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Reflections on My Colleague, Tom Holdych

*Janet Ainsworth**

As one of the founding faculty members of the University of Puget Sound Law School, Tom Holdych played a major role in setting the course for the fledgling law school. From its humble beginnings in a Tacoma business park to our current status as a mature institution at the center of the Seattle University campus, our law school experienced development and change that were not imagined at its inception. But one thing has always been constant—our dedication to teaching of the highest quality. Among the faculty, Tom was consistently one of the loudest and most insistent voices about the primacy of our teaching mission. He never wavered from that commitment during his long career at the law school.

My first interactions with Tom as a teacher (though they happened more than twenty years ago) are vividly etched in my memory even now. I had just been hired as a law professor, and before the first flush of excitement about my new career had time to fade, it was replaced by a sense of panic. It had been quite a while since I was a student in a law school class, and I realized that I had only the foggiest idea what exactly to do in front of the class. So, I went to three senior colleagues who my dean suggested were exemplary teachers, and asked them if I could sit in the back of their classes for a week to get some ideas for my own teaching. All three agreed with alacrity. But of the three, it was Tom who suggested that instead of just sitting in on the classes, that perhaps I could come to his office before each class and he would talk with me about his game plan for the class. Then, after each class, he invited me back to his office again, this time to debrief the class I had just seen. He asked me for my sense of how particular hypothetical exchanges had gone—had the students gotten the point of the questions? Would it have been better if he changed the order of the problems he posed? Should he continue in the next class to pursue one topic that was raised but not explored fully? I realized that Tom was engaging me about teaching in the same way that he engaged his students about contract doctrine—beginning with simple questions that spiraled into more complex and challenging pedagogical considerations. Because Tom relished any opportunity to talk about teaching, I suspect our sessions were just as stimulating for him as they were invaluable for me.

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Above all, Tom particularly loved teaching first-year students. His Contracts classes were legendary, featuring volleys of Socratic questioning leavened with his wry sense of humor. His teaching was designed to push students beyond their first reactions to a question, probing and refining his questions until he was satisfied that they approached the problem posed with the analytic rigor and precision befitting a lawyer. His exams were famous—perhaps even notorious—for their diabolically challenging fact patterns. At times, some of his students may have failed to appreciate his demanding style of teaching, but I have no doubt that in their later professional lives, his students have had many, many occasions to be grateful for it. At alumni functions over the years, his name was almost always the first that former students would ask after. For many of our graduates, Tom came to represent the law school and their legal education at its best.

In addition to his teaching, Tom was fiercely dedicated to promoting the welfare of the law school as an institution. In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that he and I sometimes did not see eye to eye. I doubt we ever voted for the same politician, and we certainly differed on law school issues at times. But I never doubted for a second his sincerity and his good faith in the positions he took, and I valued the candor and integrity with which he expressed his views. With the passing years, I have come to understand that despite our differences we actually shared fundamental commitments to the primacy of our students in this institution and to the importance of the law school as a community. Tom sincerely cared about each of his colleagues as human beings within that community. Whenever a colleague's life was touched by hardship or tragedy, Tom unfailingly reached out to express his sympathy and personal support. Even after his retirement, as his own health was deteriorating, Tom wrote me a personal note to express his condolences on the death of my mother this past fall. Reading his shaky handwriting in that note, I was deeply touched by yet another reminder of Tom's gracious and caring humanity in his relationships with his colleagues at the law school.

In reflecting on Tom's contributions to the law school that he served so long and so well, I began to think about the legacy that he has left us—a legacy accomplished by the way in which he exemplified our aspirational goals as articulated in the words of the law school mission statement. That legacy continues in our law school culture, one that values “demanding and humane” classroom teaching that inculcates “clear and critical thinking, effective communication, wise judgment, ethical behavior, and a charitable spirit.” Tom's legacy is also embodied in the generations of lawyers he taught, who learned the foundations of their craft in his classes and came to understand their responsibility to “lead

and serve others with integrity and compassion.” And finally, his legacy will live on at the law school in our renewed determination to ensure that the law school strives to fulfill the university’s mission to “engage one another as collaborative colleagues” through our scholarship, our teaching, and our service to the community and to one another.