

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

Darby Dickerson*

At 11:50 p.m. on May 8, 2003, Professor Luz Nagle called me at home. "Darby, I've been called back to Gary's house. I think we're probably within an hour. . . . His breathing is not good."¹ "Okay," I responded, "call me, no matter the hour."

That final call came at 1:10 a.m. on May 9; Professor Nagle made this call as well. "Gary just died." "Was it peaceful?" "Yes, it was."

May 9, 2003. The day of our Honors and Awards ceremony. The day before commencement, at which we were to honor Dean Gary Vause for his twenty-eight years of extraordinary service to Stetson University College of Law.² May 9, 2003. Much too soon.

Even after two months, it is still hard to believe that Gary is gone. He had so much left that he wanted to accomplish. High on that list was the anticipated completion of the new Tampa Law Center and Campus, which he had spent a large portion of his deanship ensuring would become a reality. Although Gary did not live to see that day, he has left us with a powerful spirit. He also left us with some lessons in leadership that we should not forget.

* © 2003, Darby Dickerson. All rights reserved. Interim University Vice President and Dean, Stetson University College of Law. B.A., M.A., The College of William and Mary, 1984; J.D., Vanderbilt University School of Law, 1988. Dean Dickerson served as Associate Dean and Vice Dean under Dean Vause.

1. Professor Nagle and Professor John Cooper stayed with Gary and Celia Vause virtually around the clock from May 1 until his death early on May 9. Jim Thaler also spent considerable time with Gary and Celia. I admire the courage and dedication that they showed during this difficult period. It is wonderful to know that we have such amazing people at the law school.

2. As I mentioned during Gary's mass on May 13, my last visit with Gary was on May 3 at St. Anthony's Hospital. John Cooper called me that morning and indicated that I should come to the hospital. Fearing the worst, I stopped by the office to pick up the beautiful Stetson Medal that we were to present to Gary at the May 9 graduation. John Cooper, Luz Nagle, and I presented the medal to Gary in his hospital room. I could tell that Gary was very touched by the medal. We took the medal out of the box and put it around his neck, while Celia snapped a couple of photographs of a smiling Gary. On May 9, Dr. H. Douglas Lee, President of Stetson University; Joseph W. Landers, Jr., Chair of the Stetson University Board of Trustees; and Judge Thomas E. Stringer, Sr., Chair of the Stetson College of Law Board of Overseers, presented Celia Vause with the medal and with a joint resolution honoring Dean Gary Vause. The joint resolution appears earlier in this issue.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Gary was a quiet leader. He did not go around telling people how to do their jobs or use his deanship as a soapbox for his views and positions. He was relatively quiet during meetings, and tended to spend more time listening and thinking than talking. Gary chose to lead with his actions; he gave us an example to follow. Gary exemplified a rare combination of quiet grace, dignity, and honor. He worked hard, he was dedicated, and he was unfailingly loyal. He was courteous and collegial. He honored his word. He showed us how he hoped we all would act on a daily basis, and he set an outstanding example of what it means to be a true professional.

THE INSTITUTION COMES FIRST

Gary always put the College of Law first in his decision-making. He did what he thought was best for the school, even if that choice conflicted with what might be in his personal best interest. The only times I saw Gary show any degree of anger or frustration were when he believed that others were trying to harm the college or university. His selflessness was but one trait that made him a strong and effective leader.

DO NOT BE AFRAID TO CHANGE YOUR MIND

Although Gary held strong opinions on some issues, he did solicit input on important matters and would listen to and consider opposing views. He did not appoint “yes” men and women to serve as his advisors; instead, he wanted to hear the conflicting opinions. More than once, he told me about something he was considering. More than once, I expressed some degree of disagreement or suggested an alternative. More than once, he revised his position—whether in substance or timing—after listening to my view. I did not always think Gary was listening or had heard me—but he was, and he did. Again, what was important to Gary was that he make the best decision for the school. It did not matter whether that decision originated with him or with someone else, or whether the best idea came at the beginning of the process or closer to the end.

WORK HARD

Gary was a workaholic and that was the main characteristic we shared. For better or worse, we were often at school on weekends and holidays, and we were both morning people. Even when Gary was not physically at work, we often traded e-mails at what most would consider odd hours—5:00 a.m., 11:50 p.m., etc. Gary worked hard because he loved his job and he loved the law school. He developed a strong work ethic during his childhood³ and maintained that ethic until he died. Gary knew that working hard was the way to get ahead in life; he equated hard work with success. It is thus fitting that our last conversation—on May 3 while he was in St. Anthony’s Hospital—concerned a new project the school was about to launch.

However, it was not enough for people merely to go through the motions or to put in long hours. Instead, Gary valued results. He was known as a person who could make things happen and bring about positive conclusions—and he looked for that same trait in others. Many of us will remember him by the phrase that he used during his “State of the Law School” address in August 2002—“Forward Momentum.”

