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Remarks on Jonathan I. Charney

Jeffrey Schoenblum

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I have been asked to speak for 10 to 15 minutes about a very dear friend and colleague of 25 years, Jon Charney, specifically about his contribution to Vanderbilt Law School. It is difficult to encapsulate any professor's contribution over the course of 30 years in mere minutes. This is especially difficult in Jon Charney's case, because in my opinion, Jon made an extraordinary, extensive, and enduring contribution that has earned him a place in the pantheon, among the giants in the history of this Law School.

This might seem an odd assertion to those who were acquainted with Jon. He never held a high administrative position to the best of my knowledge. He was not one to constantly prowl the halls engaged in all the give and take of daily life at an academic institution. In fact, more often than not he was away from the Law School. What he was doing while away, however, says a lot about what he uniquely contributed.

First and foremost Jon brought tremendous prestige and status to all of us. The title "Professor of Law, Vanderbilt Law School" is now a worldwide accolade largely on account of Jon. I, as well as other faculty, have personally experienced, while abroad at academic conferences, the familiar refrain: "ah," usually in a French, Italian, English, Chinese, Korean, or German accent, "Vanderbilt, what an exceptional school, that's where Professor Charney teaches."

There are others, leaders in the academy in international law who are here today, who will speak on his scholarship. I would simply say that a lot of that was also produced while away from the Law School, though a bit closer to home, from a cramped study directly beside his kitchen, sitting in his favorite chair. The scholarship produced there, characterized by its productivity, its insights, its analytical rigor, and the remarkable elegance of his argumentation, has always presented Vanderbilt in the best light, and his words have vicariously burnished Vanderbilt's reputation, so that today it is taken most seriously in every academic center, on every continent, throughout the world.

I do not mean to say that Jon was not physically present at the Law School. Far from it. Let us say he spent "quality time" here. There are few if any who have contributed more over the last three decades to make Vanderbilt the highly competitive, serious national institution it is today. The incredible strength and depth of the

faculty at the present time is directly attributable to the foundational efforts of many persons, among whom Jon was absolutely a central figure and at critical moments in the modern history of this institution the singularly instrumental force. Without Jon, Vanderbilt simply would not be the great school it is. Jon had a vision and he fought hard to assure that Vanderbilt, both the Law School and the University, was an educational institution that respected, encouraged, and nurtured scholarship of the highest order and of the most challenging character. Today, thanks in large part to Jon Charney, these are values that are secure and that we take for granted. But it was not always so. His contribution to Vanderbilt's continuing ascent to greatness cannot be overestimated.

In preparing my comments, I was tempted to speak of Jon solely in the soft hues and homogenized terms with which we are tempted to speak of those we seek to remember. But I have a problem and anyone who really knew Jon knows what I mean. As Jon looks down on us today I'm afraid he will reproach me if I don't tell it the way it really is. Because we all know the truth, Jon could at times, and quite proudly and purposely, be one ornery guy. Yet, there was a method to all that. He was a man of unrivalled integrity, utterly fearless, incredibly determined, unbending in his loyalty—not to individuals, but rather to principles of hard work, of the highest intellectual pursuits, of playing it straight. He was for quality, for demanding performance. He was against sophistry, mintmarks, and other indicia of status not substantiated by tangible intellectual product of unquestionable merit.

He took this stance with students as well. So if you were a student who really wanted to learn international law, you would get the best preparation, literally, in the world. Jon was a professor who expected a great deal and was truly revered by many of his students. He was not capable of buying favor with them or throwing softballs. He taught the way we all should aspire to teach. Thus, it is fair to say that in addition to his worldwide reputation, Jon made an exceptional contribution in this realm as well, educating students with no gimmicks, making them struggle to reach their highest potential. In this, he contributed mightily to the indisputable reputation of Vanderbilt Law School as the premiere teaching institution in the country. Perhaps, as importantly, with the lustre of his unquestioned status inside and outside the classroom, he put to rest any suggestion that a professor cannot be a great scholar as well as a great teacher. As the years progressed Jon came to embody the magnificent coalescence of these qualities. I might add that Jon took a huge interest in each student and worked outside the classroom with them as well. He was vitally interested in guiding students in their professional careers and often interceded personally to facilitate the accomplishment of these goals. He also invested much of himself

in certain students' personal travails, trying to help out whenever he could. In all these efforts he never sought publicity or praise—it was just what a Vanderbilt Law Professor does. In sum, with respect to students, he was a man for all seasons. He was, and will remain, the gold standard.

As a faculty member, he was also an ardent participant in the intellectual life of the Law School. The various lunches and workshops we attend today, and sometimes even complain about, were not always here. Jon played a little known, but central, role in assuring that these were finally established and took root, that they were supported by the then administration, and that they served as occasions when the leading scholars from around the country presented works in progress. He also recognized early on the critical importance of the need to encourage the presentation of work by our own faculty. His efforts in this regard have revolutionized the academic life at Vanderbilt, and have earned the school a unique reputation as an institution that nourishes through this faculty interaction, faculty development in a most positive way, one without compare anywhere else.

So, in conclusion, I'm back to where I began. How does one capture the essence of Jon Charney's extraordinary and multifaceted contributions to Vanderbilt Law School in mere minutes? For those who did not know him, I hope you can appreciate a bit now what he meant to this institution and how his legacy endures. For those of you who knew Jon well, I will end with what Jon would undoubtedly have said in his inimitable style at this moment, with that barely apparent, puckish smile: "o.k. gang, this is all very nice, but we've still got a lot of work to do."

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