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## TRIBUTES

### THE VALUE OF A LEGAL EDUCATION

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Jerry Bepko served a lot of roles throughout his life: Professor, Dean, Chancellor, mentor, colleague, and friend. The list goes on. I had the unique honor of having him as a father, and I could not have imagined a better one. Some great leaders have different public and private personas. Not my Dad. He was the same at home as he was in the world—energetic, honest, caring, thoughtful, and always full of good advice. Of course, he was a little less buttoned up at home (although always sporting a collared shirt). The lessons he taught me—in word and deed—are too numerous to recount, but there is one that has had the biggest impact on my life and career. That is the value of a legal education.

Dad often said that education is the key to a satisfying life. It was usually while reminiscing about some of the jobs he worked in high school and college, none of which would have required an advanced degree. He set pins at a local bowling alley, tended the counter at his family's delicatessen, and worked as a laborer on a construction site. In his Chicago neighborhood, any of these would have been fine long-term jobs. According to Dad, they taught him the value of hard work, gave him a sense of community, and put a little money in his pocket. But he knew his opportunities would be much greater if he continued his education. This insight led him to law school and eventually into a career as a law professor. When he started, I don't think he could have known the depth of opportunities he would create, not just for himself but for countless numbers of his students.

My whole life, I have heard stories about the impact Dad had on the lives of his students—how he inspired them to pursue careers in government, law enforcement, and civil rights. He supported them in times of challenge and helped them to overcome obstacles. He devoted his time to their pursuits, big and small. He memorized all of his students' names and seat assignments before the start of the term so that he could address them by name on the first day. I remember at the end of every term, he was surrounded by piles of exam bluebooks, carefully working his way through each one. Once, I told him how

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boring and tedious this work seemed. He responded that his students worked diligently to ready themselves for their exams and that he owed it to them to exercise the same amount of care in evaluating their work.

Dad has always been my mentor, but when I went to law school, he took on the role of unofficial professor as well. I was hundreds of miles away, and he had not taught a first-year law course in more than a decade, but because, as Chancellor, he always described himself as “a law professor on hiatus from teaching,” I sought his help navigating the first year. Despite his grueling schedule, he always made time for me. We talked often, usually on his way home after he left the office, at dinner, or at some other event. He helped me grapple with legal principles and concepts until they came into focus. He also advised me as to how to meet the demands of the professors who employed the Socratic method in teaching their first-year students. Some of them were terrifying, but through our conversations, I was better equipped to think on my feet, analyze legal problems in real time, and defend my reasoning under pressure.

In my second and third years, although I found my stride, we still continued our talks about substantive subjects. He still helped me with the occasional difficult professor. My secured transactions professor stands out in that regard. Part of the reason I took the course was so that I could talk to my Dad about his area of expertise. But, I did not connect with my actual professor, and I realized quickly that I was going to need assistance if I was to truly learn the material. Rather than just winging it on the ride home, Dad set times for us to meet by phone and was ready with his copy of the Uniform Commercial Code. Talking with Dad, the clouds parted, and the material came into focus. By the end of the semester, some of my friends in the class had joined in on the tutoring sessions. Dad’s last piece of advice to us before we went off to take the final was this: Remember, you take the professor and not the course. Stick with the concepts your professor tried to teach. Use his approach. His language. Otherwise, you might have the material down, but you won’t have the grade. Dad was right on all fronts.

Looking back, I now understand what Dad meant all the times he told me that it was a “pathway to lifelong learning.” Law school sparked an intellectual curiosity in me that did not exist in my prior studies. The subject matter invigorated me, and I became devoted to developing the type of critical thinking that the law requires. As Dad described it, the rigor of dissecting statutes, case law, and legal principles helped me to “exercise” my brain in a new and fulfilling way.

I also understand why Dad loved the law. In our discussions, he often described its power—to protect our safety, remedy wrongs, and ensure our rights as citizens. Lawyers are instilled with the great responsibility of upholding these values and not only applying them in our work, but in our lives. In his last years of teaching, Dad created a new course entitled “Leadership and the Law.” As he developed that course, he sent me the materials, and we

renewed the types of discussions we had while I was in law school. In addition to being impressed by the way he approached the topic, I thought it was an apt final course for him to teach, given that he embodied all the characteristics of an effective leader. He measured his success by the positive impact he had on the world around him and the students he educated. He found more satisfaction in consensus-building rather than control. His moral compass focused him on doing what was just and right, even if doing so required hardship and sacrifice.

My story is just one more to add to the countless others I have heard over the years. I am profoundly grateful (and extremely lucky) to have had him as a father, mentor, and unofficial professor. I miss our talks. But I know that if he were here, he would tell us all to stop fussing over him and reminiscing about the past. (Indeed, he would be uncomfortable with all the attention.) Then, he would encourage us to look forward and find something worthwhile to do that will have a positive impact on the world.