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From the Beginning: Francis Letro ’79, Recipient of the Jaeckle Award, Found His Inspiration Early

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Francis Letro ’79, recipient of the Jaeckle Award, found his inspiration early

A well-known Buffalo trial attorney, whose attitudes about “the nobility of the law” were born when he was a child and his family faced tough times, accepted the 2012 Edwin F. Jaeckle Award with an emotional recounting of his story.

Francis M. Letro ’79 accepted the award, the highest honor bestowed by SUNY Buffalo Law School and its Law Alumni Association, at a Jan. 27 luncheon in New York City’s elegant Union League Club. The presentation was held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Law School’s New York City alumni chapter, one of its strongest and most active alumni cohorts.

After words of welcome by Dennis R. McCoy ’77, chair of the luncheon committee, and Brian Melber ’96, president-elect of the Law Alumni Association, Dean Makau W. Mutua gave an update on progress at the Law School. “We have invested in the indexes of academic excellence,” said the dean, pointing to 14 new faculty hires in the past four years, plus two this year, and the improving quality of each entering class of students, noting that this year’s incoming class had the highest GPA in the history of the Law School.

UB President Satish K. Tripathi, introduced by Dean’s Advisory Council Chairman Thomas R. Black Jr. ’79, said the Law School is a key component of the University’s long-range plan. “We already have a very strong institution, and we have much to take pride in. The Law School is a key part of that strength and pride,” Tripathi said.

In introducing the honoree, Dean Mutua noted that “over the last decade, Fran has provided leadership to the Law School at every critical juncture and in every possible way. His altruism, his service to the Law School and the legal community are simply extraordinary.”

He went on to cite “two African sayings which I think describe Fran as a community person, as a professional and as a true friend. First, the Africans of old used to say, if you want to kill a flea, remember that you can’t do so with one fingernail. You need to put two fingernails together to kill a flea. That’s about cooperation. The second one says that if you want to walk fast, walk alone, but if you want to walk far, walk togeth-
er. Fran, in my view, symbolizes the kernel of truth in each of those ancient sayings. He’s a collaborator, he’s a leader, he’s a fellow human being, he’s a loving person.”

Letro used the occasion to look back on his life and career, starting with when his family was thrown into turmoil when his father, a railroad worker, lost a leg in a work-related accident. “My father never returned to work,” he said. “It was my mother, a homemaker, who left the home to walk to the closest place where she could find a job, selling in a retail store. My oldest sister had to drop out of nursing school, returned home, and she went to work to help support the family.”

The railroad, he said, disavowed any responsibility for the accident, and “my family turned to a small-town lawyer, a sole practitioner, to take our side. I learned at that age that a lawyer present in our family during our times of hardship gave us tremendous hope and confidence. I clearly remember him coming to our apartment after work, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. He would stop by the house to update my parents on the status of case and to reconfirm to them his commitment to seeking justice on behalf of my family. He showed us the potential nobility of the law.

“It was during those visits, when I was 7 years old, that I watched the law in action. How this lawyer showed great compassion and showed great love for his work and told my family that the rule of law would prevail. After he would leave the house, my parents’ spirits were buoyed. They had a sense of hope, a sense of opportunity and a sense that we would have another chance.”

After a long battle, the case was settled, his family’s economic well-being was secured— and Letro had found his calling. “After having seen that,” he said, “I wanted a chance to be that guy, who could step in, save families, restore their dignity the way I saw it done in my family.”

He also said the UB was the only law school that accepted him, and that it took him seven years to graduate. “I knew what it meant to be a lawyer, but I didn’t know what it took to be a lawyer,” Letro said. “Professor Bill Greiner took me under his wing to make a lawyer out of me. With his guidance, we walked far and we walked together. And I learned a lot about life and I learned about the law that way.”

“If the Jaeckle Award would allow me one wish and one wish only, that wish would be that we all walk far together, that we continue our love for the law and each other and for our alma mater.”

“A couple who met as students at SUNY Buffalo Law School, and in the intervening years have been substantial supporters of the school in time, energy and dollars, have stepped forward with a major gift in furtherance of the Law School’s mission. Kenneth B. and Ellen C. Forrest, both members of the Class of 1976, have specified that their gift is to endow scholarships for deserving law students. “We thought about different alternatives for giving,” says Ken Forrest. “Law schools are very aggressive in providing scholarships to students, and we wanted to help SUNY Buffalo Law be in the position to do the same thing. We just felt this is what the Law School needs, and hopefully over the years the amount will accumulate so it will provide for meaningful scholarship money.

“In the past, we have given annual gifts which have been used for scholarships and have been gratified to learn that very well qualified students have received the benefit of these,” he said. “We wanted to do something along those lines on an endowed basis. It is our hope that other Law School alumni will consider making gifts for this purpose, because ultimately, if there were several large scholarship endowments available to the Law School, it would certainly advance the Law School’s ability to attract top students with financial needs.”

Forrest is a partner in the New York City law firm Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, concentrating his practice in the area of commercial litigation. The gift comes as a capstone to the couple’s long involvement with SUNY Buffalo Law. Forrest was a founding member of the school’s Dean’s Advisory Council and has worked with four deans in helping to chart the Law School’s strategic direction. He has received Distinguished Alumni Awards from the UB Alumni Association as well as from the SUNY Buffalo Law Alumni Association. In 2010 he received the Edwin F. Jaeckle Award, the Law School’s highest honor.

Ellen Forrest serves as board chair of the Vincent Smith School, a private school in Port Washington, N.Y., and has volunteered extensively with charitable organizations that relate to people with learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorders. The couple have two grown children, Kimberly and Craig.