

2002

A Tribute to Joseph W. McGovern

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Recommended Citation

John D. Feerick, *A Tribute to Joseph W. McGovern*, 70 Fordham L. Rev. 1535 (2002).

Available at: <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol70/iss5/1>

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A GRAND BUILDER OF FORDHAM LAW SCHOOL

John D. Feerick '61

Joseph W. McGovern '33 was a towering presence in the life of Fordham Law School. He was among the ten most important graduates in the history of the Law School in terms of building Fordham's reputation for public service. I described his life when I presented him with the School's *Second Harvest Award* on March 3, 1996. Knowing how much that award meant to him and his family, I record here the words of the citation that accompanied it:

As we meet this morning to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Class of 1946, we also begin another tradition at Fordham Law School: the inauguration of the Second Harvest Award. This award is to be given annually to an alumnus or alumna—fifty years from graduation—"who has made exceptional contributions to society in the humanities, the legal profession, business world, community, civic or charitable affairs." Under the rules governing the award, the recipient will designate a fund at the Law School where a gift of \$3,000 will be applied.

The first recipient of the Second Harvest Award is Joseph W. McGovern, Class of 1933. As many of you here today are aware, he has made exceptional contributions to society in virtually every category of the award: as lawyer, civic leader, humanitarian, educator, and parent of 5 children and 11 grandchildren. He has a wonderful wife, Marie, who is also a selfless servant of others.

His contributions to the community read like an honor roll of civic service and include 14 years on the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York—6 years as chancellor; 18 years on the Board of Calvary Hospital, including a number of years as chair; outside counsel for Catholic Charities and all of its constituent charities; and New York State delegate to the White House Conference on Education in 1955 and the White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1960. He was a member of the New York City Community Mental Health Board from its inception in 1954 until 1962 and served from time to time as its acting chairman. He also served as director of the Catholic Guardian Society, the Kennedy Child Study Center and several business corporations and as a member of the Fund Distribution Committee of the Greater

New York Fund. He is a Knight of Malta and a trustee of the Church of Our Lady of Refuge.

Joe was born in the Bronx and attended Regis High School. In 1930, he graduated *magna cum laude* from Fordham College, and after graduating from the Law School (*cum laude*) in 1933, he went into private practice. Three years later, he joined our faculty, serving as a professor for seven years. In 1943 he returned to the practice of law, but continued to serve on the adjunct faculty until 1966, with the rank of Professor of Law.

As a professor, Joe brought the same talent, energy, and humanity that he brought to everything else that he has accomplished in his truly remarkable career, a fact that is attested to by a generation of Fordham Law students, who still refer to him as "Professor McGovern." When graduates speak fondly of the Golden Age of the Fordham Faculty, Joe's name is always in the first rank.

In presenting the Second Harvest Award to Joe, I am pleased to inform you that Joe is in the process of creating a "second harvest" of his own. At the age of 87, he soon will be moving the offices of his firm, McGovern & Dawson, to White Plains. We wish him all the best in his future endeavors, and for all his past accomplishments, and for being such a wonderful son of Fordham Law, it is my great pleasure to present him with the Second Harvest Award.

How fortunate we are to have had Joe as a member of the Fordham Law School community for more than seventy years, spanning eight decades of the School's history. He was one in a million!

JOSEPH W. MCGOVERN

*Martin Fogelman**

Almost half a century ago, the Fordham Law School faculty—although excellent—was not the fully cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial mix we are delighted to perceive today. The then dominant fine personnel were of Irish heritage, who had largely attended—or at least so it seemed—Regis High School and Fordham College. Into this homogeneous fraternity was introduced a new Jewish professor, who had not only graduated from a Methodist college, but its school color was orange! It has been one of the myriad joyous recollections of my years at Fordham that everyone made me feel most welcome. But there is no doubt that the one individual—then an adjunct professor as well as leader of the bar—who clearly and deliberately extended his efforts towards ensuring that lovely welcome was Joseph W. McGovern. Joe's superlative welcome was contagious, and this outsider was soon made to feel completely embraced. In the over four succeeding decades his warm greeting and friendship never faltered, wavered or decreased.

