

TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR CARROLL “JOHN WAS THIRD”

*Jim Gibson **

In any law school, there are those of us—most of us, really—who like to hear ourselves talk. We think that no conversation is complete until we have voiced our views.

But then there are those rare few who do not feel that need, who instead have a talent for picking their moments and crystalizing an issue with a single, insightful observation. That was John Carroll. At a faculty meeting, in a colloquy with a visiting scholar, and of course in the classroom, John could be counted on to say the wise thing at just the right time. His quiet voice could fill a room. It is impossible to contemplate never hearing it again.

When the law school family first heard the horrible news of John’s passing, and we were grasping for ways to comprehend and express our loss, one of my colleagues said that she wished John were here to help us through it all. She got it exactly right. John would have known how to give comfort, what to say. When not to say anything. How to listen.

Sadly, it was not until John was gone that I began to understand all the ways that his gentle, generous soul had enriched our institution. I had known John mostly as a great teacher and a peerless mentor for his students. I knew that he loved the law school. That much was obvious from the time and energy he devoted to his work.

But the number of students, staff, and faculty who could tell a story about how John’s counsel had helped them through a tough time—it was amazing. And humbling. And inspiring. And of course his boundless energies were directed far beyond the

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boundaries of the university, to friends old and new, to his partners in private practice, and to his church.

I am always in awe of people who accomplish so much so modestly, making it all look simple. The academic in me wants to know how that is done, to figure out the key to living an unhurried life that is nevertheless full of achievement. I have a theory, at least with regard to John: He knew exactly who he was. Most of us spend a lot of time searching for ourselves, vaguely dissatisfied with our lot in life. Not John Carroll. He held his values with absolute certainty—faith, family, service. He embodied the Gale Sayers credo: “The Lord is first, others are second, and I am third.” Knowing who he was, what those values were, and where he stood gave John the serenity to excel as a father, husband, teacher, friend, and colleague. John put himself third, and the rest, for him, was easy.