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## Celebrating a Lasting Legacy: Thomas Schoenherr

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## THOMAS SCHOENHERR\*

*Michael W. Martin\*\**

As a former student and current associate dean for experiential learning and clinical professor of law at Fordham University School of Law, I have seen first-hand Tom's influence as a pioneer in law school administration of pro bono and public interest programming. Over the past three decades, Tom has pushed the agenda of pro bono and public interest further than all but a few in legal academia. By investing himself so strongly in the pro bono movement, Tom spurred the pro bono and public interest ethos to become a signature of what the Law School stands for. Tom became a national voice to create space for pro bono and public interest programming at every law school nationally, as well, through the Association of American Law Schools (AALP) and the National Association for Law Placement (NALP).

Tom arrived at Fordham Law in 1988 as a career services counselor. Nothing in his job description specified pro bono or public interest counseling, but Tom proactively sought to counsel the small contingent of Fordham Law students who expressed interest in public service work. In 1989, I arrived at Fordham Law as a student and received word from like-minded students that I should see Tom if I was interested in public interest lawyering. In my three years as a student, I witnessed how Tom led the meteoric rise of pro bono and public interest emphasis at Fordham Law. Prior to 1990, Tom had supported the handful of public interest student groups at the Law School: the Fordham Pro Bono Project, the Fordham Student Sponsored Fellowship (FSSF), and the Fordham Law Community Service Project. These three groups had little funding, no office space, and little to no faculty or administrative involvement beyond Tom—they survived on the resourcefulness of Tom and the students who gravitated towards each other in search of a more public interest-oriented haven amidst the craze of the race to join the more lucrative private sector.

With Tom at the helm, a series of events helped increase the support of public interest at Fordham Law. First, in the fall of 1990, Tom encouraged students to approach then Dean John D. Feerick about instituting a pro bono

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\* Thomas ("Tom") Schoenherr founded the Public Interest Resource Center (PIRC) at Fordham University School of Law and served as its assistant dean until his recent retirement.

\*\* Associate Dean for Experiential Learning and Clinical Professor of Law, Fordham University School of Law. These remarks were delivered as part of an event honoring departing faculty members at Fordham Law School in the spring of 2020. The text of these remarks has been lightly edited and footnoted. For an overview of the corresponding Tribute, see *Foreword: Celebrating a Lasting Legacy*, FORDHAM L. REV. ONLINE 1 (2020).

curriculum requirement geared towards instilling the virtue and responsibility of public interest work in all students. In response, the dean courageously announced his support for a pro bono graduation requirement in the school's curriculum. Although that particular initiative was not ultimately adopted, Tom and Dean Feerick responded by creating one of the strongest voluntary pro bono programs in the country. Reflecting on his work and passion, Tom then coauthored an article *The Lawyer's Duty of Public Service: More than Charity?*, which laid out the argument for a pro bono graduation requirement.<sup>1</sup>

Building on his success, Tom sought to solve a clear, critical need for students to have a physical space in which to convene and discuss their pro bono projects. Tom lobbied Dean Feerick for such a space and asked that his duties be revised to explicitly include collaborating with student pro bono leaders to ensure the quality and long-term viability of the student pro bono projects in that new space. Dean Feerick accepted, and the Public Interest Resource Center (PIRC) was born. PIRC gave students interested in pro bono and public interest law a space for collaboration, fellowship, and the sharing of ideas, and served as a physical reminder that such issues were and are vital to Fordham Law.

For those of us who were there for the opening of PIRC in 1991, we can only marvel at how Tom transformed PIRC from three pro bono and public service student groups in a tiny basement office to today's twenty-plus student organizations that serve as a leading model for law school public interest programs nationwide.<sup>2</sup> Becoming PIRC's first full-time director in 1992 enabled Tom to focus officially on pro bono and public interest programming; the effect on the Law School was both dramatic and immediate. Students were attracted to PIRC's purpose in droves; PIRC helped these students follow their pro bono and public service interests. The number of student pro bono hours has skyrocketed from 40,000 for the class of 1992 to 152,094 hours for the class of 2018.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Tom's tireless work has enabled students to follow their passions and respond to current student interests and community needs. Fordham Law students were in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, in New York shoreline communities after Hurricane Sandy, and in South Texas to assist those impacted by changes to immigration policy.

In recognition of Tom's work, national and state pro bono awards have flooded PIRC and its constituent groups. In 2008, for example, PIRC received the prestigious American Bar Association's Pro Bono Publico

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1. Tigran W. Eldred & Thomas Schoenherr, *The Lawyer's Duty of Public Service: More than Charity?* 96 W. VA. L. REV. 367, 400 (1994).

2. See PUBLIC INTEREST RESOURCE CENTER, FORDHAM UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW, PUBLIC SERVICE JOB SEARCH GUIDE 4-5 (2018), [https://www.fordham.edu/download/downloads/id/11255/public\\_service\\_job\\_search\\_guide.pdf](https://www.fordham.edu/download/downloads/id/11255/public_service_job_search_guide.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/6KVU-K7NJ>].

3. *Fordham Law Facts – Fact 6: Public Service*, FORDHAM UNIV., [https://www.fordham.edu/info/20753/fordham\\_law\\_facts](https://www.fordham.edu/info/20753/fordham_law_facts) [<https://perma.cc/92ZB-JFVK>] (last visited Oct. 30, 2020).

Award.<sup>4</sup> Other student groups have been recognized for their work on death penalty defense, domestic violence, and family court mediation.

Beyond his work with students, Tom has had a national effect, elevating Fordham Law and pro bono service nationally. Many alumni turn to Tom and PIRC to seek guidance on returning to their public interest passions. Tom engaged alumni and the administration to help complete over 100,000 public service hours in honor of Fordham Law's centennial, a nationally recognized initiative.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Tom has consistently led by example with his own service. Starting in 1992, Tom spent twenty-six consecutive spring breaks with our Habitat for Humanity group and has participated in every public service project at the AALS annual conference since they were conceived (in large part, by him) in 2002.

Over his career at Fordham Law, Tom has shown a deep commitment to the students and community and has delivered a pro bono and legal services innovation invaluable to the Law School's legacy. We will miss Tom, but his work at the Law School endures.

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4. *Fordham Law's PIRC Honored by American Bar Association*, FORDHAM NEWS (May 30, 2008), <https://news.fordham.edu/law/fordham-laws-pirc-honored-by-american-bar-association/> [<https://perma.cc/N9T9-SNCA>] (last visited Oct. 30, 2020).

5. *Supreme Court Justice Highlights Centennial Celebration*, FORDHAM NEWS (Aug. 24, 2005), <https://news.fordham.edu/law/supreme-court-justice-highlights-centennial-celebration/> [<https://perma.cc/LBA3-QH9A>] (last visited Oct. 30, 2020).