
IN MEMORIAM: HONORABLE JOHN E. FENTON, JR.

Remembering an Extraordinary Teacher, Leader, and Friend

Professor William T. Corbett, '75*

On August 24, 2014, Suffolk University Law School lost a legendary and inspirational leader. Outside of Gleason Archer who founded the law school in 1906, few have left their mark on the institution, its faculty, staff, students, and alumni as indelibly as did former Dean and Judge John E. Fenton, Jr. In the eyes and hearts of many, his name and Suffolk Law are synonymous.

Dean Fenton's devotion to the law school spanned well over fifty years. He served the institution in so many capacities and for those fortunate enough to have been his student he probably is most fondly remembered as an extraordinary teacher—perhaps the best ever had during any part of their education. His course in Evidence was truly legendary. As was the case over forty years ago when I was a student, and was still the case until his retirement a few years ago, every student in the law school wanted to take that course. It was always oversubscribed with students literally sitting in the aisles of the classroom. Dean Fenton took great pride in this fact and with a wonderful smile would, to his good friends, attribute it to his gifted teaching. Those friends humorously would point out to him the fact that he rarely gave a grade below an A- certainly did not hurt his enrollment. Such bantering was always done in good humor and with the knowledge that Dean Fenton, indeed, was a very special person.

John assumed the Deanship in 1994 after having completed many years of service to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as an Associate Justice and then as Chief Justice on the Massachusetts Land Court, and later as the Chief Justice for Administration and Management of the Trial Court. At that time, the law school was entering a particularly challenging period in its then nearly 100-year history. Facing him was major curriculum revision, the largest ever capital campaign, the construction of the new law school, and the transition from the law school's former location on Beacon Hill to its current home on Tremont Street, not to mention the high expectations concerning Suffolk's emergence into greater national prominence and visibility. Under his guidance,

* A.B., Providence College, M.B.A., Boston College, J.D. Suffolk University, LL.M, Boston University. Professor Corbett is a former Acting Dean and Associate Dean of Suffolk University Law School. He joined the law faculty in 1976.

and with the generous support of our loyal alumni, faculty, and staff, the mission was accomplished and today we have what is still rightfully referred to as one of the finest law school facilities in the United States.

When one reflects on all that John accomplished as Dean, it is astounding. He transformed the school in so many ways, but he never changed its character nor all that was so good about its mission of providing access and opportunity to those seeking to better themselves through the noble practice of law. He accomplished these goals while also identifying the things that needed to be done in order for Suffolk to realize an enhanced national reputation. As busy as he was, his office door was always open to any student, faculty, staff, or alumni seeking his counsel. Such discussions took place routinely and, invariably, no appointment was ever necessary.

The administrative structure of the law school was very different in 1994 than it is today. When Dean Fenton arrived at Suffolk, there was no Dean of Students or Assistant Dean of Students, no Director of Internships, no Director of Clinical Programs, no Director of Law School Communications, no Academic Concentrations Coordinator, and no Director of Academic Support. He created these positions, formed their departments, established their budgets, and provided guidance to those in charge of their everyday operations. The first female dean in Suffolk University Law School history was John Fenton's first appointment as Dean of Students.

Dean Fenton saw the opportunity for the law school to distinguish itself by creating programs of academic excellence that could build upon the school's existing outstanding reputation in certain areas and also capitalize on historically strong segments of the Massachusetts economy. He, with the support of the law school faculty, created the academic concentrations in Civil Litigation, Intellectual Property, Financial Services, Health and Biomedical Law, and Taxation. In May of 2014, ninety-two students (approximately twenty percent of the graduating class) received a certificate from one of the concentrations. Such programs, though unique when started back in 1995, have become commonplace at U.S. law schools today.

John recognized the crushing financial burden that faces so many students and made it a priority of his administration to dramatically increase scholarship assistance. Although the cost of a legal education and the concomitant debt that follows remain an issue today, Dean Fenton addressed it as a top priority. Scholarship assistance more than doubled and he initiated the merit and academic leadership grants so as to attract and retain some of Suffolk's finest students. John's dedication to the issue of financial access to legal education and commitment to public service is certainly borne out by the many generous contributions made by alumni and friends to both the John E. Fenton, Jr. Scholarship Fund and John E. Fenton, Jr. Public Service Fellowships.

Dean Fenton saw the need for providing students nearing graduation with law school sponsored and subsidized bar preparation assistance. While today

such programs are offered routinely throughout the country, they were not at all routine in the mid-1990s and, indeed, Suffolk may well have been one of the very first law schools to provide this benefit to its students.

He recognized the need for Suffolk to form relationships with educational institutions outside of the United States and instructed his staff to investigate this opportunity. The result was the establishment of Suffolk's relationship with the University of Lund in Sweden and the formation of an enviable program that just completed its fifteenth consecutive year of operations. This program has provided the law school and hundreds of its students with an outstanding summer program along with new opportunities for faculty and student exchanges.

John Fenton recognized that for the law school to become a center of legal education, and to build upon its success with the academic concentrations, it had to consider the establishment of LL.M. programs. In 1998, he created the first faculty committee with the express charge of determining the nature and extent of what he hoped would lead to the first of several graduate programs. His vision of this program came to fruition in 2002 when the law school accepted its first class of students into the LL.M. Program in Global Technology. To date, 222 students have received a Suffolk LL.M. degree. This current year Suffolk initiated a JD/LL.M. program in Taxation that will permit students to receive both a JD and an LL.M. degree in the same time period required for the JD alone. In so many ways, these are all the result of Dean Fenton's vision back in 1998 to create strong graduate program offerings. What is particularly remarkable is that Dean Fenton managed to accomplish all that he did while teaching approximately 300 students each year and visiting countless alumni all over the United States.

During his tenure as Dean, the school achieved unparalleled success and national prominence. It did so because John Fenton was a remarkable leader who generated *esprit de corps* simply by his presence, compassion, and kindness. He had a clear vision of the goals that the law school needed to accomplish and he was able to inspire those around him to bring about those goals. But these accomplishments, while extraordinary, are not the real hallmark of his administration. The true hallmark is the loyalty that he showed to all who gave of themselves to Suffolk Law School and the goodwill that he instilled in all who were fortunate enough to cross his path. John Fenton did more good for more people (asking for nothing in return) than anyone I have known. It did not matter to him who it was who sought his counsel—whether it be the governor of the Commonwealth or a person of little means. He treated everyone with dignity and respect. He was that great man described by the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle who showed his greatness not by keeping the company of kings, but by the manner in which he treated the common person.

It is easy to understand why so many mourn his passing. They want to let a great man know that he was admired and loved by many, that the devotion that

he had to the entire Suffolk Law community was deeply understood and appreciated, and that all who had been fortunate enough to know him realized how much their lives have been enriched by his friendship.