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John D. Feerick: A Man Committed to Advancing Diversity

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Cover Page Footnote

Fordham School of Law '70; Associate Dean, Fordham School of Law.

JOHN D. FEERICK: A MAN COMMITTED TO ADVANCING DIVERSITY

*Gail D. Hollister**

Twenty years ago John Feerick, then a partner at Skadden Arps who had recently been named to be the next Dean of Fordham Law School, asked me to meet him for lunch. Over lunch we discussed the law school and John's view that the administration had to be expanded to include a person who would be responsible for guiding students. I agreed to assume those responsibilities and so became the Law School's first Assistant Dean of Students, and thus the first woman in a dean's position at the law school. Now that I know John better, I am sure that one of my major qualifications for the job was my gender—appointing me as an Assistant Dean was his first step in adding diversity to the administration of the law school.

John's actions in recruiting me in 1982 meant that there was one woman among five deans in the law school. In 2002, four of eleven deans are women, as are our librarian and the director of technology. When John arrived as Dean, students who were members of minority groups comprised 5.2% of the student population and there was one tenured faculty member who was a member of a minority group. This year 23.9% of our students and 11% of our faculty are members of minority groups. There also has been a significant increase in the number of women at the school during this period. While 41% of the students in 1982 were women, half are today. Women's representation on the faculty increased from 10% in 1982 to 26% today. And although we can not now know what the final class to be admitted by Dean Feerick will look like, we do know that this year faculty positions have been offered to four people who are starting their academic careers, and two who are already well recognized scholars. All of these people are women, and three of them are members of minority groups. The increased diversity in all parts of the law school during the last twenty years is striking and there is every reason to anticipate that the faculty, the student body, and the administration which Dean Feerick's successor will inherit will be even more representative of our society than they are today.

* Fordham School of Law '70; Associate Dean, Fordham School of Law.

Behind those statistics are many stories, stories of individuals helped, of programs begun, of essays written. Within months of arriving at Fordham, John had established a new scholarship, named for the Honorable Lawrence Pierce and designed to enable highly qualified disadvantaged students to attend the law school. This scholarship has led to additional diversity at the school. To attract additional minority applicants, John enlisted the minority student groups who agreed to attend the Law School Admission Council's Regional Forum, as well as Law Days sponsored by AALSA, BALSAs, and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. During the 90s the Dean began to send representatives to talk to students at colleges with substantial minority enrollments. In 1998 *Black Issues in Higher Education* ranked Fordham Law School 8th in the nation in granting law degrees to African American students. That same year *Hispanic Business* ranked the law school 5th among the nation's law schools that are "doing the best job of attracting Hispanic enrollment."

Having embarked on a program to increase the number of minority students, John also instituted strategies to make their law school experience more rewarding. A faculty Minority Affairs Committee was created to consider issues of concern to minority students, and in 1984 the Dean appointed a faculty committee to consider instituting a formal program to aid disadvantaged students' transition into law school. The result was the Minority Enrichment Program, which has evolved into the school's present Academic Enrichment Program, a voluntary program which includes two weeks of class during the summer before a student's first year in law school, and continues during the year with workshops in areas such as legal writing strategies and taking exams. Last year he brought together a group of minority alumni/ae who enthusiastically began a mentoring program for minority students.

John's efforts in this area are not confined to the law school. When he became President of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, he listed "the role of women in the legal profession"¹ as one of the areas he wanted to stress, and that year women chaired more Association committees than they ever had before. John was instrumental in establishing the Thurgood Marshall Summer Law Internship Program which gives inner-city high school students the opportunity to have paying jobs with law firms, law schools, and in corporate legal departments, and he also played a leadership role in the City Bar's program, which successfully encouraged major firms to set minority hiring goals. He has written about the "shocking lack of diversity in the federal judiciary"² and that "[d]iversity can only enrich

1. John D. Feerick, *Inaugural Address*, 72 *The Record* 589, 594 (1992)

2. John D. Feerick, Letter to Editor, *N. Y. L.J.*, December 29, 1993, at 2.

the quality of judicial decisions.”³ In recognition of John’s efforts to foster diversity, the New York State Bar Association recently presented him with its Building Bridges award “in Honor of his Leadership and Commitment in Building Bridges of Opportunity for Minorities in the Justice System.”

As with many of John’s endeavors, personal involvement with individuals has been a hallmark of his approach to advancing diversity. In response to my request for information, many people explained how John had assisted them on a personal level, often by helping them make contacts that led to the jobs which had been eluding them. Those individual personal stories, to me, overshadow the impressive array of institutional actions which he spearheaded so successfully. They quietly but eloquently speak to John Feerick’s commitment to helping society achieve diversity, one of the many ways he has fulfilled what he calls “a lawyer’s cardinal obligation . . . to foster the integrity of the legal system by promoting human dignity.”⁴

3. John D. Feerick, *Women Lawyers Struggle Against Many Barriers*, N. Y. L.J., May 3, 1993, at s-12.

4. John D. Feerick, *A Message From the Dean*, 15 Fordham Urb. L. J. 7, 7 (1986).

Notes & Observations