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Tribute to John Pickering

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TRIBUTE TO JOHN PICKERING

*Esther Lardent**

I want to talk to you about the lessons that so many of us have learned from John, and the qualities that made him so memorable and so extraordinary.

The first was his unerring ability to know what was right. Now, many of us want to do right, but John always knew what the right thing was. Despite growing up in a time and place where women and people of color were not valued, where the homeless, the despised, the poor, and the disadvantaged were not considered worthy, John cared deeply about doing right by all of these people.

Having served with John in the ABA House of Delegates, I know well that the House of Delegates had an important rule. It was the Pickering rule. If John Pickering was with you on a resolution or policy coming before the House of Delegates, you won. If John Pickering visibly opposed you, you lost. And that rule was the most consistent rule. It was not simply because of John's prominence and his clout in the House. It was because if he was with you, you were right. John knew what was right.

In addition to having these great gifts, John was generous with them. He was a teacher. I look out and see in this audience so many members of the public interest bar. This has been a very difficult number of years for people in public interest. My colleagues in that community get tired and frustrated, and despair that instead of moving forward we keep getting pushed back. I would venture to say that every public interest leader in this room felt that John was the person that they could go to when they were despairing and thought perhaps they just could not fight any longer. John was so generous with his time and with his caring, and reminded us why it was that we should keep on doing what we are doing.

There was, of course, particularly for me, John's commitment to pro bono. Not only by doing hands-on pro bono work of the highest order throughout his career, but also through his work in supporting the institutions that do pro bono, including the D.C. Bar, the civil rights groups, the women's rights groups, and so many others. John was there when we started the Pro Bono Institute and the Law Firm Pro Bono Project, and he inspired us with his presence at our meetings and seminars. As one person said to me, "If John Pickering can find the time to do pro bono work, how can any of us say we're too busy to do pro bono work?"

In doing all of this, being a serious, engaged lawyer and a great friend and teacher and colleague, John had fun. John had a twinkle in his eye. I remember three incidents in particular that I just want to briefly relate to you.

* President and CEO of Georgetown University Law Center's Pro Bono Institute.

The first was seeing John at an ABA meeting, looking particularly cheerful and dapper. Of course he wore the bow tie, but also a really smashing hat. I said, "John, you look wonderful. Where are you going?" And he said, "I'm going courting." That was when he and Helen were dating.

The second was when John showed up at the offices of the Pro Bono Institute in 1993, hand-carrying Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering's signed commitment to our law firm pro bono challenge to ensure that his firm became the first to sign on to the challenge, which set national aspirational standards for pro bono. John was insistent that the firm be the very first to sign on. He worked some wonderful behind-the-scenes magic to make it happen in very short order. He particularly liked the fact that although the Pro Bono Institute was housed at Arnold & Porter at the time, he had beaten them out as the first signatory. He talked about that a lot.

Finally, when the merger was happening between the two legacy firms, there was a very well-orchestrated campaign to have key partners in the firm contact key constituencies. I thought it was remarkable and wonderful that one of the key constituencies clearly was the public interest world. John called to tell me about the merger before it hit the legal newspapers. He was so thrilled about the merger because it was two great law firms with great lawyers that shared this incredible passion for and commitment to pro bono work, but he also loved the fact that the firm was able to keep this quiet and surprise everyone with it.

What do we learn from John? Always do the right thing. Share your gifts with others. Do a great deal of pro bono, and then do a great deal more. Laugh and have fun. If you do that, then perhaps, like John, you can be a great lawyer and live a great life in the law.