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MASTER TEACHER, DEAREST FRIEND

HON. ABRAHAM J. GAFNI*

I first met Steve Frankino forty years ago when my wife arrived at Villanova Law School as a second year transfer student, and he joined the faculty, at age twenty-nine, as its youngest member. Somehow, perhaps because we lived in the same Philadelphia neighborhood, we both had young children and my wife was so impressed with him as a master teacher, we became close friends and maintained that friendship over the following four decades despite our often residing hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles apart.

Thinking back, I recall that even then, although he was but a few years older than I, Steve presented an aura of wisdom and gravitas. Initially, I imagined that this was because his hair was starting to gray and that this outward change in appearance was principally responsible for creating an impression of understanding and judgment often associated only with those who were considerably older.

I soon appreciated, however, that Steve's already mature observations on law and society, as well as people and problems, were not simply an illusion created by the color of his hair. Of course, they did reflect remarkable powers of analysis based upon his traditional training as a lawyer. There was, however, an additional dimension to Steve's analyses. Not only could he recognize and define the issues and propose potential solutions, but, in addition, he always appreciated the ramifications of each of these proposals and the positive and negative impact they might have, both short and long term, on persons and groups, including those not directly affected by them. This rare combination of legal brilliance and practical common sense is, perhaps, what lay at the core of Steve's success in his remarkable career directing the fortunes of three law schools.

Beyond his special talents as a lawyer, professor and dean, however, there were other aspects of his personality which are deserving of mention and which reflect on why he was such a special person.

First, he had a rare ability to relate to people and, in effect, to make them a part of his own family. I noted this in particular when Steve would often refer to different individuals as his and Rosemarie's "dearest friend." Anyone who knew Steve and the precision with which he employed language might be taken aback by such repeated statements for he, of all people, understood the limitation of the superlative. There was, however, no confusion or insincerity in his characterization of these relationships. For when you became a friend of Steven and Rosemarie Frankino, and were with them, you did, in fact, sense at that moment that you were their

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closest and most intimate friend. At the same time you understood that they had the capacity to share this special relationship equally with others, as a parent might with children, without diminishing the quality of their relationship with you. In short, when Steven Frankino was your friend, he was, in fact, your “dearest” friend, and you could rely upon him to provide the support and assistance one might expect only from one with whom such a close relationship had been established.

But Steve’s sense of obligation extended beyond those with whom he had a personal relationship. At the Memorial Service held at the law school in November, I mentioned, as an example, an undertaking that Steve had assumed with respect to a needy individual whom he had met in a medieval synagogue in the city of Safed in Israel in 1969. That man assured that he would recite prayers regularly for Steve and his family. In exchange, for years, Steve continued to send him money reflecting a personal sense of commitment to an individual whom he had met once for perhaps two minutes but which commitment, once undertaken, could not, as a matter of personal ethics and honor, be abandoned. Over the years I came to learn that this was not the only such personal commitment which Steve had assumed over the years and about which he never spoke. In many respects, Steve, a public figure by reason of his professional positions was a very private person and never more so than when he was assisting others.

But, he further understood that this obligation to the poor and disadvantaged extended beyond one’s personal commitments. In particular, he often expressed the need for the legal profession to apply its very special talents and training to the service of society in general, without regard to financial reward.

Steve’s ability to extend himself was reflected in yet another aspect of his personality. A review of his personal background and education from primary school through law school, as well as his professional career, reflect extensive study, training and commitment to the Catholic Church. These, of course, formed much of the religious, ethical and moral perspectives which were at the very core of his being.

He was not only a committed Roman Catholic, however, but was also “Catholic” in the broadest and most general sense of that term. He was open, tolerant, accepting of others and all-embracing. Moreover, he was not only respectful of the beliefs and value systems of others, but was also interested and inquisitive about them. He was most sincere in seeking to learn from those of different backgrounds in an attempt to broaden his own insights into and understanding of all people.

That is not to say that he did not have very strong opinions, particularly in the area of special academic interest to him, i.e., the proper relationship between religion and government in the United States. But even when one might disagree with Steve he had a special ability to express a differing opinion without in any way belittling or expressing a lack of re-

spect for a contrary position. He would always reflect an attitude which conveyed that views contrary to his own were worthy of consideration and that respect was to be accorded to every person's beliefs and traditions.

Since Steve's passing, I have reflected upon these aspects of Steve's personality and character and how they coincided with the objectives of legal education to which his professional career was dedicated. In training new lawyers, we, of course, attempt to instill the ability to approach problems analytically and not be diverted by the extraneous or irrelevant. At the same time we hope that these students will appreciate that there is more than a rigid intellectual aspect to the practice of law. We want them to reflect flexibility and openness in considering new approaches and solutions which may not have been considered or accepted earlier. We hope that they will not view their roles as advocates for disputing parties as requiring that they adopt hostile, unfriendly or personally destructive attitudes, which, while assumed in the guise of advancing the client's position, often create even greater anger and tension between the parties and undermine the important role of the lawyer as healer of human conflict. Rather, we intend that our students appreciate that they have not been retained simply because they have special technical expertise, but because they can bring a dispassionate and calming influence to a heated situation. Finally, we hope that our students will understand that a legal calling includes not only service to one's clients but to society as a whole; that we have an obligation to provide service to those less fortunate; that our special training has provided us with tools which allow us to accomplish these goals; and, that our failure to undertake this role would reflect an abandonment of the moral responsibility of our profession.

Steven Frankino exemplified all of these characteristics in full measure. His brilliance as a lawyer was matched by his winning and loving personality and by his openness to new ideas. He approached differences of opinion not as an invitation to legal or administrative warfare but as an opportunity to mold solutions that would serve the best interests of all. He valued personal principle and belief, but appreciated that differing beliefs of others are, except in the rare instance, to be accorded honor and respect. And, he understood that we have an obligation as individuals, and particularly as lawyers, to employ our special training in the service of society generally and particularly for those who are unable to obtain the full benefits to which all are entitled.

Villanova Law School, whose mission was so important to Steven Frankino, will continue to educate lawyers for decades to come. In so doing, it will, hopefully, recall him and consider his example as the educational model for our students. He was, in fact, the lawyer and person we hope to see reflected in each of our graduates and in the legal profession in general.