VALUE LOYALTY, BUT DO NOT BE BLINDED BY IT

Gary was extremely loyal. He would stand by people through good times and through bad. He did not speak badly about his friends or colleagues. However, he was not blinded by loyalty. If his sense of loyalty to a person conflicted with his loyalty to the institution, loyalty to the institution would win.⁴

KEEP CONFIDENCES

Gary hated it when matters discussed in confidence spread through campus; I always assumed that was part of his military intelligence background and training. He could keep a confidence and expected others do to so as well.

3. Frank Klim, *A Life of Service*, 33 *Stetson L. Rev.* 35 (2003).

4. Gary was also loyal to his country. He served in the military and was very patriotic. A picture of our Nation’s Capitol hung behind his desk in the Dean’s Office. He almost always wore an American flag on his lapel. Although he traveled the world, he believed in “buying American.” And, one of his last official acts was to invite Dr. Susan Demers to sing “God Bless America” during the Spring 2003 Commencement.

JUDGE PEOPLE ON THEIR MERITS

Gary judged people on their merits, not on their race, ethnicity, or gender. He promoted women and minorities to important positions in the administration because he truly believed that the institution would be best served by having them in those roles. Thanks to Gary's leadership, women and minorities are better represented in the school's administration today than in any time in the school's history.⁵

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

After taking my first trip to Key West, I gave Gary a replica of the Harry S. Truman desk sign that says, "The Buck Stops Here." One day, I went into Gary's office and noticed that he had replaced the word "Stops" with "Starts." That was Gary; he always took full responsibility for matters that affected the law school. One example of Gary taking responsibility occurred during the first few weeks of my arriving at Stetson as an assistant professor. I was supervising several adjunct professors, and one was not working out as we had hoped. When I spoke with Gary about this in his role as Associate Dean—fully expecting that I would need to make that unpleasant phone call—he asked me for the pertinent facts, and indicated that he would make the call. He had signed that person's contract, and he was not going to put an untenured professor in the uncomfortable position of terminating a school employee.

Another example occurred just a few weeks before his death. A difficult and unpleasant message had to be delivered. Although Gary very well could have asked me or someone else to handle the matter—especially given his precarious physical condition at the time—he came in and handled the matter himself. He was the leader; he understood that it was his responsibility to make those difficult calls and to have those difficult conversations. Although he did not relish them, he never shied away from them.

5. Gary appointed women or minorities to the following positions during his deanship: Vice Dean, Associate Dean, Library Director, Assistant Dean for Admissions, Associate Vice President for College Relations, Associate Director of Continuing Legal Education, Registrar, and two Directors of Centers for Excellence. Some of these positions had never been held by a woman or minority.

NEVER PLACE BLAME IN PUBLIC

I know that most people who worked for Gary did things—whether intentionally or unintentionally—that he wished we had not done. Not once, however, did he place blame or make derogatory comments about those missteps in public. And, more often than not, he supported our decisions regardless of the consequences. When an action was egregious enough that he wanted to ensure it would not be repeated, he acted more as mentor than accuser and privately counseled the individual regarding the conduct he expected in the future. We all appreciated this fact about Gary; it allowed us to perform our jobs the best we knew how, always knowing that Gary would support us and would never speak badly about our decisions in front of others.

REMAIN CALM WHEN CHALLENGES ARISE

Gary led Stetson during an interesting time. We grew and prospered, but we faced our fair share of challenges. But Gary remained calm, especially to the outside world. He was so stoic. I can still visualize that slight nod of the head and the smile he would put on. He had a masterful poker face. He was never excitable, never out of control—even at the end. When Gary publicly revealed his medical condition to the campus on April 23, 2003, he did so with a level of courage I had not seen before. Although I am sure that he felt personal frustration and disappointment about his condition, he never let it show. He discussed his condition with dispassion, and always gave us the sense that everything would work out just fine. He said more than once that if he had to come down with a disease, he was glad it was cancer, because it gave us time to plan a smooth transition.

The same was true of how he led on a daily basis. If someone made a legal threat, he calmly invited them to contact the law school's attorney. If he learned about bad news, he calmly gathered pertinent facts to make a deliberate, considered decision. He did not let events control him or how he responded to them.

CONCLUSION

Not everyone agreed with all of Gary's decisions or supported his vision for the school. Most, however, admired him for the quiet leadership that he demonstrated day in and day out, even during that last year when he was so very ill. We should learn from the

leadership lessons he taught us in his quiet way, and we should consider how much stronger Stetson is because of what Gary gave us.⁶

6. Although Gary's last job at Stetson was as Dean, he was a teacher until the end. "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* 79 (Doubleday 1997) (quoting Henry Adams).