

A TRIBUTE TO DEAN GABRIEL WILNER

*Porter Elliott**

Never had I been less convinced that I wanted to be an attorney than during my first year of law school.

When I first enrolled, I fancied making a career as an international lawyer, although I had little notion of what exactly an international lawyer did or what it meant to be one. All I knew was that I was attracted to the principles of fairness and due process, to travel, to working with people with different backgrounds and perspectives, and to the prospect of making a comfortable living wearing a suit. It seemed like international lawyer would be an ideal profession for me.

Now, with the first year of law school almost under my belt, I was not so sure. An international career still appealed to me—but in law? For nearly a year, core legal concepts such as proximate cause, adverse possession, and the rule against perpetuities had been drilled into my brain, concepts that most of my classmates seemed to take great pleasure in debating, but to which I was indifferent. The indoctrination had just begun, but I was finding it hard to imagine spending my life doing any of this.

It was then that Dean Wilner saved me for the first time. I saw a brochure on the law school's bulletin board advertising a summer program called the "Brussels Seminar on the Law and Institutions of the European Communities." The flyer directed interested students to Dean Wilner. There was no application form to fill in, no box in which to drop your resume. If you were interested, you needed to go see the man himself.

I had never met Dean Wilner and did not even know what he looked like. He taught only international law courses, which were not part of the first year curriculum. As a result, most of the 1Ls did not know him. Among those who had heard of him, he did not seem to have a bad reputation. Still, he *was* a law professor, and one thing I learned from my first year was to exercise similar caution approaching a law professor's office as one would approaching a lion's den. As it turns out, I had nothing to fear.

Dean Wilner welcomed me warmly into his office. A knowing smile crept from beneath his beard, giving me the impression that he and I were somehow already complicit in something vaguely and delightfully sinister.

* Partner, Van Bael & Bellis, Brussels. J.D., University of Georgia School of Law, 1996.

Instead of sitting across from him at his desk, he motioned to a small sofa in his office, where we sat and talked. In a soft accent I could only have identified as “foreign” at the time, he asked me about my background and why I was interested in the Brussels Seminar. I was completely frank with him. I had become disillusioned with law school, and the prospect of spending the summer in Brussels studying European law excited me for the first time in a long while.

After about fifteen minutes, he informed me that he had to go teach a class, but not to worry: I was accepted into the Seminar.

There had been no application process. He had not asked for my grades, and indeed with final exams still pending, I had no grades to show him. It did not matter. All he cared about was how interested I was in the program and why. (I later learned that he arrived late to his course that day in order to speak with me. I also came to learn over subsequent years that Dean Wilner would often let conversations he considered important or interesting delay him. The man had many virtues, but punctuality was not among them.)

The summer spent at the Brussels Seminar was a turning point for me. For the first time since I enrolled in law school, I found every lecture—and every lecturer—interesting. Six days a week, the students had the privilege of hearing from some of Europe’s leading academics, judges, European Commission officials, and practicing lawyers. I found EC law (as it was then known) fascinating. Despite all the distractions of spending the summer in Europe, I do not think I missed a single class. As it turns out, I would have plenty of time for sightseeing later.

Returning to the University of Georgia in the fall, I made a point of taking as many international law courses as I could, most of which were taught by Dean Wilner. He quickly became my favorite professor. He offered me a position as his Teaching Assistant, and I worked on several law review articles with him. He liked to argue points or test theories with me, sometimes late at night at his home, and he always acknowledged my modest contributions in his articles.

As my second year of law school was winding down, Dean Wilner saved me once again. The second summer in law school is when students typically clerk at the law firm they hope to join as an associate upon graduation. While I had a few opportunities, none of them really appealed to me. I did not feel like spending the hot Atlanta summer months drafting wills and dealing with landlord-tenant disputes, and I had no desire to continue doing so after graduating the following year. I talked to Dean Wilner, and he asked me if I would like to work for a firm in Brussels instead.

