

CALVIN A. KUENZEL: A TEACHER'S TEACHER AND STETSON LEGEND*

Bruce Jacob**

I first saw Calvin Kuenzel in the fall of 1958 as I began my third year of study at Stetson University College of Law. At that time, Stetson had a student body of 235 and a full-time faculty of only six professors. In a law school that small, the addition of a new full-time professor was exciting news. All of us who were students had heard the rumors about the recently hired, brilliant young professor who had received his legal training at the law schools of the University of Iowa and the University of Illinois. At the Inns of Court banquet during the first several days of the term, in the Great Hall of the law school, Dean Harold L. "Tom" Sebring introduced this new professor. Cal stood up and I then got my first glimpse of the teacher and man who in the years since then has had such an enormous impact on this law school. He was just thirty years old at the time, and was young-looking for his thirty years. If he could return today, looking the same as he did in the fall of 1958, he almost certainly would be mistaken for a student.

That fall, I was a member of Stetson's Moot Court team that competed in the National Moot Court Competition, held in Atlanta. Professor Kuenzel judged our team practices, along with Dean Sebring, a former Florida Supreme Court Justice, and Professor James Tenney Brand, a retired Oregon Supreme Court Justice.¹ All three grilled us intensely. Unfortunately, we did not place in the competition, but we had been well prepared by our three coaches and I have always felt that I learned more from our practices with

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1. Dean Sebring and Professor Brand had been judges at the Nuremberg war crimes trials following World War II. Justice Brand had been Chief Judge of the "Justice" panel at Nuremberg — the panel that tried those who headed the Nazi judicial system. The movie "Judgment at Nuremberg" was about Justice Brand. Spencer Tracy played his part in the movie.

them than from any other learning experience while a law student at Stetson.

I did not take a course from Cal Kuenzel, because I already had taken the courses he taught that year — Contracts, commercial law subjects, and Domestic Relations. I was curious about his teaching, and students in his classes told me that Professor Kuenzel asked questions but never gave any answers. My first reaction was disbelief. It was impossible to teach without doing some lecturing and without answering questions, I thought. But I heard this comment from his students so frequently that I eventually became convinced that what my fellow students were saying was absolutely true. At that time, I had not heard about the purely Socratic method. I had not been exposed to it and did not realize how effective it could be as a teaching method.

Some years later, Cal explained his reason for teaching the way he did. He said, “Information is like fish — it stinks as it gets old.” To him, learning through lectures was of little lasting benefit. His philosophy was that a person does not learn from someone else — that the only real learning occurs when the student digs in and teaches himself or herself. The job of the professor is to prod students into working hard and learning through their own efforts. His hope was that they would read carefully, think seriously about what they had read, and learn to be accurate in answering his questions during class sessions. He wanted them to learn to think.

There was at least some terror involved in his teaching method. A few years ago, at an alumni get-together with Cal in the audience, Paul May,² a Stetson graduate practicing in Ft. Lauderdale, told a story about his first experience with Cal. It was Paul's first day of classes at Stetson. He and his classmates had heard about Cal Kuenzel, but had not yet seen him and did not know what he looked like. They sat in the classroom waiting for their first Contracts class to begin. Because of what they had heard from previous students, they were nervous and scared. Kuenzel was late. The students waited. Each minute seemed like an eternity. Then they heard him

2. Paul M. May served as member of the Stetson University College of Law Board of Overseers and as President of the Stetson Lawyers Association, our national alumni organization. All who knew him were deeply saddened by his death on April 2, 1999, at the age of 44.

walking up the steps to the classroom. As Cal took each step, the steel heel plates that had been imbedded in his high-top boots to keep the heels from wearing out made a loud clicking noise. There was not a sound except the clicking of Cal's heels as he climbed the stairs. Each step struck a little more terror into the heart of each student as Cal made his way toward the classroom. Paul's story had those in the room laughing hysterically because almost all of those present had been students who had lived through a similar experience while at Stetson. Cal, of course, enjoyed Paul's recollection more than anyone.

Back in 1958, when Cal began teaching at Stetson, virtually all that was required for admission was completion of three years of college. Almost everyone who applied was admitted, but grades were low and the flunk-out and drop-out rates were incredibly high by today's standards. In the 1980s and 1990s, after I became Dean, some students complained about how low Cal's grades were, but his grades were higher than they had been in the 1950s and 1960s. Believe it or not, he had mellowed and his grades had risen through the years. However, the newer, younger professors graded on a higher scale, and their grades made his look low by comparison.

In 1980, while I was the Dean at Mercer University Law School, I was invited to become a candidate for the deanship here at Stetson. Cal was a member of the selection committee. He picked me up at the Tampa airport, and after the interviewing had ended, he drove me back to the airport. While being interviewed earlier for the Mercer position, a representative group of students had met with me and had given their reactions to the Mercer faculty and selection committee for use in making the decision to hire me. At Stetson, I also expected to be interviewed by students, and I asked Cal that I be allowed to meet with such a group. Cal dismissed this request by saying, "Inmates don't run the institution," or something along those lines. This attitude was a throwback to the attitudes of law faculty members during the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1980s, dean candidates expected to be interviewed by students, but Cal obviously was not impressed by this recent trend in legal education.

I became the Dean at Stetson in July 1981. When I moved to St. Petersburg and assumed my new duties, I began to learn more about Cal Kuenzel as a person. I learned that he had been born on July 4, 1928, during Calvin Coolidge's years as President, and that

he had been named for Coolidge. He grew up in a small farm community in the northeastern part of Iowa. At least some of his ancestors were of German background, as were two of my grandparents who emigrated to this country around 1900. We both knew a few German words, and from the time he learned this, whenever he saw me alone in the hallway or in the faculty dining area he always used the German greeting “Wie geht's,” pronounced “veegatés,” meaning “How are you?”

