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Dedication

A Tribute to Dean Michael Yelnosky

Judge William E. Smith*

This edition of the Roger Williams University *Law Review* is dedicated to Michael J. Yelnosky, Dean of the Law School from 2014 to 2020. It is my honor to briefly pay tribute to Dean Yelnosky for his six years of service as Dean.

Michael came to the role of Dean “from the inside,” as a founding faculty member of the law school, present from its beginning. Like a soldier volunteering for service on a dangerous mission, with little chance of survival, Michael stepped-up to the plate at a time when law school enrollments were down nationally and new challenges, internal and external, loomed on the horizon. While he understood that the coming years would be filled with difficult challenges requiring steady leadership, he also saw that these years could be a defining period for our young law school: a period to not only survive, but to thrive; to further declare who and what we were, and what we stood for; a time to recruit students, nurture and grow programs, and build relationships that would enable the law school to meet its calling. As he put it in one of his comments about his goals as Dean, he aimed to make the law school “aggressively relevant.” And did he ever!

* Judge William E. Smith has been a United States District Court Judge for the District of Rhode Island since 2002. He served as Chief Judge of the District Court from 2013 to 2019. He has been a member of the Board of Directors of the RWU Law School since 2012 and became Chair of the Board in 2014. He also serves on the University Board of Trustees.

During his six-year tenure, Michael oversaw a vast expansion of the law school's public interest commitment and programming. His capstone achievements include: the creation of the Rhode Island Center for Justice, a veritable public-interest law firm operating inside the law school that provides much needed pro bono legal services in the areas of immigration, worker's rights, housing, education, utility shut-offs, and more; evolving the annual public interest auction into the "Champions for Justice" awards dinner, which has grown to become the premiere legal fundraising and networking event of the year; spearheading the effort to give the Pro Bono Collaborative long-term financial security by creating and obtaining funding for an endowment; and creating the Veterans Disability Appeals Field Clinic in collaboration with the law firm Chisholm, Chisholm & Kilpatrick. As a result of these initiatives and more, RWU Law has secured its reputation as one of the leading public interest and public service law schools in New England and beyond.

RWU Law has a unique and special place in the legal fabric of Rhode Island. The law school supplies interns and law clerks to the Justices of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, and the judges of the state and federal courts; it produces more members of the Rhode Island Bar than any other law school; and it supplies the associates to law firms, the young prosecutors and defenders to the criminal justice system, and the young lawyers doing public interest work of all kinds throughout the state. Stewarding the relationships that make all this possible is the job of our Dean, and it takes a special blend of charisma, charm, and hard work. Through Michael's efforts, the relationship of the law school with the bench and bar—and with the wider Rhode Island community—has never been stronger.

RWU Law's special status has positioned it ideally to lead the much-needed diversification of our bench and bar. Michael seized on this opportunity. He led the effort to increase the diversification of the student body, faculty, and staff; created a Diversity Steering Committee; and oversaw the development of a strategic plan for diversity. Michael recognized that for the bench and bar of Rhode Island to become more diverse, as it must, then it would be the job of the Law School to build the pipeline of diverse lawyers who will eventually become judges and law firm partners and leading public-interest lawyers in the state. And build the pipeline he did. As a result of his leadership, the diversity of our incoming law school

classes has averaged steady growth and reached a record twenty-seven percent in 2020. In the last several years we have witnessed three African American graduates of the Law School become judges of the Rhode Island District Court, the first RWU Law cohort to enter the state judiciary: District Court Judge Christopher Knox Smith '07, District Court Judge Melissa R. DuBose '04, and R.I. Workers' Compensation Court Associate Judge Keith A. Cardoza, Jr., '10. And this is just the beginning. The coming years will see increasing diversity throughout the bench and bar because of the efforts Michael and his team.

Early in his term as Dean (and my term as Board Chair) Michael and I worked together to restructure the Law School's Board of Directors to give it more focus, and we (mostly Michael) recruited new members to the Board, broadening its experience base and diversity. While I am of course biased on this point, I think RWU Law has one of the most qualified, energized, and enthusiastic Boards in the business. Tending those relationships, connecting Board members to the school through committee work, teaching, brown bag lunches with students, internships, fundraising, recruiting, social visits, and more, is all the work of the Dean. With his keen sense of humor, low-key grace and trademark ease (shirt unbuttoned, tie slightly askew) Michael forged and strengthened the critical bonds that tie the Board to the law school.

Through all the challenges faced by the law school during his tenure, beginning in 2014 with enrollment and financial challenges and ending with the pandemic year-from-hell, 2020, Michael never lost sight of the people that make the Law School what it is. In everything he did as Dean, every single day, his focus was service to the students, faculty, and staff of the Law School. Through wage freezes, lay-offs, and enrollment drops, and even the pandemic, he never, ever stopped advocating for the people under his care. Through his tireless advocacy, jobs were saved, programs were preserved and strengthened, and high-quality legal education and experiences were delivered. And now, as the pandemic that defined his last months as Dean comes slowly to an end, the Law School is thriving: applications are up, bar passage too, and virtually every indicator points to a Law School that is accelerating out of the turn, into the future, stronger than ever.

As Michael's wife and colleague, Professor Laurie Barron, said in the recorded Zoom tribute (necessitated by the pandemic), Michael gave it his all, every single day for the Law School. We

could not have asked for anything more. Thank you, Michael, on behalf of the entire law school and university community for your amazing six years of service as Dean!