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Harold G. Maier: A World Class Fellow Indeed

*Paul M. Kurtz**

Hal Maier has played many roles in my life: he has been my teacher, my boss, my advisor, my colleague, and most and best of all, my friend. In all those roles, he has exhibited enthusiasm, patience, tact, and brilliance. Not at all a bad combination, I would say.

Come with me back to his classroom, circa 1970-1971. The subject is Conflict of Laws (which was required back then) or Law of the European Economic Community (which one with no interest in international law only took because of the masterful teacher). Clad in white shirt and oh-so-narrow tie which he constantly seemed to be adjusting, Professor Maier was one of those teachers who wandered around the front of the classroom, seeming to come toward the student he was engaging in conversation. Always a conversation, not a performance. Careful question after careful question. No yelling or screaming, but a brilliant demonstration of complete control of the subject. What the hell does “renvoi” mean anyway? The flat-topped fellow pacing the front of the room in his comfortable shoes kept prodding and poking until we all understood. One always left his classroom feeling that some progress had been made in the grand mission of trying to figure out this law stuff.

On the occasion of Hal’s retirement, one of my classmates offered the following recollection.¹ In a third-year seminar in which the topic was whether legislators should vote their conscience or reflect the will of their constituents, “to focus the discussion Professor Maier posited a situation, which he said might even occur some day . . . when everyone could dial their phone into some central spot to indicate their vote on some measure.” Was that the way government ought to operate or did we want informed legislators who used their knowledge and values to make decisions? “As the internet has developed and we now have instant voting on *American Idol*, I think back to [Professor Maier’s] wildly creative . . . hypothetical (which made the point in terms that seemed beyond any current reality),” wrote my classmate. This hypothetical is often in my classmate’s mind as he drafts contracts today, confident that

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1. This was in an email sent to me by Pete Collisson, Class of ‘72, who is now in practice in Irvine, California. One of the real joys of the current age of virtual communication is the ability to keep up with classmates from long ago who are now far away.

problems, “however wild they might seem” today, might arise. He concludes that Hal Maier “was doing exactly what good law professors are supposed to do: teach their charges how to think like lawyers—meaning both incisive analysis of the present and deep reflection about the future implications of legal choices—and not focus unduly on the rote memorization of rules.”

On a faculty filled with very, very talented teachers (readers of a certain age will remember the young Tom McCoy, Dent Bostick, Bob Covington, Dutch Hartman, Don Hall, and John Wade among others), Hal Maier stood out as special.

Consistent with Vanderbilt’s policy, Professor Maier’s office door was always open to us, usually with aromatic smells from his ever-present pipe (that is a clue as to exactly how long ago the early 1970s were). The professor was always willing to chat about class, about the eternal job hunt being conducted by his students, about the next gig scheduled for the Statutory Grapes (a Law School band starring him as drummer) or simply about the state of the world. It was in that office that I was privileged to discuss with him my research work for him on a special project on which I was working. While my memory refuses to yield the topic of that work, I do recall that those sessions seemed to me like an extra opportunity to be taught by this kind professor.

In later years, after I entered academia, Hal became Hal, not Professor Maier. I am sure many other students of my generation were delighted and perhaps a bit surprised to realize that Hal was actually less than ten years older than most of us. He became a real friend, one who was always available to trade a joke, share some gossip, give career advice, discuss his or my latest project, tell about his photography hobby, and drink some wine. Whether on the phone or in person, at conferences or on visits to campus, Hal would pick up as if we had communicated the day or the week before.

On two different occasions, I had the pleasure of temporarily being Hal’s colleague: first, in 1987 when I was a visiting professor at Vanderbilt and then in 1995 when he spent a semester on my campus as a visiting professor in our most prestigious International Law chair. On those occasions, I could see Hal from a different angle. Observing his interactions with faculty colleagues at both schools, I realized that he was as comfortable discussing family law, contracts, intellectual property, and criminal law as the international subjects in which he specialized. Always there was the prefatory “this is not my area,” followed by valuable contributions to the conversation. As the Associate Dean during his visit with us, I was not surprised to find him to be the kind of “good law school citizen” always willing to cooperate in scheduling and other matters.

In all the years I have known Hal Maier, I have never heard anybody say anything negative about him. I am proud to have learned from him, to have laughed with him, and to have emulated

him. Many of the readers of this piece will be aware of the group collectively known as Beasley's Bastards, after former Associate Dean John Beasley (don't worry about it, it was a 1970s thing . . . having nothing to do with non-marital births). To my knowledge a similar group has not been established for Hal Maier. Therefore, utilizing the common law right of self-help incorporation which I have just invented, I declare myself to be one of Maier's Minions, confident that many others will self-identify in the same way. As you retire, Hal, know that your influence will long be felt in many ways.