I also learned that Cal had served in the United States Navy in the Pacific and in China shortly after World War II. Later, he entered the Army Reserve, and as a part-time soldier rose to the rank of full Colonel. He was extremely proud of his military record. Before he died, he chose to be buried in the “military” section of Trinity Memorial Gardens, near his home in Lutz, Florida, and the marker at his grave begins with these words:

CALVIN A KUENZEL — COL US ARMY

Cal loved hunting and fishing. For many years, he carried a small boat on the top of his sports utility vehicle as he drove back and forth between home and the law school. Just a few short blocks to the southeast of the law school, across Gulfport Boulevard, is land that is now a subdivision known as the Pasadena Golf and Country Club Community. Cal told me that, in his early years at Stetson, this was an unspoiled wilderness. After school he hunted there, for doves, as I recall.

He was the Chair of our Admissions Committee for many years. I have always believed that our success on the Florida bar exam was due largely to his oversight of our Stetson admissions process. He had a sixth sense for picking prospective students who would do well in law school. Our success on the bar exam, I think, also was due to the way he taught the first-year courses on Contracts. Forcing students to work so hard and be well prepared for class during their first months of law study, I believe instilled in them an ability to do well when it came time to take the bar exam.

Cal has been a constant subject of comment from our alumni. Jim Smith, former Attorney General of Florida, is quoted in the

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Stetson Cupola,³ the Winter 1988 issue, as saying:

Kuenzel taught a contracts course and that is one of the more difficult areas of law. He'd hold discussions but he'd never give us clues or talk about the answer to a problem before we figured it out ourselves. We were all the better for it, but we were all in fear that we'd fail.⁴

He said, also, that: "All the students revered him. He scared us to death and made us grow up."⁵ The first thing that Joe Reiter, the first Stetson Law School graduate to become President of The Florida Bar, said when he came to speak at an Inns of Court banquet shortly after taking office, was: "Well, Cal told me I would never be a lawyer." This line brought down the house; the laughter and applause were deafening. Cal was in the audience and no one in the audience enjoyed that opening line more than he.

When I became Dean, to raise money for the law school, I began holding phonathons and alumni get-togethers throughout the State; even as far away as Atlanta and Washington, D.C. One of my purposes for the get-togethers was to make alumni feel good about their alma mater. Cal was a tremendous help to me in cultivating the friendship of alumni and in raising money. He and his wife, Diane, attended almost every alumni gathering, often at great inconvenience. I can recall Cal being at alumni gatherings in Miami, Melbourne, Tampa, Jacksonville, and Fort Lauderdale, among others. He understood how important it was to the law school to build and maintain strong relations with our alumni, and he pitched in and helped me and the school by attending these alumni lunches, dinners, and cocktail parties.

When present at these gatherings he always was the "star of the show." Alumni, now all successful lawyers, would crowd around him and share their "Cal" stories. They would brag that they had received their lowest grade in law school from Cal, thereby causing laughter by everyone in the group, including Cal. It was as if it were

3. The *Stetson Cupola* is a publication of the DeLand campus, the main campus of Stetson University.

4. Keni Browning Lanagan, *Jim Smith: "I Grew up at Stetson,"* STETSON CUPOLA (Dep't of Pub. Relations, Stetson Univ., DeLand, Fla.), Winter 1988, at 7.

5. *Id.*

a mark of distinction, a badge of honor, to have received a D or an F from Cal Kuenzel. At this stage in their careers, after having achieved much success, they loved talking about how difficult his courses were and how low their grades were in the courses he taught. During these alumni parties, and also in phone conversations and meetings with our alumni throughout the country, I heard virtually the same comment over and over again from alumni: "I hated my classes with Cal. They were very, very difficult. I didn't understand what he was trying to do. Since then, however, I have come to realize just how much I learned from him. He taught me how to think."

Cal died on July 21, 1998, at age seventy. He had just finished mowing the lawn and had sat down to enjoy a cool drink when he suddenly collapsed. He left behind his wife and family, including four older sons and a small son who looks exactly like his father. His death was a shock to all of us who knew him. Even today, months after his death, it still is difficult for those who were his colleagues and friends to fully comprehend that he is gone.

As a student in the late 1950s I knew him, and then as his colleague here on the faculty at Stetson, I knew him for another seventeen years. But, even after so many years together, in some ways I did not know him well. He was easy to get to know, but at the same time there was a part of him that was complex and difficult to fathom. He was a teacher who was both revered and feared by his students while they were in law school, but those same students grew to appreciate him and feel immense gratitude to him after leaving law school, because they realized that he had taught them much more than information; he had taught them to think. To some of his students he seemed a tyrant in the classroom, yet at times, in faculty meetings he actually seemed shy. He could be laconic and Coolidge-like. He didn't talk a lot, but of course, when he did speak everyone listened. Although quiet, he had a wonderful, wry sense of humor. He was always friendly and good company. He was a very private person, yet was better known by everyone connected with Stetson than any other single professor.

An outstanding lawyer is sometimes referred to as a "lawyer's lawyer." Cal was a "teacher's teacher." He was a truly great teacher who devoted his life to teaching law.

Certainly, everyone who knew him would agree that Cal

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Kuenzel was one-of-a-kind, and that he left his unique imprint indelibly on this law school. I believe I can safely say that his influence on Stetson University College of Law has been greater than that of any other individual. Stetson, in many ways, is a reflection of Cal Kuenzel's personality.

Cal's wife, Diane, and his family spoke for all of us when they added these words at the bottom of the inscription on the headstone at his grave:

“THE LEGEND” — STETSON COLLEGE OF LAW

He truly is a legend, and he will always be missed by those of us who make up the Stetson University College of Law community.