7-1-1979

Joseph Laufer: My Recollections

Daniel J. Gifford

University of Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/buffalolawreview

Part of the Legal Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/buffalolawreview/vol28/iss3/3
JOSEPH LAUFER: MY RECOLLECTIONS

DANIEL J. GIFFORD*

Joe Laufer has been, for many years, one of the pillars of the Buffalo Law School. He has been a scholar, a superb and committed classroom teacher, and an unassuming but persistent and dedicated force for a conservative and thoughtful approach towards the school’s academic responsibilities and obligations. Joe has a sense of inquisitiveness and a stubborn desire to do things well. He is also a warm and sensitive human being. The combination of these qualities in Joe Laufer has enabled him to contribute significantly to the richness of life at the Buffalo Law School.

Joe Laufer has always been concerned—almost passionately so—with the welfare of law students. His concern has manifested itself in many and sometimes novel ways. But it underlies his approach to much of his professional career and, at times, it has perhaps made him seem a bit cantankerous to some of those who were unaware of this deep concern of his. This concern was evidenced in a number of visible ways and in a host of less visible ways. Joe’s doubts, for example, about the wisdom of the modifications in traditional methods of grading that the school adopted after extensive study and debate, were based on his underlying concern for the welfare of students. These modifications, he feared, obscured from the students the extent to which they could, and should, strive for improvement. Their long run interest, he felt, might be furthered by a more demanding and revealing measure. At the expenditure of enormous amounts of energy and patience, and governed by single-minded determination, Joe, some years ago, prepared a comprehensive dictionary of unfamiliar terms which first-year law students are likely to encounter in their assigned readings of cases and other materials.¹ His dictionary is both comprehensive and illuminating. His explanations are elaborate enough to enlighten without exhausting his readers. It has been “must” reading on the Buffalo campus for many years. And it is superior to any comparable product which I have seen on any law school campus.

* Professor of Law, University of Minnesota.

The special admissions programs were also Joe’s concern. In order to achieve a desirable degree of diversity in the student body, the law school at SUNY has, for a number of years, attempted to assist minority and other persons from divergent backgrounds to attend. Because some of these students had incurred various kinds of educational disadvantages during their elementary and high school years, Joe was extremely concerned that efforts be undertaken at the law school to remedy any present disabilities which had resulted from those deficiencies in training. For a number of years he devoted vast amounts of time and energy to this task. He personally reviewed classwork with many students from academically weak backgrounds and, by his careful prodding and questioning and suggesting, helped many disadvantaged students to surmount their previous disabilities. Joe always viewed suspiciously those admissions programs that the school undertook when it had failed to back them with adequate remedial programs.

Joe was a tenacious and insightful scholar. When he decided to investigate the practices of the insurance companies and New York’s provisions governing compensation to persons injured by uninsured motorists, he delved into an area in which both the regulatory agency and the practices of the regulated insurance companies are extremely complex and difficult to uncover. In two highly original articles, Joe set forth his findings—findings which revealed that the legislature’s goals in seeking to protect persons from uncompensated injury at the hands of uninsured motorists had not been fully implemented in the manner intended. In so doing he illustrated the role that complexity plays in insulating regulated behavior from adequate official scrutiny.

Joe has always maintained a lively interest in, and contact with, institutions in the State of Israel. He spent some time, as a young man, working on a kibbutz. Later, after the establishment of Israel as an independent state, he directed a project to further the process of legal development in Israel. He devoted significant amounts of his time to review work of Israeli scholars: encouraging them, criticizing them, evaluating them. His own published writings are composed in significant part of commentaries upon Israeli or traditional Jewish law. Joe was a serious and devout

---

adherent of the Jewish tradition. Yet he was not a person who accepted without thought or modification that which previous generations had handed down. He maintained a reverent sensitivity and loyalty to the heritage of the past, however, and the way Joe did it enriched him and all of us who were his friends. He, in effect, used the past to develop his own present fullness, openness, and responsiveness.

Joe contributed in a number of ways to my own development as a scholar and as a person. I have missed the day to day contact with him since my own move to Minnesota. And his retirement will be a major loss to the Buffalo Law School.