The current and intermediate faculties would wish me to memorialize here that Joe never ceased to extend his charming wholehearted welcome to each new academician as he or she joined the preeminent assembly. Further, four decades of students have perpetually revealed to me the personal attention this leader of the bar bestowed upon each individual person in his class.

Joe McGovern was, and shall ever remain to me—as George Washington is to his country—the father of my association with Fordham. His parents—born, incidentally, as they both were in Ireland—had quite appropriately selected “Washington” as Joe's middle name.

Born in the City of New York in 1909, it is not surprising that his Irish heritage would lead him to attend Regis High School (diploma 1926) and Fordham College (B.A., *magna cum laude*, 1930). Joe McGovern's application to Fordham School of Law, evening division, is most revealing: His answer to the question enquiring why he wished to work 5 hours per day while attending law school was “Having attained my majority I should like to be no longer dependent upon my mother's support.” Joe paid the \$10 registration fee and the \$50

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tuition for the first quarter of the school year, and began attending lectures on September 22, 1930. His law degree was awarded in 1933, and three years later he joined the faculty.

After serving as law secretary to U.S. District Judge Vincent Libell, Joe McGovern became an outstanding lawyer and partner in the well-known law firm of Sullivan, Donovan, Hanrahan, McGovern & Lane, in New York City. More recently, he practiced law with McGovern and Dawson in White Plains.

Many lawyers find the practice of law to be a rewarding but time consuming activity, especially when expending additional time and effort at the lecture bench in law school. However, well beyond the foregoing, Joe McGovern incredibly carried on additional distinct and renowned public accomplishments any one of which would have made an ordinary mortal proud of his contributions to humanity. He was, *inter alia*, the New York State Delegate to the White House Conference on Education in 1955, and to the White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1960, and he was a member of the New York City Community Mental Health Board. He was appointed as a member of the prestigious Board of Regents of the State of New York in 1961. (The world-revered Board of Regents was established by the Legislature in 1784, and is the oldest continuous state board of education in the country.) In 1968, Joe became the nationally known and universally heeded and respected Chancellor of that outstanding Board, thus overseeing the venerable superb educational system of the huge major State. It was only upon assuming the latter office that it was found necessary to relinquish his long-time mutually rewarding professorship at the law school.

I hope I may be allowed a recent, particularly personal, but revealing incident. One week before writing this, I was enjoying lunch at the Delray Beach Club in Florida. At the table were exceptionally distinguished (apart from myself) leaders of the government, the federal and state bench, and the bar. Without knowledge that I was about to write this piece, when the discussion turned to Fordham School of Law, every person at the table expressed sadness for the loss of Joe McGovern. Some had been taught by him, and stated either an incident or an overwhelming overall magnificent impression. Each of the others uttered the warm, glowing sentiments I have tried to convey herein. The whole discussion demonstrated the universality of the ambiance about this glorious individual.

It was not unexpected that the effervescent warm friendship that Joe McGovern exuded would be matched by his charming, talented and beloved wife Marie. If any testimony as to this is required, consult my wife Suzanne—who, embraced by Marie and Joe, was made as welcome as a faculty spouse as I had been as a teacher. The couple's six children have always been blessed by these

understanding, intelligent, concerned and devout parents. Joe's pride in and love for his family were well known.

The faculty of Fordham School of Law would wish me to record that the humanity and humility of this kind, gentle, courteous man of action was matched by his enormous public accomplishments in renowned careers to an extent rarely amassed in one individual. His loyalty to his God and Church, his vigorous and continuous identification with Fordham—at a personal level with deans, faculty, students, staff and alumni—were legendary. All those will miss him, as well as will all folk educated in the State of New York during his tenure, some of whom may never have heard his name, but who bear his unforgettable fine imprint.

