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In Memoriam: Virginia Leary

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IN MEMORIAM

VIRGINIA LEARY—by Makau Mutua*

I want to thank the ASIL for giving me an opportunity to remember one of the most outstanding members of this august society. Professor Virginia Leary passed from this world unexpectedly on April 8, 2009, in Geneva, Switzerland, where she made her home after stepping down from Buffalo Law School. We will always remember Virginia as a distinguished colleague, a dedicated servant of the ASIL, a mentor of junior faculty and countless young human rights activists from around the globe. But above all we shall always remember Virginia as a wonderful friend.

Today we celebrate a life of academic excellence and exemplary service to humankind. As one mark of her academic distinction and achievement, Virginia Leary was named a State University of New York Distinguished Service Professor, the highest honor that the SUNY system can bestow on a faculty member. But in conferring that honor, SUNY was merely affirming what the world already knew—that Professor Leary was a world-class academic and activist whose talents and compassion knew no bounds. She touched all those with whom she came across—whether king, queen, or peasant—with the humility that was so characteristic of her. She lived her life to affirm a basic truism of human rights doctrine—that we are all equal in our dignity as human beings. It is because of this unwavering faith in the dignity and the worth of the human person that Virginia traveled far and wide—all over the globe—fighting against human powerlessness in all its manifestations.

Virginia was so humble that you could not tell what a towering figure she was in the universe of international law and human rights. In fact, Virginia was one of the first, if not the first, woman to become a true star scholar in international law and human rights, and in that capacity paved the way for others. She served in the highest echelons, including as Vice President and member of the Executive Council of the American Society of International Law, the industry's most hallowed body. She was revered and widely admired within the corridors of the ASIL. Her service and academic excellence were recognized by the ASIL with the Goler T. Butcher Award. Those who knew Virginia knew that she was Ms. United Nations itself—personifying as she did its most noble causes. To her, everyone was a brother and a sister. She was a citizen of the world.

But there is one thing for which we should all remember Virginia, and that is her love for teaching and mentoring students to work in human rights. It is not widely known that Virginia founded the Buffalo Human Rights Center, one of the first such centers in the world, when many law schools were not even teaching human rights. She sent students to intern with human rights NGOs and at intergovernmental institutions before others did it. This is one of her most important legacies. And so, as we remember Virginia and celebrate her remarkable life, I want to solemnly promise that the University at Buffalo Law School will always honor the spirit by which she lived her wonderful life. She left UB Law a rich legacy in human rights—that candle will burn into eternity. We at the ASIL are the richer for having been touched by Virginia's life.

* Dean and SUNY Distinguished Professor, State University of New York–Buffalo Law School.