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Tribute to Professor Peter M. Gerhart

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Juliet P. Kostritsky[†]

We all knew Peter in different ways. Here are some of the ways our students and I remember Peter. Of course, our stories are just a fraction of stories repeated by faculty, students, and staff at the law school and—we are sure—at other organizations Peter was involved with. Peter was always reaching out to others, and he will be missed.

His Kindness to Students: Years later, students recall getting emails (which they saved) telling them that they were not defined by their grades. Peter would send this email out to students while they were anxiously awaiting their grades. This email helped students recognize that life continues even if their grades disappoint them, and that learning is a lifelong process.

During the pandemic, his classroom was an oasis of kindness and a place of welcome and learning.

His students delighted him. He relished answers that were surprising. When studying an epileptic-driver case in Torts, a student responded with an unusual answer about damages that involved suggesting a hug as a possible remedy. Professor Gerhart, delighted, taken aback, responded: “I had not heard that answer.”

His Kindness to His Peers: Peter recently consoled me at the intensive care waiting room while waiting for my husband to come out of open-heart surgery. He somehow managed to find out where I was waiting with my best friend in the hospital. He helped lessen the worry while we were waiting for the outcome.

Empathetic and a Problem Solver: When Case had no maternity leave policy and Peter was Dean, he made a maternity leave for me possible. I don’t know what magic wand he waved, but he somehow made it happen.

Insatiable Intellectual Curiosity: One semester Peter told me he wanted to enroll in my Advanced Contracts class as a student. He soon was co-teaching the class with me. It was so fun playing off different ideas with him. I approached the class from a law-and-economics perspective and he from a social-morality perspective. The students benefited from hearing us spar. In addition, Peter and I met with another colleague weekly over the course of a summer at a Starbucks to discuss incomplete contracts, externalities, and bargaining impediments. At the end of the summer, we had produced a document that encapsulated all of our discussions and helped us in the years to come

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with our research projects.¹ Peter and I also wrote an article together;² we had a research assistant. The three of us would meet in the Faculty Lounge. Peter would come prepared with infectious enthusiasm to share his take on the case. It was the ideal learning environment. We discussed the cases and applied our theories to see if they worked. It was my ideal of how law school should work.

Teaching—His Availability: Peter held office hours when few came. A student went to see Peter unsure of the class, but did not have a specific question in mind. Peter was able to draw the student out and have the student formulate the unknown questions, leading to a clearer understanding of the class. Another student mentioned how, even if you were confused, Peter didn't make you feel bad about your lack of understanding; instead, he helped you gain better understanding of the material.

Sense of Adventure: Peter tried to make a boring situation fun. My husband remembers running into Peter while they were both on jury duty downtown at the Justice Center. At their lunch break, Peter said, "let's go over to the casino"—something my husband would generally have no interest in doing. With Peter's almost naïve sense of curiosity, they played the slots, and my husband ended up winning his lunch money. Peter's enthusiasm brought a sense of joy to this event.

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1. During her reading of this tribute, the author held up a notebook and said, "here is the notebook of our discussions."
 2. Peter M. Gerhart & Juliet P. Kostritsky, *Efficient Contextualism*, 76 U. PITT. L. REV. 509 (2015).