Notes & Observations

A TRIBUTE TO JOSEPH W. MCGOVERN

On December 24, 2001, when Joe McGovern was brought home to the Fordham University Chapel on the Rose Hill Campus for the celebration of his life, he had lived a life of exceptional accomplishment, by any measure. In Fordham's bright history of magnanimous sons and daughters, there has not been a more respected gentleman.

Joe McGovern was born in the Bronx, just a little shy of ninety-three years from the day he died. In his long life he was always "from the Bronx." Early on his parents purchased two lots in the Fordham section on Bainbridge Avenue, in what is now the parish of Our Lady of Refuge. Joe was born there. His father worked for the United States Postal Service and was called home by God as a young married man, leaving his wife Jane and their teenaged son. Joe and his mother were to live in that house his father built until she passed away in her late nineties. Joe lived there until the last twenty years of his life.

Regis High School in Manhattan claimed Joe for his four years of high school, followed by Fordham College on Rose Hill, from which he graduated in 1930. Fordham University School of Law was his next alma mater, where Joe distinguished himself with his keen mind, profound dedication to learning and his wondrous Irish wit.

After finishing his law degree, while teaching Latin and Greek at Regis, he went into private practice for a short time, before joining the law school faculty as a full-time professor for seven years and an adjunct professor until 1966. His teaching years were among the most deeply satisfactory of his life; nothing thrilled him more than to encounter, as he frequently did, lawyers and judges who had been his students, who held him in great esteem and affection. He was always the pellucid professor.

Among the many public services which Joe gave to city, state and nation, he felt that the most significant was his service on the New York State Board of Regents for fourteen years, seven as Chancellor. His Board colleagues valued his legal and administrative skills. Even more they loved him for his humanity and sensitivity to the needs of students from early childhood through professional education. He loved the company of these distinguished volunteer citizens and they loved the way he handled the sometimes-tender relationships between the Board and the Governor. Among his many fans was then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller, although they often approached problems from very different viewpoints.

After teaching and chancerying, Joe practiced law with the firm of Sullivan, Donovan, Hanrahan, McGovern and Lane, and later with McGovern & Dawson, where one of his partners was his son Lawrence. His public service covered his career: Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York, the Catholic Guardian Society, and Calvary Hospital in his native Bronx. He served Calvary for eighteen years, thirteen as its Chair. His life-long concern for the poor and the ill was devoted to this truly extraordinary healthcare center.

How does one measure a life? Some favor numbers. Joe had some formidable ones: almost ninety-three years of life, sixty-four years of marriage to Marie Gough, a dozen honorary degrees. Others favor prestigious positions: certainly Chancellor of the Board of Regents of New York State is one of the most prestigious in our national educational system. Perhaps one of the most telling marks of a person's life is the friends they make—and keep. There are no numbers for Joe's legionary and legendary friendships. More telling is the inability of this writer to recall ever having heard a negative word about Joe McGovern.

There is more to learn from the source of a person's deepest happiness. No one who had the privilege of knowing Joe McGovern would ever doubt that for him, that source was his faith and love of God, and his profound love for his family. Joe and his Marie were clearly meant for each other; they complemented each other in a rare way. The source of their love was in their shared faith in God who had, in their view, helped them find each other. Their faith was never demonstrative, just the abiding leit-motif of their long lives. And this they passed on to the five children who survived into adulthood, Teesie, Joe, Ray, Phil and Larry, as well as to their son Joe Ray who died in childhood. Joe and Marie were strong people and they passed that strength down to their children, who have been the strength of their twenty-two children. That strength was at hand when Joe lost both his wife and his son Phil in the last two years of his own life. That strength, suffused with Joe's delight in his unabashed love for his clan, including twelve great-grandchildren, is his heritage to a remarkable family.

On December 24th, it was clear that his clan would receive no more lasting Christmas gift than their joyous celebration of Joe. He loved his Irish heritage, his Jesuit education, his Bronx roots, his teaching and practicing law for almost seventy years—and waltzing with Marie! Even more, he loved God and his family. May his incomparably good life cheer ours and brighten heaven.

—A Jesuit Friend