

2006

A Teacher's Teacher

Lonnie T. Brown Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vjtl>



Part of the [Civil Procedure Commons](#), and the [Legal Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lonnie T. Brown Jr., *A Teacher's Teacher*, 39 *Vanderbilt Law Review* 1405 (2021)

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vjtl/vol39/iss5/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Vanderbilt Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Vanderbilt Law. For more information, please contact mark.j.williams@vanderbilt.edu.

A Teacher's Teacher

*Lonnie T. Brown, Jr.**

On the day of my graduation in May 1989, Professors Harold G. Maier and Donald J. Hall, my two favorite professors, congratulated me jointly and paid me the ultimate compliment. They expressed to me their impression that I would make a good teacher and strongly suggested that I contemplate a career in legal academia. For me, this was akin to Richard Pryor telling an aspiring comedian that he or she was funny. I considered, and still consider, Professors Maier and Hall to epitomize everything that a great teacher, as well as a great person, should be. Their brief words of encouragement on the final day of my law school career set me on a path that would eventually lead to my return to the classroom, but this time as the nervous teacher up front, rather than the nervous student in the back.

Two of the principal courses that I teach are Civil Procedure and Conflict of Laws (Conflicts). I took Conflicts in the spring of my third year from Professor Maier, and it was, without question, the most amazing class that I have ever taken. I found the subject matter to be interesting, primarily because it helped me to understand better some of the fundamental concepts of Civil Procedure, such as personal jurisdiction. That alone, however, would not have been sufficient incentive to get me out of bed at what I recall to have been a cruelly early hour. Professor Maier was the real motivation.

He possessed the unique ability to make very difficult material accessible, without merely spoon-feeding students. He recognized that true knowledge and understanding cannot be bestowed; they must be acquired. His approach, therefore, was to guide, rather than to tell, and he did so by masterfully weaving cases together in a story-like fashion that created an almost insatiable desire to figure out what would come next. That may sound profoundly overstated, not to mention hopelessly geekish, but it really is the truth. For me, attending one of Professor Maier's classes was like reading a great book, and that truly made me look forward to each and every session.

In the classroom, he demonstrated astounding intellect, unbridled enthusiasm, good humor, sage wisdom, and perhaps most importantly, deep compassion and respect for others. The fact that all of these remarkable qualities were packaged beneath a somewhat quirky, quintessentially professorial exterior made Professor Maier all the more dear to me and my fellow classmates. I am definitely not

* Associate Professor of Law, University of Georgia School of Law. B.A., Emory University, 1986; J.D., Vanderbilt Law School, 1989.

even close to being in the same pedagogical league as him, but he is the sole reason why I teach both Conflicts and Civil Procedure. And he is certainly the model to which I aspire.

As much as Professor Maier's Conflicts class inspired me, his Federal Courts course actually had a deeper effect on me. I signed up for the class largely because I was the incoming editor in chief of the *Journal of Transnational Law*, and I felt obligated to do so, given Professor Maier's role as the *Journal's* adviser. I also hoped that I would be able to make a good impression upon him. This latter desire, however, seemed to go down the drain rather quickly. On the second day of class, I was unprepared (for a legitimate reason, of course), and as destiny would have it, that was the day that Professor Maier chose to call on me. Uttering the words "I'm not prepared" to him on that day was one of my lowest points during law school.

Although he did absolutely nothing to make me feel embarrassed or ashamed, I felt terrible because I sensed that he must have been disappointed. That feeling stimulated me thereafter to work harder in Federal Courts than I ever had for any class previously. While my inspiration was the desire to ensure that I would not disappoint Professor Maier again, along the way something else happened—I began to really learn for the first time. That probably sounds shockingly ignorant, particularly coming from someone who is now charged with educating the legal minds of the future, so let me explain.

Until the time of this educational epiphany, I was fully capable of superficially comprehending the information conveyed to me by my teachers, with the goal of adequately preparing for the inevitable exam. Professor Maier's Federal Courts class, however, ignited something within that caused me to delve well beyond the surface of the subject matter. I not only read all of the assigned material but also many of the supplemental resources referenced by Professor Maier during class. I even conducted independent research on certain topics of particular interest. Our coverage of the infamous Scottsboro Boys case, for example, led to my purchasing and reading a book on the history behind this legal tragedy.¹

My growth as a student, though, was not simply limited to studying additional course-related materials. Professor Maier also created in me, for the first time, the urge to ask questions and to offer voluntary responses. In addition, I did what, to that point, I had dismissively considered to be the definitive form of brown-nosing—I approached the professor at the podium after class to pose questions and even went so far as to meet with him outside the confines of the classroom. Professor Maier was able to do for me what only the most

1. See generally DAN T. CARTER, *SCOTTSBORO: A TRAGEDY OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH* (1969).

skilled teachers can accomplish, and that was to generate a thirst for more knowledge, devoid of any ulterior motives. He made me want to learn, which is the most worthy lesson that a teacher can impart.

Jackie Robinson once said, "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." By that measure, Harold Maier has led an extraordinarily important life. I know that he has had a profound impact on innumerable students throughout his career and upon one in particular. I continue to learn because Professor Maier inspired me, and I teach others because of the wonderful example he set. Though he has now left the classroom, Professor Maier's legacy as a teacher will always endure through the countless minds he has awakened and lives he has touched.
