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Thomas D. Yannucci

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Tribute to Professor Edward J. Murphy

*Thomas D. Yannucci**

By any measure, Ed Murphy was a master teacher who touched deeply all students at Notre Dame Law School for more than twenty years. No one better represented Notre Dame's commitment to establish a first-class national law school where teaching remained the primary focus of its faculty.

He was a great teacher because he transcended his material. Like many of my classmates, I entered law school eager to study constitutional law, criminal procedure and other more "topical" courses. But within a few weeks, contracts—despite my complete unfamiliarity with commercial concepts—became my favorite course. The subject matter was secondary. Murphy's ease in the classroom, his impeccable preparation, and mastery of the material was a performance, made available three days a week.

Professor Murphy taught in classic fashion. Although he routinely engaged in the Socratic method of teaching, he never once humiliated or belittled a student. If you were off point, he would let you down gently or would even prop your argument up before rolling out the correct analysis. Most important, he inspired his students to do their best. If there was only one class you could prepare for, it would be contracts, because the prospect of letting Professor Murphy down—of not fulfilling your end of the "bargain"—was unacceptable.

Like any good teacher, Ed Murphy was expertly skilled at making complex matters appear to be simple. But what distinguished Ed Murphy, at least in my mind, was his ability to keep that simplicity in place, class after class, and month after month. You were always able, no matter what new principle of law you were studying, to place it in clear context in the vast field of contract law. "Offer and acceptance," "consideration," "promissory estoppel," and "conditions precedent" were not just axioms of law to be memorized, they were concepts his students understood at their core. He taught you to work as freely and as confidently with these concepts as does a mechanic who can assemble an engine no matter how its parts are arranged. The grounding he gave us had great staying power. Now, more than twenty years after sitting in his classes, there is no problem that comes up where I am more comfortable than I am with a contract issue.

These virtues alone qualify Ed Murphy as a great teacher. But he gave much more to his students. As important as his instruction in contracts, was the example he set for law students with regard to larger issues. He was a walking example of why the practice of law was, and still is, a profession

* Mr. Yannucci is a 1976 graduate of Notre Dame Law School where he served as Editor-in-Chief for Volume 51 of the *Notre Dame Law Review*. After graduation, he clerked for the Honorable John A. Danaher of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. He worked at the Department of Justice from 1977 until 1980. In 1980, he joined Kirkland & Ellis. Mr. Yannucci is currently a partner in commercial litigation and serves on the firm's management committee.

and not a job or a trade. To Ed Murphy, the law required constant attention, the ability to be creative and the skills of a craftsman. These constant demands, in turn, kept him vibrant, challenged and cheerful. He also instructed one on how to act like a lawyer. His mannerisms, his dress, his sense of humor, his entire demeanor provided us with a template of how to conduct ourselves as individuals who have an obligation to care deeply about what we do and how it affects others. Finally, there was an unmistakable sense of balance in his manner: serious but also polite; intense but always ready with a smile; successful but modest; widely published but more interested in his students and the law school community than in research. Above all, he was scrupulously fair and honest. No favorites, no tricks, and no pretense in faithfully carrying out his critical role at the Law School.

This wonderful blend of personal and professional qualities made him a revered figure during my years at the Law School. No one questioned Ed Murphy's goodwill, character or sincerity. When he began each class with a prayer, everyone, despite their private views or religion, respected and observed his need for prayer. Ed Murphy prayed not to make a statement or proselytize. He prayed because he was a humble man who thought prayer was the best way to prepare for the challenge of teaching his students.

I took every course Ed Murphy taught—even "Restitution"—and the bond that existed between us as student and teacher remains strong and clear in my mind. Indeed, that bond is one I share with nearly all the graduates of the Law School who followed me. Whenever I meet Notre Dame students the answer is the same: Professor Murphy was the best at what he did. I am honored to have been one of Ed Murphy's students, and I will continue to treasure the many lessons he gave me.