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Mr. Consumer

Ralph Nader Tells Students “Take Your Consciences to Work”

By Leah Rae

Can you hear me in the back?” Ralph Nader asked the throng of law students and faculty who crowded into the O’Brian Hall classroom on April 16. “I’ll try to speak more forcefully.”

It was the usual way to begin a speech, but the words meant more coming from a man who is so adept at making sure his voice is heard throughout America.

The consumer advocate and Harvard Law School graduate has not backed away from the podium since his published indictment of the auto industry. *Unsafe at Any Speed* established Nader as a spokesman for consumer rights in 1965.

Twenty-six years later, Nader’s supporters are still devoted to him, and his critics are still afraid of him. The two sides can agree only on his stature.

Nader embodies his message from head to toe. Slim, confident and serious, his clothes suggest value, not status. His familiar suit — a black, ’50s-style affair — has become a trademark. On his feet may well be the last of the fabled dozen pairs of Army boots he bought for \$6 each in 1959. Only the flecks on his dark tie hint at its age.

It is widely believed that Nader resides in a Spartan room and lives on \$15,000 a year. And he doesn’t own a car. “A car in downtown Washington is an impediment to mobility,” he is fond of saying.



Kathleen A. Welch '91 questions Ralph Nader.

Not everyone is impressed. An October 1990 issue of *Forbes* magazine launched a bitter attack on Nader and what it called the “unchallenged perception that he is St. Ralph.”

The article accused Nader of setting his agenda according to private interests and living in luxury behind a facade of frugality. *Forbes* concluded that Nader was “unsaintly — and untrustworthy — at any speed.”

“It’s what you would expect from *Fibs* magazine,” Nader told reporters in Buffalo. “This has been going on ever since I started. It comes in cycles. It’s all an attempt to undermine a movement by focusing on its advocates.”

Nothing seemed wrong with Nader’s image when he came to the Law School. It was just three weeks before final exams, but Nader was there to give the students something more to think about than grades.

In no uncertain terms, he urged students to make a career out of public interest law and warned them of the alternatives. His tone was that of a concerned parent.

“A lot of the work done by young associates is extremely narrow, specialized, redundant and someday will be robotized.” Those were the kindest remarks he had for the large law firms and the high-paying jobs they offer to young, debt-burdened

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lawyers.

Nader told students to pursue something more substantive — in the non-material sense — than the wealth of Wall Street or the power of large corporations. "Defending corporate priorities you don't particularly care for is not a high-level quality of life," he said.

Nader's idea of a quality career is keeping corporations accountable and their enormous power in check. To take on giant institutions like Exxon or General Motors, he says, lawyers must pioneer their own institutions. New York Public Interest Research Group and the Natural Resources Defense Council were created by lawyers, he pointed out.

Nader aimed his words at the consciences of his audience. He noted the imbalance in the "deployment" of lawyers in U.S. courtrooms. Eighty percent of the lawyers represent only 20 percent of the people, he said, adding, "It's even worse than that."

How many lawyers represent the struggle against polluters, he asked, versus the polluters themselves? Workers versus corporations? Consumers versus corporations? Communities versus corporations?

Using ridicule, Nader's gut feelings about the power of corporations became abundantly clear. "Have you ever met Sears?" he asked rhetorically, making the point that corporations are regarded with a certain amount of animism, as if they were human beings deserving of human rights. In the courts, firms have claimed a right to self-determination and other principles, he said.

"We need lawyers who can rethink how far it's gone, and whether you can have equality under the law between corporations and individuals."

He pared it down to a clear choice for the students in front of him: "You'll either represent the perpetrators, or you'll represent the

victims.

"Whatever you do," Nader said, "make sure you bring your conscience to work."

Nader's call to public service evoked a positive response from the students. The Buffalo Public Interest Law Program (BPILP) has successfully promoted public interest law at UB by raising funds for internships, working with local agencies and lobbying for mandatory pro bono work.

In past years, an average of 10 to 12 percent of UB Law graduates have pursued public interest law. Nationally, the average is 3 percent, according to Chris Thomas '91.

Thomas, who directed BPILP with Kathleen Welch '91, is among those who are inspired by Nader.

"I buy the side that says this guy is a national treasure," Thomas said. "His celebrity is well earned from hard work on good causes. It's too bad there aren't a thousand more of him."

Last year, BPILP received national honors for raising over \$20,000 in pledges from law students and faculty toward a fund for summer internships. As a result, 10 summer interns were paid a stipend of \$2,000 each to work at agencies such as Farm Workers Legal Services, the Office of AIDS Discrimination Issues and Legal Services for the Elderly and Disabled.

All of which helps keep debts from becoming a deterrent to a career in public interest law, which is not known for its six-figure salaries. For example, the average salary for 1990 UB graduates who went into public interest law was \$24,909. At the very large firms, graduates were paid an average of \$64,174.

Nader confronted this problem in

his speech, urging students to work two jobs for a while.

"You're young and vigorous!" he said. His comments set off a wave of nervous giggles.

Halfway through Nader's speech, a dog barked. All heads turned in the direction of the aisle where the previously unnoticed pet sat panting next to its owner. But Nader was used to interruptions.

"I tell you, this law school takes equal opportunity seriously," he said.

Nader had just finished describing his own experience at Harvard Law School, when equal opportunity wasn't much of an issue. He expressed enthusiasm that more women and minorities are going into law, and students are questioning their subjects.

In Nader's day, the curriculum was narrow. "We had a course on Landlord/Tenant Relations," he said. "We never got to the tenant."

"They might call a course Business Ethics or White Collar Crime — you know, where the teller steals from the bank, rather than the reverse."

Nader recalled one classmate who questioned the racial makeup of juries. It was one of the few times when a student raised a controversial issue — and at that time the discriminatory selection of juries was not yet a public issue.

The professor rebuffed the question, Nader said, because he lacked the foresight to know better. "But you could never blame Harvard Law School for lack of foresight," Nader continued, "for one simple reason. And that is, you can't footnote foresight." ■

Leah Rae is a copy editor for The Buffalo News.

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