

1981

In Fond Appreciation

Michael I. Sovern
Columbia Law School, msovern@law.columbia.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Michael I. Sovern, *In Fond Appreciation*, 81 COLUM. L. REV. 938 (1981).
Available at: https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/2179

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Scholarship Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholarship Archive. For more information, please contact scholarshiparchive@law.columbia.edu.

In Fond Appreciation

I write in a representative capacity—not for all the presidents of Columbia University, nor even for all the past deans of our great Law School; I presume rather to offer a few words of fond appreciation on behalf of the thousands of middle-aged lawyers who once sat at Willis Reese's feet. My class began the 1952-53 academic year and our legal education with Dean Young Berryman Smith as our Torts professor. A few years later, classes would begin to be sectioned, but in those primeval days, we were one big, happy group. Two hundred and forty strong (not all of the adjectives in this and the preceding sentence are meant to be taken literally), we gathered for all of our classes in Harkness Theatre in the basement of Butler Library. Our faculty lineup was Julius Goebel, Dean Smith, Edwin Wilhite Patterson, Jerome Michael, and a beardless stripling, only forty-one years old, Harry Wilmer Jones. Even he seemed ancient to our young eyes.

In some ways that semester was the end of an era. We were the last to study with that extraordinary teacher, Jerome Michael; death would claim him in the final weeks of the semester. Though they would return later, both Patterson and Smith were afflicted with extended illnesses, and the class of '55 had its first exposure to the second team—Paul R. Hays and Willis L.M. Reese. Would that Columbia's football team had such bench strength.

Upperclassmen had told us about Reese, but we were not prepared for the reality. Every part of him participated in the dialogue—endless arms and legs, a body that looked like an exclamation point except when it curled over the lectern to form a question mark, a voice that modulated between the shrill and the raucous. He was uproariously funny, endlessly interesting, a master teacher. Socrates would have acknowledged him a peer, but not at first sight.

The great Elliot Cheatham was my Conflict of Laws teacher, and so I never saw Reese in that venue, but I have heard about him from hordes of admiring students over the years. I am confident that if Reese undertook to teach two or three more courses, our students would keep right on enrolling.

There are great teachers who displace their subject matter: the folklore has it that those who studied with Thomas Reed Powell studied Thomas Reed Powell, whatever the name of the course. And there are great teachers who enrich their subject matter: their performances are not an exaltation of self but, paradoxically, a subordination of self. They perform to help their students learn, not to imprint a vision of virtuosity. Willis Reese is a brilliant scholar, but that is not the first, or even the second or third, description you would get of him from his students. His goal in the classroom is not to make himself look good; it is to help his students learn.

It is and has been common in universities to debate the question whether to prefer teaching to scholarship or vice-versa when making faculty appointments. The Columbia Law faculty has long prided itself on refusing to accept that dilemmatic question and doing its best to transcend it by appointing professors who can do both. Willis Reese is their quintessential achievement.

I began this piece as a dazzled student turned worshipful alumnus. Let me finish it as a professor. I have been proud to claim Willis Reese as a colleague

for more than twenty-four years. He is not only a teacher and a scholar; he is, also, in the finest sense of that phrase, a gentleman and a scholar. A thoughtful, generous-spirited man who has always carried more than his fair share, he has been a key figure in the maintenance of the faculty's marvelous esprit, free of petty politics and committed to all that is good in the concept of a community of scholars.

MICHAEL I. SOVERN

*President
Columbia University*