

IN MEMORIAM: FRANCIS J. CONTE

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His eyes told part of his story to those of us who were fortunate to be students of Francis J. Conte. They were soft, reflective, compassionate, and betrayed a discernible enthusiasm for life and the process of learning. They also gave hints of an unusual energy and optimism about people, and of an inner resolve that might appropriately be called sweet strength. We knew him as professor and dean when we arrived at the University of Dayton School of Law to commence our studies. But some of us knew him in a sort of way even before our arrival at the law school; his hand-written words at the bottom of our admission letters, urging us to attend the law school, had already endeared him to us before we met him in person. Such was the personal touch of the man that family, friends, and colleagues affectionately referred to as “Fran.”

Personal warmth and commitment to his students and the law school were hallmarks of Dean Conte’s tenure as a professor, and as longest-serving dean at the law school. The fourteen years in which he served as dean had as its middle point 1994, the year in which he taught me and others Torts. He had an engaging style of teaching and his voice would rise in excitement whenever we broached a topic that he found particularly interesting. It felt, on more than one occasion, as if the allotted class time was far from sufficient and his wish for more than a few more minutes of discussion was easily apparent to all. Through interaction with students both inside and outside the classroom, he sought to delve beneath what lies on the surface to the core of our understanding of the subject matter, as well as our comfort level with life at the law school and in its environs. He cared deeply about his students and that came readily across to us.

His extraordinary efforts which led to the construction and completion of the Joseph E. Keller Hall building which now houses the law school are well-known to many. Mine was the last graduating class which knew Albert Emmanuel Hall as the home of the law school. We were witnesses to the vision that he had of a state-of-the-art building equipped with computers at the work stations of students. The architectural plans and models which we saw were transformed into reality as ground was broken on the adjacent lot and building commenced in earnest. The opening of

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Keller Hall in 1997 was a remarkable achievement in the history of the law school and it might arguably be viewed as the high-water mark of his tenure as dean. But that would be so if consideration were limited to only the tangible contributions that Dean Conte made.

Other contributions of Dean Conte to the law school's ideals, faculty, students, and community were equally exceptional. They are as much a part of his legacy as anything else. They included fostering a diverse faculty and student body, with an enriching consequence being exposure to different perspectives and views about legal issues and their ramifications beyond the theoretical. It was his vision and fund-raising efforts that laid the foundational groundwork for the gains the law school has made in this area. Indeed, some of us might not have been able to pay our way through law school, but for the Dean's scholarship that we received. It did not cover all of our expenses, to be sure, but it was a grant which no doubt was part of a wider effort to attract and retain the less financially able in the student body. That sense of commitment to the ideals of diversity sows in the beneficiaries seeds that will inure to the benefit of the law school in perpetuity, as alums feel, in turn, a sense of obligation to help sustain such funds in aid of current students.

There was also an expanded enlistment of esteemed legal practitioners (judges, magistrates, and lawyers) who served as adjunct faculty during Dean Conte's tenure. Those practitioners invariably had the effect of making the local legal community a part of the law school, and vice versa. His most recent profile on the law school's website makes clear how much he enjoyed forging such relationships: "I really enjoyed helping to develop and strengthen the relationship between the law school and the legal community, especially with area judges and lawyers, and with our regional and national alumni," he said. Interaction with members of that extended legal community had the additional benefit of exposing students to the daily responsibilities and challenges that come with the practice of law.

The law and a quest for enriching experiences took Dean Conte to places both near and far. Some of us have followed in his footsteps in that regard. He was a frontiersman of sorts, never content to remain at a standstill in mind and action, and yearning to learn more and more right until the end. He taught as a Fulbright scholar during the 2008–2009 academic year at the University of Warsaw Faculty of Law in Poland. He learned and mastered European Union law and international law after his tenure as dean. He facilitated the development of both intellectual property and law and technology programs at the law school. These are but a few testaments to his pioneering spirit.

Teachers seldom realize the impact they have on the future lives of their students and law faculty are no different in that regard.

Their influence on students manifests itself in countless ways from conscious decisions regarding what area of law to specialize in to subconscious impulses regarding what character and personality traits to emulate. I took from Dean Conte in this regard the aspiration of compassion, personal contentment, and a generosity of spirit. Those attributes of his are worth far more than any lesson he ever taught. Other attributes of his that would resonate more in eras by-gone were his unpretentiousness and complete comfort in his own skin. He never tried to be more than what he was and he left one with the impression that hard work and perseverance were indispensable ingredients for success.

Fran Conte was a good and decent man who will be missed by so many. He lives on vibrantly, nonetheless, through his family, his students, and scholarship.