He knew one of the founding partners of Van Bael & Bellis, a boutique firm specializing in EC law, to whom he recommended students from time to time. “Both of the founding partners come from New York firms. They

expect a lot, so I am very selective about whom I send them,” Dean Wilner explained. “Sometimes, years go by before I recommend someone to them.” The message was clear. He would help me get my foot in the door, but it would be up to me to prove myself and to maintain his reputation with this firm. I was not about to squander the opportunity.

The summer at Van Bael & Bellis was an excellent experience. I also enjoyed my third year of law school, where I continued to take Dean Wilner’s courses and to serve as his Teaching Assistant. I also served that year as the Editor in Chief of the *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law*. Dean Wilner was (and for many years had been) the *Journal’s* Faculty Advisor, so I worked closely with him, including on a special issue commemorating the *Journal’s* silver anniversary.

After graduating, I decided to return to Brussels to pursue an LL.M. at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel’s Programme on International and Legal Cooperation (PILC). Dean Wilner was on the faculty there, and he helped get me accepted—yet another save. And wouldn’t you know it? Once the LL.M. program was over, I did not want to leave Brussels. A few years earlier, I had strong doubts that I would ever want to practice law. Those doubts were now gone.

In September 1997, I joined Van Bael & Bellis, the firm where, thanks to Dean Wilner, I had completed an internship two years earlier. I have remained at Van Bael & Bellis ever since. Despite the long hours of private practice, I continued to keep in close touch with Dean Wilner; although, he ceased to be a Dean to me. Almost immediately after graduating, he told me “You can call me Gabe.” And for the next thirteen years, I did.

I saw Gabe and his wonderful wife, Gisèle, whenever they came to Brussels. This was relatively often, as the annual Brussels Seminar continued and he remained on the PILC faculty until reaching Belgium’s mandatory retirement age a few years ago. Usually we went to dinner, all three of us being connoisseurs of good food and drink. Gabe, in particular, was a true *bon vivant*. We discussed work (his and mine), and more recently we often discussed his health, which prevented him from partaking in some of his favorite foods. But we also discussed other issues of mutual interest—politics, travel, our beloved pets, my love life. We laughed and occasionally we argued. And we remained friends throughout the years.

I also remained involved with both the Brussels Seminar and the PILC program, each year lecturing on EU merger control law or preparing the case study. Gabe offered to pay me, but I always refused, as did others who came up through the ranks under Gabe’s guidance. It was the least we could do, not just for him but for the students. We owed so much to Gabe for all the opportunities he gave us, and the best way we could pay him back was to do our small part to help him give these kinds of opportunities to other students.

Several times, I was fortunate to be able to hire students Gabe recommended as summer interns or associates, and I know some of Gabe's other former students working in Brussels were able to do so as well.

Not long before his death, I saw Gabe in Brussels. He asked me to give another lecture to his Brussels Seminar students. He explained to me that he was now going by "Gabriel," which he believed sounded more distinguished than "Gabe." We had a few minutes to talk before my lecture would begin. In any event, I knew he would not worry if it started a few minutes late.

We talked about how President Obama's first term was going (Gabe was a huge fan), about developments in the Middle East, and about my cats. And of course, he asked me if I was dating anyone. Many years ago, he'd found himself a nice Belgian girl to make his wife, and he was hoping I would do the same.

As we talked, I made a point of calling him Gabriel, as he'd requested, but it hardly rolled off my tongue. I had experienced no difficulty whatsoever making the transition from calling him "Dean Wilner" to calling him "Gabe"—that somehow seemed natural. But "Gabriel" just did not seem right. And he could tell that I was struggling with it.

At one point, he put his hand on my shoulder and smiled. "I still let some of my old friends call me Gabe," he said.

Those were among the last words he said to me before I entered the classroom to repay a small part of the generosity he had given me over the years, and I could not have been more honored by them.

Gabe, my friend, you will be missed.