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Celebrating a Lasting Legacy: Laurence J. Abraham

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IN MEMORIAM OF LAURENCE J. ABRAHAM*

*Todd Melnick***

Law librarianship sometimes feels like an underappreciated field. One of my elderly relatives, a named partner at an elite law firm, called the law library “a backwater.” In a country that elects billionaire television personalities as president and esteems the supermodel, the influencer with a million followers, and the Kardashians, the librarian can be overlooked and undervalued.

Librarianship—the way Larry did it—is low-tech and high-touch. Surely, it is grounded in an exemplary education, considerable experience, and great expertise. But the way Larry did it, it is slow and inefficient and personal. It’s a job of smiles, kind words, well-timed compliments, and disarming jokes offered at just the right moment to cut the particular tension of law school life. It’s a librarianship that remembers faces, names, hometowns, alma maters, military ranks, and favorite movies. It’s a librarianship that doesn’t wait at a desk but finds you where you are, has walked in your shoes, and helps you feel at ease. Finally, it is a librarianship that models genuine pleasure in learning and knowing, in solving difficult legal problems, and in finding a meaningful life in the legal profession. At his best, at work in the law library where I saw him nearly every weekday for the last sixteen years, Larry just looked like he was having fun. And he communicated that joy to countless members of sixteen Fordham Law classes, to his colleagues in the law library, and to anyone who worked with him.

Sometimes Larry could be contrary. From time to time, he refused to go with the flow. Larry hated buzzwords, trends, and pedagogical flavors of the month. “Flipped classrooms” and “lean for libraries” and “design thinking” were not for Larry, and he was not afraid to scoff at the latest new clothes around in which various emperors, including myself, insisted on parading. Larry liked books. Larry liked indexes. Larry was a browser, not a searcher. Every day, he methodically browsed the entire Law School from the security desk on the first floor to the clinics on the ninth, and from the Moot Court Board office to the *Law Review* office, and he did what the very best browsers do: he made connections.

* Laurence (“Larry”) J. Abraham previously served as Head of Instructional Services for the Maloney Library at Fordham University School of Law and as an adjunct professor of law. He was also the longtime library liaison for the *Fordham Law Review*.

** Director, Maloney Library and Clinical Associate Professor of Law, Fordham University School of Law. The text of this eulogy has been very lightly edited. For an overview of the corresponding Tribute, see *Foreword: Celebrating a Lasting Legacy*, 89 FORDHAM L. REV. ONLINE 1 (2020).

Larry was notorious in the law library community for his withering and uncompromising critiques of legal information products that he thought should be better and more useful. He could be infuriating to vendors because he relentlessly cut down their expensive interfaces with incontrovertible logic and, often, superior understanding of legal information seeking. But eventually, they sought him out because they saw that he actually knew how to improve their products and make them more acceptable to librarians. In recent years, both Westlaw and LexisNexis made significant design and layout changes because of a chorus of criticism from the library community. No voice in that chorus, or any chorus, for that matter, was stronger than Larry's. Above all, Larry didn't like technology that gave students permission not to think. Thoughtlessness of any kind was, to Larry, the worst sin.

Larry was an unparalleled communicator and a fearless, entertaining, and resourceful teacher. I say "fearless" because he could walk into almost any situation and, seemingly without preparation, deliver a valuable, lively class. His class assignments were notoriously difficult because, again, he wanted his students not just to retrieve or to parrot but to think. I've tried thinking a few times and I can assure you it is hard. It takes time.

Of course, Larry was clever, quick-witted, and extremely knowledgeable. Although his office may have been messy, his mind was not. This brilliance could be intimidating. He was the best-equipped legal mind in the office and didn't let us forget it—not because he wore his erudition heavily, but because he wore it so lightly and wielded it so effortlessly.

But more importantly, I think, Larry was joyful. He was funny. He was always fun to work with. He laughed and smiled and got a kick out of himself, and he brought out the joy in others.

And Larry was kind, almost in a courtly way. He listened to the problems and worries of many law students and staff members and they felt heard.

I've been thinking about why Larry made such an impact on the Maloney Library and Fordham Law, and why he was known and liked by so many people. It occurs to me that Larry noticed. He noticed when I had a dry-cleaning tag on my pants or a weird stain on my shirt. He noticed if I had heaved a particularly heavy sigh or if my posture suggested worry, and he was not afraid to ask. Larry took the time and took the risk to ask. He noticed me. He noticed us. He took the time to see all of us.

And this is the truth of Larry. He had a mind and he was kind. He wanted the people around him to think and to laugh. He modeled that behavior no matter what might be happening in his personal life or what health crisis he might be enduring.

I will miss Larry enormously. With his passing passes a certain kind of warm, personal, and daily retail one-on-one librarianship that is not rewarded by statistics and analytics and is not much aided by screens and servers. It, alas, cannot be accessed from the cloud.

Larry Abraham was not a master of the universe. He was a librarian of the old school, which is to say: he was a gadfly, an advisor, a helper, a teacher,

a goad, a kibitzer, and a friend. We thank his wonderful, strong, and loving wife Michelle; his extraordinary mother Lorraine; and his entire family for allowing him to spend so much time with us for so many years. For so few years. We will remember our good friend Larry and feel his loss every day.