

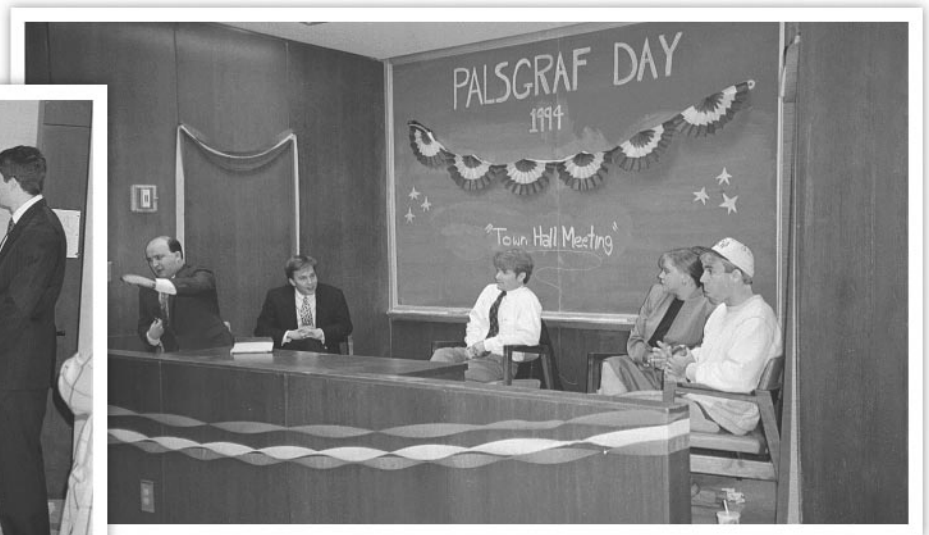
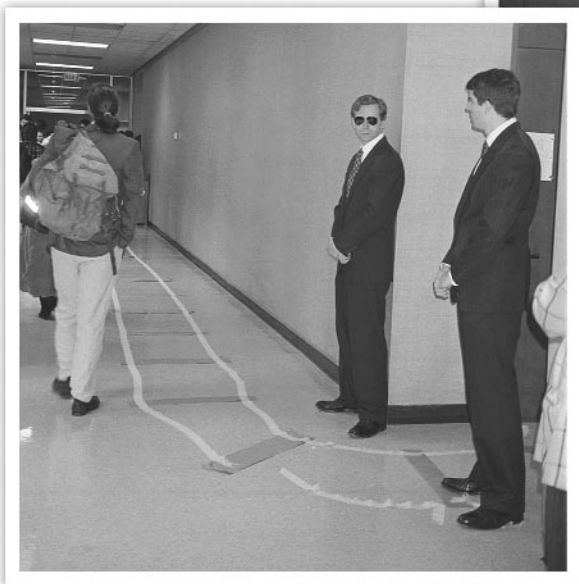
Happy 75th Anniversary, Helen!

“The special thing about the day has always been the students – their actions, collections and creations. The poems over the years have been especially touching.”

- Carter Chair in Tort and Insurance Law Perry Sentell

On May 29, 1928, the New York Court of Appeals handed down its opinion on what would become one of the most important and fascinating tort cases in the history of this country, *Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad Co.* This year marks the 75th anniversary of this momentous decision. As you are aware, students at the School of Law have a special way of celebrating – a tradition that has been passed on for four decades. Palsgraf Day, as it is known, is held each year when Carter Chair in Tort and Insurance Law Perry Sentell introduces his first-year students to the famous case.

This year, Sentell's students filed into their usual classroom 45 minutes early to be greeted by an unusual sight. At every seat was a brightly colored party hat, adorned with a large letter T (for "Section T" referring to torts, of course). Posters around the room identified the Long Island Railroad and proclaimed the importance of torts. Then, there was a song delivered to a familiar melody (Uncle Kracker's single "In a Little While") with words written to honor the special case. The lyrics included: "Been a long, long while and we still think about you/How did they ever learn tort law without you/And though [Judge] Cardozo may harm and may doubt you/For a long, long while we'll be thinking about you lady." Sentell was nowhere to be seen when a second-year "torts survivor" took to the front of the room and delivered a stunning impersonation of the professor.



▲ Students hold a town hall meeting as part of the festivities in 1994.

◀ On Palsgraf Day 1994, tape railroad tracks lead to Sentell's classroom, carefully being guarded by two "Secret Service" agents.



An outburst in the courtroom during the Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad Co. trial in 1995. ▲

In 1995, the judge rules on Helen's plight. ►



"I had no idea what to expect," first-year law student Seth Finberg said. "We all received an invitation in our mailboxes the week before, telling us to dress up in business attire and arrive early to class. That was our first hint that something big was going to happen." Sentell's former students were keeping quiet about the event. "No one would tell us anything. They wanted to keep us on our toes," Finberg said. "Sentell's class is based on intimidation, suspense and unpredictability. It is unlike any other class in law school."

One had only to look outside to see the impact Palsgraf Day has on the School of Law. Railroad tracks of blue tape materialized at UGA's famous arch and wound their way into and around the law school building, leading the way to Sentell's classroom.

