Peter Thornton, 1974-75

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Abstract

It must have been March 1974 when I came up to Fort Lauderdale to meet Peter Thornton, the dean of the non-existent Nova Law School.
Nova Law Center Deans, 1974-93: A Tribute

INTRODUCTION

Shepard Broad Law Center has been fortunate in its deans, both acting and permanent. In our nineteen year history, four present or former colleagues have served as dean, four others as acting dean or in a similar capacity. Some of their tenures were quite short, in one case less than a full academic year. Two—those of Ovid Lewis and Roger Abrams—were long enough to grant us much-needed stability.

It is unfortunate that these gentlemen have not previously been recognized for their efforts. Even the most casual of readers would be struck by the environment of adversity in which so many of them operated. Because of their efforts, the Law Center of 1993 is, in many ways, quite different from the Law Center of 1974. At the same time, each acknowledged the special qualities of our early students, faculty, and staff. Recognizing that newer is not always better, each dean played an important role in making the Shepard Broad Law Center into the extraordinary institution it is today.

The brief segments that follow offer only a glimpse of the challenges and contributions made during their tenures. There is limited repetition of some events and an occasional difference in perspective. The order is largely that of the various deanships, an exception being Steve Wisotsky’s discussion of our acting deanships. We hope each dean senses our respect and affection. We hope we have earned theirs as well.

On behalf of our entire faculty, we are grateful for the opportunity to publicly say “Thank you, Peter, Larry, Bruce, Don, Ovid, Bruce (again), Joe, Steve, and Roger.”

1. Because every section was written by a current Law Center faculty member, we have omitted the traditional institutional affiliation footnotes. The authors joined the Law Center faculty between 1974 (Bruce Rogow) and 1984 (Paul Joseph). While Bruce is the only member of the “charter” faculty still teaching full time at Nova, each author has observed at least three of our deanships.

Peter Thornton, 1974-75

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It must have been March 1974 when I came up to Fort Lauderdale to meet Peter Thornton, the dean of the non-existent Nova Law School.

I had read a small story in the Miami Review about the plan to start a new law school at Nova. I was teaching at the University of Miami Law School, and the thought of starting a law school intrigued me. I was familiar with Nova’s external degree emphasis and was sympathetic to the alternative graduate educational opportunities that it and other avant garde schools were offering. The only other new law school on the boards was Antioch, which had started a clinical style program in Washington. I thought that Nova might have similar potential to expand the traditional curriculum to something more practical.

Peter Thornton quickly set me straight. We met at his office in the Parker Building, which was (and is) just west of our presently-sited new building. That is all there was to the law school—his office. We went to lunch at Rolling Hills Country Club. Recognizing my civil rights, legal aid, clinical legal education background, and anticipating my interests, he quickly set me straight: “We are not going to be the Antioch of the South.” I quickly shifted gears and spoke glowingly of the virtues of the traditional law school curriculum, like it was taught at Notre Dame.

Peter had taught at Notre Dame for years. He was about 50 I guess, with beautifully white hair, blue eyes, and a reddish glow on his light complexion. He twinkled and I sensed some clouds too. Little did I know that he had been promised a seven-figure starting fund at Nova, but had only received six zeros. In any event, I liked him, he liked me, and I was hired by a telephone call a week or so later. I was to teach civil procedure.

Over that summer of ’74 I stopped by the Parker Building to see how construction was going. We had part of the first floor. On the west side were faculty offices; on the east, the dean’s and law librarian’s offices (a wonderful woman named Lucretia Granda); and in between, the library and two classrooms. I brought a few things into my office, looked at the admissions files, and began to look forward to the August beginning of classes.

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The meeting was better than the waiting. The initial class was a wonderful mix of people who were willing to take the risk of a new, untested law school. Many of those students came to Nova because they had families in the South Florida area and could not go away to law school. Others had no choice—the new Nova was their only entre to becoming a lawyer. At that meeting Peter provided wisdom, humor, stability and, when introducing the faculty, made it seem like the students were lucky to be in on the ground floor of this new law school.

Peter Thornton was right. That first class had a special nature, and formed a special bond with themselves and the faculty, and, later, with the communities in which they went to practice. Their successes are a tribute to Peter Thornton’s willingness to leave the safety of South Bend and create a new institution in a less than optimum physical, economic and educational environment. He put together the few resources he could find and actually made a law school. Today, almost 20 years later, we are ready to embark on the rest of our life. We are well housed, in a new building. We are well educated, with ABA and AALS accreditation. We are respected for what we have accomplished in our first two decades. We were lucky to have Peter Thornton as our Founding Father—the man who set us on the way.

Last year Peter Thornton came back for a class reunion at my house. His white hair was as thick and beautiful as always; his blue eyes as clear as that luncheon day in 1974; and the twinkle even stronger, for he was surrounded by many of those in the charter class: men and women whose lives were changed because Peter Thornton made a law school.

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Laurance Hyde, 1975-78

Ronald Benton Brown

I came to Fort Lauderdale in February 1976 to interview for a faculty position at the new Nova University "Center for the Study of Law." It was housed in the bottom floor of the Parker Building. Germ-free rats lived on the top floor. The new law school’s dean was Laurance M. Hyde, Jr. Larry had been hired to be a professor, but was thrust into the deanship shortly after the law school opened. Nothing in the minutes of the faculty meetings (or anywhere else for that matter) explains how or why or when the mantle of leadership abruptly shifted to him from Dean Thornton, and no one was interested in revealing the details to the newcomers.

Larry had been a judge in Missouri—and he had both run and taught at the National Judicial College at the University of Nevada—but running a law school was an entirely different matter. For one thing, there was the American Bar Association to deal with. For another, the university was far from stable. In fact, one inspector had charitably described it as "a speculative venture." Thus Larry had to learn the law school business on the job, under fire, and in the midst of an academic earthquake.

Joining the faculty in the law school’s third year was an adventure. There were third year students for the first time and we had to prepare for the first graduation. There were only seventeen professors, but that was almost double the size of the previous year and created a lot of disruption in faculty dynamics.

In those early days, the dean was practically the whole administration. He operated with only his secretary, one administrative assistant, a director of admissions, and an admissions secretary. How they managed to get everything done in those pre-computer years is a wonder. In his spare time, Larry also taught Professional Responsibility and Criminal Law to the freshmen. He rode his bicycle to and from school every day, setting the relaxed social atmosphere.

Larry is a sailor at heart. After returning to the faculty in his post-dean years, he had a poster on his door which read, "I’d rather be sailing," and I am sure that was true. He was a first-rate navigator, capable of piloting a sailboat across the Atlantic, but he was never the tyrannical sea captain so popular in literature. He would try to get the faculty talking together so we