

UNFORGETTABLE FRAN CONTE

*William H. Wolff, Jr.*¹

When Fran Conte died of pancreatic cancer in April, the Dayton legal community and I lost a good friend. Fran's predecessor as dean guided the reestablished University of Dayton School of Law through the ABA accreditation process but had not focused on the law school's relationship with the local legal community. With Fran's arrival as dean in 1987, that changed.

One of the first things Fran did was to resurrect the Board of Visitors, more recently known as the Advisory Council. The Board of Visitors was comprised of local lawyers, judges, and community members whose observations and advice were valued by Fran in assessing the effectiveness of the law school and in charting its direction. Some of the members of the board also had connections that proved to be valuable when funding was sought for Keller Hall and other law school endeavors.

The Program in Law and Technology (PILT) also grew out of connections Fran made with the local legal community. Fran approached three Dayton lawyers about funding for scholarships. The lawyers responded by asking if the law school could do something about training some of its students to deal with legal issues surrounding emerging technologies. Fran took the idea and ran with it and, in 1989, the PILT was established. The three attorneys came through with the scholarship money, too.

Fran's most visible achievement is no doubt Keller Hall, which was built on his watch. Much of Fran's time as dean was devoted to the promotion of the law school to the Dayton legal community and to the larger Dayton community, a task he relished. In his capacity as cheerleader for the law school, he undertook the quest for funding, knocking on numerous lawyers' doors and nurturing relationships with other potential donors. One need not venture far into Keller Hall—which opened in 1997—to see the evidence of the community's support for Keller Hall.

The Minority Clerkship Program, which is still in effect, was Fran's idea, as was the Interfaith Prayer Service, which Fran preferred for its

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inclusiveness over the more exclusive Red Mass. Fran also encouraged the Inn of Court to meet at Keller Hall and invited the Dayton Bar Association to host its Bench-Bar Conference at the law school.

In addition to being a good friend of the Dayton legal community, Fran was a good friend to me and my family. Our families lived a few blocks apart. When Fran arrived in 1987, I was still running and for the next five years, Fran and I would run several mornings a week before work. We talked about a lot of things, some of them work related, confident that what was said would not be repeated. I think we both benefited from the talk therapy. I know I did. Although my running days ended at age fifty, Fran continued to run until a few months before he died.

Fran and his wife, Kathy McShane, were the parents of four children: Brendan, Clare, Fiona, and Ciaran. Fran was a devoted, even doting, father and this was never more evident than at Christmastime. Fran was a Christmas fanatic. Bob and Pam Goelz lived across the street from the Conte family and Fran used their basement to store the many gifts he couldn't resist buying. For several years, on Christmas Eve, Bob and Pam invited our families to their home for dinner. After the Conte children were in bed and the six adults—Fran and Kathy, Bob and Pam, and my wife Penny and I—were well fortified against the winter night with ample Christmas cheer, we turned into Santa's helpers and made multiple trips from the Goelz basement across the street to the Conte Christmas tree to deposit the gifts. Although the gifts seemed to me to be piled at least knee deep, Fran always seemed to think there should have been more.

One summer Fran, Clare, Ciaran, and I went canoeing for several days in the Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario. I was the designated chef for the group because I had some experience cooking with a single burner gas stove from backpacking trips I had taken. My memories of the trip are vivid: at least a couple days on the Tim River, a narrow, shallow, snaking waterway where we were out of our canoes as much as we were in them; long, hard portages; being eaten alive by mosquitoes and black flies during meal preparation; and Fran unceremoniously dumping me out of the stern of the canoe and into the drink as we were getting the canoe out of the water. That said, we had a grand time and Fran and I often talked about doing it again, although we never did.

More than once, my children—who were older than Fran's—referred to Fran's children as awesome. I think that is because while I apparently nagged my children to straighten up and fly right, Fran and Kathy simply encouraged their children to spread their wings and fly. The Conte children had a wealth of interesting experiences as a result of their parents' encouragement and broad-mindedness.

Penny spoke to Kathy before Christmas and invited the Conte

family to Christmas dinner. Kathy declined, saying the children would all be home for Christmas and she thought the family should spend Christmas together at home. We think it was then that Kathy and Fran and the children came to terms with the fact that Fran was terminally ill. The children stayed at home throughout the remainder of Fran's life, which was a great comfort to both of their parents. I spoke with Kathy a few times about how Fran was doing. She never failed to mention Fran's abiding gratitude for the wonderful life that he had been able to live.

Fran reacted poorly to chemotherapy and decided to discontinue that treatment and live out his remaining days at home. Penny and I last saw Fran with Kathy and their children on Saint Patrick's Day, which was a Thursday. By that time, the ravages of Fran's cancer were very apparent and his discomfort was obvious to the point of being painful to us. Although Fran said little during the lighthearted banter of the rest of us, he managed to join in a toast—with Harp Lager—to himself and to Ireland. Four days later, Pam Goelz called to say Fran had died earlier that afternoon.

Although it ended too soon, Fran's was a life well lived, and we are richer for having known him. Rest in peace.