Following the act, the real show started as Sentell entered the classroom to deliver his all-important lecture. But there were a few formalities to go through before he could begin. First, the class was required to place their left hand on their "sacred" torts casebook, raise their right hand, and repeat the Palsgraf Oath, attesting that Palsgraf is the most important case they will ever find.

Then came the naming of the Palsgraf Person, "the P.P.," as Sentell calls it. This person would be asked to stand and recite the facts of the case, but equally important, this person will be in charge of organizing next year's celebration.

This year was a landmark occasion that saw the naming of the 40th "P.P.," first-year student Knox Withers. "Immediately upon hearing my name called as the 2003 Palsgraf Person, I seemed to feel a heavy burden placed on my shoulders." Withers said he knew he would face a challenge in answering Sentell's barrage of questions, but looked forward to it. "During my entire first year of law school, I have never been as prepared for any case as I was for *Palsgraf*. It would be an understatement to say I was honored to be chosen. I was determined not to disappoint."

Withers said there are rumors about how the "P.P." is chosen; one being the person is always from south Georgia. "This year,

Professor Sentell selected me supposedly by the random 'fickle finger of fate.' Some will say that it was not random because the students all know, or think we know, that everything Sentell does is calculated, at least to some degree." Withers added he does not have a connection with south Georgia. "If my selection was, in fact, based on some criteria, I can't even begin to guess what that criteria is. It certainly could not have been based on first semester exam grades!"

Richard Siegel (J.D.'76) recalled the moment when he was a first-year student and chosen as the "P.P." "When Professor Sentell called on me, I remember being excited and nervous at the same time. We all knew in advance that it was a real honor to be chosen to recite the case," he said.

When it came time to organize the following year's celebration, Siegel said he had a lot of help. "We made signs, strung crepe paper and hung balloons, among other things. I wore a railroad costume,

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This year, with their left hand on their torts textbook and their right hand raised, students repeat the sacred Palsgraf oath.

Sentell through the years



1974



1994



2003 – the 75th anniversary of the case and the 40th anniversary of the naming of the first "P.P."

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and we even had an electric train circling Sentell's podium that day." Stories and rumors about what has gone on at previous Palsgraf Day celebrations prove just how large this tradition has grown. According to an article in the 1974 *Advocate*, football games in Sanford Stadium have been interrupted by announcements of "Professor Sentell, please call Mrs. Palsgraf," and telegrams have found their way to the professor's home, sent by "Mrs. Palsgraf" herself. The downtown Holiday Inn marquee in Athens has frequently shown the message "Welcome Back Helen Palsgraf."

Sentell has his own collection of Palsgraf Day occurrences that he detailed in an article for the *Georgia State Bar Journal*. "The special thing about the day has always been the students – their actions, collections and creations. The poems over the years have been especially touching," he wrote.

Some students have taken Palsgraf pranks much further, to national proportions. Sentell tells how, in 1976, the law school received an invitation to the inauguration of President Jimmy Carter addressed to Helen Palsgraf (in care of Sentell). An invitation to President Reagan's inauguration arrived for Mrs. Palsgraf four years later. There are even rumors of students' efforts to get their professor on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson. In what Sentell admitted was the most concerning Palsgraf moment, one year his classroom was decorated with stolen railroad crossing signs and a set of scales. Sentell said he was ready for the celebration to be over that day, so the contraband could be returned before anyone found out it was missing and just what it was used for.

In the early years, students put on their production during the first part of the class while Sentell taught during the second half. Eventually, the decorations and acts became so elaborate that the students' celebration was moved to a period preceding class.

Tape railroad tracks, songs and a Sentell impersonator are all standard elements of a Palsgraf Day celebration. Helen Palsgraf imper-

sonators are also frequent. From time to time, men dressed suspiciously like Secret Service agents have been posted at the door to Sentell's classroom. One class even went so far as to produce a Palsgraf Day musical. The annual event draws a large crowd, including alumni who come back to witness the tradition.

Sentell said the first-year students really enjoy the celebration. "It's their opportunity to see the second-year students have fun with the case and with me," he said. As for the impersonations, Sentell added, sometimes they are right on. "It's almost like looking in a mirror."

Loren Collins, a second-year student who wrote and performed the songs for this year's Palsgraf Day, explained. "For 40 years, law school students have undergone the same trial of Professor Sentell's Torts class. The reading is extensive, the questions are intensive, and the exams are impossible. But if you succeed in finishing the year, you share an eternal bond with your fellow Section T-ers."

Just what does the professor think of all the festivities? "To say Sentell encourages the second-year students to put on a Palsgraf Day presentation is almost an understatement. The general sense one gets is that he practically expects it," Collins said. "I don't think he ever attends the show himself, but he does personally thank those who participate."

The only guideline the professor gives his students is to relate the presentations to the topic, the Palsgraf case. Sentell said he began the tradition in order to entertain and keep his students focused while getting the complex points of the case across. "No one really understands the opinions in this case," he said. "Professors and legal professionals all have their own theories. It was a very important case at the time, and it still is." And 75 years later, and 40 years after the naming of the first "P.P.," the tradition of celebrating Palsgraf Day lives on at the School of Law.

- Kristine Fortunato