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Tribute to Professor Peter M. Gerhart

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Katharine Van Tassel

Deans Berg and Scharf, Professor Entin, and the memorial committee, thank you so much for inviting me to share my thoughts with our community in this celebration of Peter Gerhart's life. I represent a very large group of people who, in just a very short time, were all quickly drawn into Peter's inner circle by the powerful, magnetic pull of his personality and generosity of spirit.

I personally came to know Peter when I joined the faculty as a visitor almost two years ago. We had our offices right next to each other. I am a very visual person, and I quickly came to see Peter's office, not as just a corner room on the second floor of a building, but as a lighthouse with a strong beacon of light, that ceaselessly swept back and forth over the often stormy, perilous ocean that students must navigate when pursuing a career in the law.

How did I come to see Peter's office this way?

Peter enjoyed a reputation among the students as always being there to help. His beacon regularly picked up students whose small boats were being tossed by the waves of individual crises, some personal and some intellectual, both small and large. Peter would guide these students to a pathway toward a resolution for their concerns with wisdom, encouragement, and a strong dose of laughter.

As my door is always open, I could see this steady stream of students who came and went daily, like the constant ebb and flow of the tide. I would regularly see students sitting outside his door, with body language that reflected some serious, inner struggle, their shoulders so tight that they were drawn up almost up to their ears, with faces deeply etched with frown lines and thunderous, furrowed brows.

Peter would welcome them into his office, and I would hear *the low, slow murmur of voices*. Very soon, those voices would become louder and lighter, and quickly would become punctuated with bright bursts of laughter. Eventually, the pair would emerge from Peter's office and the student would invariably be smiling. The storm would have passed, and the sun would be shining again.

Over time, and as we became friends, Peter started poking his head in my door after many of these student meetings and, with a twinkle in his eye, would give me a thumbs up and a grin, before returning to his office with a bounce in his step. What was amazing is that this constant parade of students into his door and out didn't drain him, it energized him and made him excited to return to the office the next day. Peter's office was almost always open for business as he regularly met with students in the day, the evenings, and even on the weekends. Whenever he was needed!

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And students weren't the only group he worked with.

He also had a wide sphere of friends and colleagues locally, nationally, and around the world, whom he regularly worked with, exchanging and commenting on drafts of articles, books, and presentations. I was amazed to learn just how many people I know from across the country who were in regular correspondence with Peter. I personally was blessed to have had the opportunity to collaborate with Peter on many different projects. I can speak from personal experience when I say that those of us fortunate enough to have worked with him will not forget his always wise counsel, encouragement, sharp insights, and infectious collegiality.

In closing, I want to share that I did once ask Peter where he got his energy to help, network, and collaborate with so many people. He responded with one word, "*family.*" Peter talked a lot about his wonderful family. They were the super battery that gave Peter the strength to lend a helping hand to so many.

Peter's thoughtful, avuncular, and thoroughly winning personality helped to account for his remarkable abilities as a leader, a practical-minded visionary, and an intellectual light of the first order.

Like so many who are here today, I feel blessed to have known and learned from Peter.

Thank you for allowing me to share my memories of Peter with you today!