects of this small academic dilemma. He subtly opened my eyes to a perceptual concern to which I was blinded by my own absorption in the minutia of the subject matter. Gary caused me to come back up from that depth to realize that some of my students were not keeping up with me and that they likely were not as personally absorbed in self-learning as I wanted them to be. Of course, after my own reanalysis, I made necessary adjustments. Thus, he facilitated the exercise of academic freedom to achieve a result that was in the best interest of the professor and his students. In his last year, Gary worked a similar magic to achieve the best interest of the parties by resolving a faculty problem with the same quiet diplomacy as demonstrated to me years ago.

I speak about new initiatives, new directions for our professional growth. He achieved these improvements, once again, in understated ways.

I see him as builder of the school's Tampa Program—although locally approved during Dean Liz Moody's term, he personally had to convince the opposing interests in the accrediting organization of our merits. Undoubtedly, it was his exceptional self-control that carried the day. Cool, verbally precise under pressure—not flustered by the emotions of others. It's especially important not to forget this because he never let on how hard those multiple efforts were!!! *I see that he leaves us better than we were.* These aspects are the hallmarks of a **true leader.**

I see him addressing the assembled faculty, administrators, staff (all of them), and student leaders

He affected change by a welcoming acceptance of new, creative faculty ideas for specialized courses and topical concentrations. He wanted his faculty to develop their expertise.

The Tampa Law Center and Campus for part-time students was, in concept and its initial details, an effort pioneered by Dean Liz Moody, who was effectively instrumental in convincing the faculty to support its implementation for the long-term good of the school. However, when that package was presented to the national accrediting authorities, it ran into objections. It was Gary who personally advanced Stetson's case on several occasions before this national body.

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to chronicle the year's achievements, to praise the team to which he was turning over controls, and to admit, at last, his year's medical struggle. Unflinching, dry-eyed, raw courage in the face of adversity. Later, I said to Connie Evans, wife of and mother of Marines, that the presentation took the courage of a Marine; his own service, the Air Force, would have been doubly proud, I'm sure.

Finally, **I see personal qualities of self-effacing humility**: I would like to have seen, after several years of working with him, the look on my own face when I first learned of his mastery of the very difficult languages of Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese.

Of substance and depth: in professional achievement without overt self-promotion,

The most evident personal quality was his objectivity. It was evident in nearly everything produced during his administrative tenures. I saw him take pains to ensure that each side had input into any issue or policy statement. I saw an infinite patience at refining draft language so that those holding every rational position became satisfied that their views were expressed. Gary practiced objectivity as part of his refusal to entertain irrational extremes and avoid any tendency to espouse only a one-sided view.

How could he, or anyone, be so self-effacingly humble and still be a recognized expert in his field, as well as be a master of Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese? Yet he was. He never wore such achievements as medals or emblems on his sleeve. And it was some years after I had been his colleague that I came to perceive the depth of these achievements and his personal qualities.

Established as an expert by his labor-law publications, he was an arbitrator, sought after for his skills at fairness and objectivity. Those who appeared before him, remember, with respect, his ability for writing fair and balanced opinions from which each side could find comfort and relief.

he was neither “shallow” nor “media flash.”

These are Gary Vause's ripples that have washed over me—that I have highlighted tonight.

Dignified, humble, facilitator, builder, courageous leader. From his life, these are the standards by which I will measure my own life.