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Tribute to Professor Leon Gabinet

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Barbara R. Snyder[†]

In 1983, I arrived in Cleveland to start work as an assistant professor at the Case Western Reserve University School of Law.

It was only three years earlier that I had been a student at the University of Chicago Law School. I had taken courses with extraordinary faculty members like Geoffrey R. Stone, who went on to serve as the school's dean and then the university's provost; and Walter J. Blum, one of the nation's foremost authorities on tax law.

Now *I* was going to be the one in front of the class.

After law school I had clerked for a federal appellate judge and served as an associate at a Chicago firm.

I had learned a great deal in both settings from supervisors and peers.

But even so, I asked myself, Was I really ready for this new role?

One of the few sources of reassurance in those early days involved my Case Western Reserve School of Law colleagues. No matter how senior or distinguished, every one of them treated me with kindness and respect. They endured my questions, encouraged my efforts, and at least appeared to appreciate my enthusiasm. They generously shared their expertise and the wisdom gained through years of experience. Among the most gracious of the group was a very popular tax professor with a glint in his eye and a big smile, Leon Gabinet.

I had met Professor Gabinet during the interview process; we discovered that we both had attended the same law school "at different times," as he liked to say. He was the kind of person who searched for such connections. Once I joined the faculty, he was just as warm and welcoming. Whenever we passed in the hall, he had a ready smile and a kind word. If ever I had a problem, I knew I could go to him without fear of seeming too junior. He *wanted* to help.

This spirit was just as evident in Professor Gabinet's interactions with students. Like Chicago's Professor Blum, his expertise was in tax law, which can appear daunting and even intimidating for many students. But Professor Gabinet's classes inspired admiration and created a sense of fandom among his students. Certainly he expected them to master the material, but something about his approach made

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the subject more accessible, more interesting, and even—at times—fun.

I came to realize that his stature as one of our most outstanding teachers could be traced to two primary causes. First was the man himself. Professor Gabinet truly enjoyed life, and he loved teaching. He took enormous pleasure in seeing students engage and understand; he *wanted* them to succeed. This sentiment led to the second reason for students' affection: He approached each class with an energy borne of a sense of possibility. Since *he* found this tax principle or that policy fascinating, Professor Gabinet just knew he could find a way to convey that feeling to his students. If the first try did not succeed, he would seek another. And if that one did not work, he would turn to his most effective pedagogical technique—a warm and sometimes hilarious wit. After all, it is difficult to be frustrated and discouraged in the midst of a laugh. Even better, students are more apt to try harder because they appreciate the professor's effort.

Professor Gabinet's exceptional teaching was undoubtedly enhanced by his scholarship. His students gained the benefit of learning from a scholar widely respected in his field. Indeed, Professor Gabinet continues to be an active scholar to this day. He is, in short, the epitome of a great faculty member.

In 2010, the Case Western Reserve community received a powerful example of just how long the esteem and appreciation I had observed among Professor Gabinet's students continued after they had graduated. Forty years after earning his JD, Coleman P. Burke endowed a professorship in his mentor's honor.

"Professor Gabinet is a gifted teacher who didn't just teach the law," Burke said in 2010, the year he announced his gift. "He engaged us with the material and motivated us through questioning and an ever-present sense of humor. Most importantly, he instilled in us a sense of fairness, integrity and service to one's fellow man."

Ever the gentleman, Professor Gabinet responded by complimenting his student.

"I am both humbled and honored to hold this chair bearing Coley Burke's name," he said. "Coley exemplifies the best of our law alumni, and I am pleased to be the inaugural chairholder."

The most important lesson I learned from Professor Gabinet, then, was this: Be yourself. The sentiment may sound trite, but it is no less true. For example, I could no more emulate Professor Stone in the classroom than Tom Cruise could have assumed Paul Newman's role in the film *The Verdict*. But I could convey my own appreciation for the nuances of constitutional law. I could watch students' expressions to discern which approach was working and which needed to be dropped. Most of all, I could engage students about their perspectives on significant rulings or how they might have framed arguments another way. I *liked* hearing their ideas, and they learned from articulating them.

Over time, I became more and more comfortable in the classroom. To this day, I continue to enjoy the give-and-take of a vigorous conversation among a large group of smart people. I well remember my 2007 visit back to the law school as a brand-new university president. There in the audience was Professor Gabinet, still with that glint in his eye, still with that warm smile. Yet again, his presence put me at ease. Yet again, I felt profound gratitude. This time, though, I knew I shared the feeling with generations of his students. He had taught us all well.

