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PROFESSOR EUGENE M. CORBIN IN MEMORIAM

*By Gordon A. Christenson**

Eugene M. Corbin died suddenly on November 15, 1983, after a very short terminal illness. He was in the midst of teaching two courses. One was a basic course in federal income tax. It met three times a week, and more than eighty students were enrolled. The other was a course in legal accounting in which twenty students were registered. When Professor Corbin asked for leave on September 30, 1983, to go into the hospital for a routine operation needing prompt attention, he was reasonably sure that he would be back in the classroom within two weeks.

When I visited him in late October, Gene told me that his illness was terminal. Yet he was determined to return to his classes to finish the semester. While I told him not to worry about his classes and said he should feel free to teach or be with students in any way he felt he could, we both knew that he might not ever see students' faces in class again. Such was indeed the case. His course in tax was completed ably by his colleague Professor Marilyn E. Brookens, and legal accounting instruction was handled by practicing lawyers Bart and Michael Brown.

Professor Corbin was faculty advisor to the Law Review for five years. He counseled with succeeding boards of editors, especially the editors-in-chief, and stated the Law Review's case in faculty meetings for sound changes in policy. He advised the boards on various standards, helped in the resolution of problems and was a courteous friend. It is fitting that the Law Review dedicate this issue to the memory of Gene Corbin who spent much of his time concerned with the Review and its problems.

Gene Corbin was one of the most gentlemanly and civilized men I have known. While he had strong feelings and expressed them in the policy debates within the faculty, he never showed pique or irritability, nor did he complain. If a decision he thought fairly made went against him or his interests, he was graceful in the loss. He was not one to make every minor grievance into a matter of principle; yet his demeanor, while apparently self-effacing, betrayed a toughness of character well beyond the courtesies he always showed. I first met him when I was interviewing for the deanship in the fall of 1978. He

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had just begun teaching full time at the College of Law upon retiring early from the Internal Revenue Service after a long career with the government that included service with the F.B.I. and military service during World War II. In 1978 he was a beginning law teacher, and he showed it. He was working harder than he had ever worked in his life, he told me. Anxious about how his expertise, learned over the years, might be made more effective in the classroom, he wondered whether he had the stuff to give to students. He shared all of the familiar anxieties and fears that all of us in the law teaching profession suffer acutely during the first years and suffer, in varying dosages, for the rest of our teaching careers.

The law students in Professor Corbin's tax courses and in his trial practice sections responded to his dry wit and gentle manner with affection. His basic tax course enrollments were always high because, in part, he showed a personal interest in working problems with the students in class. He would hand out problems he had taken care to construct on various questions in tax law and, after conceptual development of the material, would help students work through the problems. He expected students to think about problems outside class and to be prepared to know regulations and statutory materials as well as the case law. But he was never too busy nor too distracted by his own work to convey warmth and a genuine liking for teaching. This affectionate bond between teacher and students developed after he retired, late in his life. It was a personal development, one that provided great comfort as, unknowingly, he found himself at his life's end. Erik Erikson writes of the joyful contributions a learned person may make at mid-life or beyond by passing to the new generation friendly wisdom and expertise. He called this stage of development the generational phase of a mature personality. As Professor Corbin developed into a teacher-mentor with his students, he probably found greater rewards than the students knew.

Last year, when the Goldman Prize for teaching excellence was awarded to Wilbur Lester, the most senior and experienced professor on the faculty, I listened intently to the discussion among the four elected students who sat on the Goldman Prize selection committee which I chaired. We had gone over the criteria for evaluating teaching excellence and had examined each faculty member's teaching in light of those criteria. We had included, for example, criteria such as the capacity to inspire a student to stretch or to reach beyond himself or herself; the capacity to prepare students for problem-solving over a lifetime; and the quality of being demanding, objective and unyielding in supplying ready-made answers, while yet keeping one's wit and humaneness. When all of the evaluative comments were made and the

discussion came to the point of making a final decision, it was clear that Gene Corbin's teaching performance had developed very rapidly over the previous five years and that his stature within the eyes of the students had suddenly appeared almost as a metamorphosis from a cocoon late in life. I do not know what final arguments back and forth were made, because I absent myself from the final processes of consensus in order not unduly to influence the selection. While Gene was not chosen in 1983, clearly he was one of the final candidates. He was placed among a few other professional law teachers of long standing. I write of this incident to illustrate the depth and profundity of the development late in life of Professor Corbin as a law teacher. If I may be permitted a dean's prerogative to generalize, I would add that a change in career late in life, though risky, often is of greater benefit and reward to the individual who struggles for deeper development and meaning than for those being served. And I know from talks with Gene how he valued teaching, for he loved students.

Gene's family supported his change of careers. Barbara, his wife, encouraged his teaching career and was part of the metamorphosis, I am sure. The Corbins were especially good friends with Associate Dean Stanley Harper who delivered the funeral eulogy, Professor Jorge Carro, Professor Alphonse Squillante and the late Professor William Jeffrey, and their wives. Their son, Jim, a student at the College of Law, kept us informed about Gene's illness. These simple links of collegiality and friendship are often overlooked in the struggle for achievement and excellence, but they are no less significant in nurturing those values of mind and spirit than the important contributions of colleagues in their scholarship and teaching.

The ultimate sorrow is that two friends and colleagues of about the same age, one a long-standing member of the faculty, Professor William Jeffrey, and the other, a newly transformed law teacher, should both die of the same disease within months of each other. It was a loss and shock to us all. In our last conference discussing his future, Gene Corbin told me that, after his family and friends, the most important thing in his life had been students. On the day he died, Barbara, the family and friends wrote "A Grace Note" to the College of Law students. It ended: "He had a last regret: That he was unable at least to complete the Fall, 1983, semester. Now how shall we say this? . . . Directly . . . He wants you to raise a martini toast in his memory . . ."

The students responded for all of us: "Here's to you, Gene!"

