

From the Faculty: Good Guys Can Lead

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Eleven years ago, my name was on the short list of names submitted to the Chancellor of Seton Hall University as he considered the appointment of the Dean of Seton Hall University School of Law. Ron Riccio's was among the others. I was convinced that the Chancellor, upon seeing my name on the list next to Ron's, would appreciate how much better I would be as dean. He did not. It did not take long for me to conclude he was right.

Seton Hall Law School has a brilliant future. Most of my colleagues take where we are, and what we have, for granted. They were not around to witness the conditions under which faculty members labored, and students were not as appreciative of the school as they are now.¹ Many do not understand how hard we must work to preserve what we have before we can move ahead to where we want to go. Too many do not appreciate the fact that Ron Riccio is the big reason for our bright future.

My colleague, Professor Paula Franzese, has often stated that Ron is a great dean because he is a good person. "Great dean" and "good person" are not usually used together in assessing an individual dean's tenure. In fact, given the nature of the job, it is difficult to be viewed as a good human being if one has been an effective dean.² The decisions made affect people on a very personal level. How could a good person deny tenure to someone? Or, deny merit raises? Or, for that matter, how could a good person make any decision that affects a faculty member or a student in a negative way?

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¹ For some of us, it is mind-boggling to think that the school was not highly ranked for student satisfaction as we are now. According to one publication, Seton Hall Law School is second in student satisfaction. See Theresa Marvin, *The Best Law Schools*, THE NATIONAL JURIST, Apr.-May 1994, at 12.

² It is not my intention to insult any prior or subsequent dean. I am sure that others who have held the job at various times and places would disagree with this judgment. Nevertheless, I believe this to be a fair assessment.

Ron's very first official act was to appoint me as his associate dean. He immediately made it clear that we were not going to do business in the usual decanal fashion.

When Ron said he would have an open door policy, he meant it literally as well as figuratively. He did not want me to close the door when we met in his office because it gave out the wrong signals. Only those discussions that were truly confidential needed to be held behind closed doors. After all, how would students know they could interrupt if the door was closed?³

Ron wanted to be the Dean of Seton Hall Law School to serve the students better. He remembered what it felt like to be one. Ron was grateful for the doors that opened up to him as a Seton Hall graduate. Nevertheless, he also remembered how much he disliked the conditions under which he studied. He came to believe the institution had lost sight of its mission.

Ron once told me that when he was a law student, Seton Hall Law School had the distinction of employing an advanced model of the Socratic method used by most law professors at schools around the country. At most law schools, students were required to come up with the answers to the questions posed by their teachers and, through this process, learn the law. At Seton Hall, the students had to come up with the questions as well as the answers.

Ron has very fond memories of his classmates. Many are still his closest friends. Unfortunately, the positive memories end there. Everything Ron has done as Dean needs to be understood from the perspective of his memories as a student at the law school. He wanted to make sure that future generations of Seton Hall Law School students would value the institution as well as their classmates. He wanted to make sure that the institution valued the students.⁴

In 1988, the law school was on a fast slide to mediocrity. The American Bar Association had completed a scathing evaluation and threatened our accreditation.⁵ Our faculty was divided. Our students

³ I must admit I never did get used to being asked to leave his office whenever a student interrupted us. Then again, with me as dean, our students might have never felt as comfortable with the school as they have with Ron.

⁴ Being the good person that he is, I have no doubt that Ron would be more charitable to the institution if he were writing this. He is not! I am not as charitable. I know Ron would not disagree with my assessment of his recollections.

⁵ The ABA evaluation starts off with an institutional self-evaluation intended to be used as a base of comparison by the evaluators. The majority of the tenured faculty did not sign off on the official self-evaluation. Instead, we came up with our own self-evaluation. We were hard on the institution and ourselves. Our goal was to ensure that the evaluation was not a whitewash. While some saw our actions as treason, we believed that the only way we were going to move forward as an institution

dissatisfied. Our alumni . . . well, they did benefit from the advanced Socratic method.

Although we had moved into a new building in 1976, it was clear that we had to move again. Ron's first challenge was to "get us" a new building. While he dedicated himself to this task, I could tell that something about the move bothered him. He was concerned about our readiness for a new building. We needed to get a new attitude as an institution if the building was to be a meaningful acquisition.

Ron began the process of changing attitudes. Some things were tangible, like changing "travel money" into "development money." Faculty members were told they could use the money allotted to travel for any endeavor that would help the faculty member develop into a better teacher or scholar.⁶ Student organizations were encouraged to host events, paid for from the Dean's discretionary account. Support staff were remembered on their birthdays with a bouquet of flowers.

Some things were harder than others. Ron committed himself to improving the quality of teaching. The only way he knew how to do this was to lead by example. The only teaching experience he had was as a catechism teacher. Yet, he was intent on serving as a model for the rest of the faculty. He knew that if he failed, he would undermine much of what he wanted to accomplish. He also knew that failing was not a possibility. He has consistently ranked as one of the best teachers at Seton Hall. The students voted him teacher of the year.

Ron began to re-create the Seton Hall family. By 1992, we were ready to move into a new building having acquired a new attitude and having come to believe in Ron's ability to lead us to higher levels of recognition and fulfillment.

The transformation of the School of Law was not without a price. I have often wondered whether I could have been as forgiving as Ron if I had been dean. One of our colleagues once wrote a letter to the Archbishop in which the author defamed Ron in an attempt to have him fired. Ron knew who wrote it, yet he refused to retaliate.⁷

A colleague once told Ron that it would be impossible for Ron to appreciate true scholarship because Ron was a "Frank Sinatra kind of guy." Ron, according to this colleague, did not understand the

was to address our shortcomings head-on.

⁶ Most faculty members used the money to buy computers.

⁷ I would have at the very least shared the letter and the name of the author with the faculty. I know the faculty would have been outraged by its contents.

contextual nature of an academic institution because of his “limited cultural background.” I’m not sure how I would have reacted if someone said I was limited by my ethnicity. Ron just smiled.

I could point to numerous insults that would have tested most people I know. Ron saw each as an opportunity to prove his commitment to Judeo-Christian principles. Being a Christian is important to Ron. He does not wear a sign proclaiming it. He is not happy with Christians who say the right words, yet act as if they have never heard of Christ. He does not believe that Christianity begins and ends with the words uttered in church on Sunday. I know very few people who are as committed to all members of the family of God as is Ron.

Ron has decided to leave for the very same reasons he wanted to be Dean in the first place. The students! He believes our school may need a new leader to take us to the next level. I am not sure he is right. He is capable of taking us anywhere we want to go. But, I do know that he has been right so far, and maybe he sees things a bit more clearly than I do.

Ron is a son of Jersey City. I am a son of the South Bronx. I can honestly say we are brothers. We both share a common background filled with disappointments and challenges. Yet, we share a dream filled with hope. Ron gave me the opportunity to look into his heart and his mind. I have never been able to discuss issues of race and culture with anybody else with the kind of honesty and emotion I have with Ron. He rekindled a belief in people that I use as a motivator in my present endeavors.

His legacy is based on a decision-making process that begins and ends by considering the effect those decisions will have on people. I hope the next dean will share those values. I fervently pray that the next dean will be a great dean because he or she is a good person.