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Tribute to John Pickering

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TRIBUTE TO JOHN PICKERING

*Evan Caminker**

I had the great fortune to work with John Pickering during my own stint as a young associate at Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering. One of my first projects at the firm was to assist John in writing an amicus brief in the landmark right-to-die case involving Nancy Cruzan. Learning to draft a Supreme Court brief from such a master advocate was a memorable experience. Of course, John taught me a great deal about first-rate brief writing, but much more significantly, he illustrated by example the possibility and importance of marrying reason with passion, and of dedicating one's energy and talents to causes that speak to the heart.

It was during this time, working together, that I first learned of the depth of John's commitment to the University of Michigan, as evidenced by the frequency with which John sported a maize and blue bow tie.

John earned his B.A. from the University in 1938, and his J.D. from the Law School in 1940. John understood the degree to which his alma mater had served him, and he took seriously the responsibility of giving back as a mentor and as a leader. He constantly devoted his time and energy to ensuring that others enjoyed access to the same educational experience and life lessons.

Among other contributions, John served as the national chair of the Law School Fund at a time when public universities first began anticipating significant erosions in state financial support. He served on the Law School's Committee of Visitors for forty years, perhaps encouraged by the coincidence in scheduling of Committee meetings with fall football games in the Big House.

He was, at the time of his passing, an honorary chair of the Law School's Campaign Steering Committee, and for many years he had the ear of the Dean, offering sage counsel on any number of issues concerning the student educational experience or the school's relationship to the bar and professional practice.

Near the end of his career, John's service to the university and service to his vision of the public interest converged in his offer to have his law firm spearhead the University's defense of its affirmative action admissions policies. While John did not handle the tremendously challenging day-to-day lawyering, he relished the ability to play armchair quarterback and provide moral leadership and strategic direction.

He once remarked to me that the litigation brought together his three primary passions in life: the Michigan Law School, the pursuit of social

* Dean of the University of Michigan Law School. Dean Caminker's remarks were read by John Payton.

justice, and the Michigan Law School. He had a twinkle in his eye about the relative emphasis of priorities, of course. But I thought this comment nicely captured the connection John always felt deep in his heart between his law school educational experience and his lifelong interest in pursuing social justice.

Earlier this year, John announced a substantial gift to the Law School, to establish a Justice Frank W. Murphy Seminar Room. John had been a law clerk to Justice Murphy, who also had been an alumnus of both the University and the Law School. According to John, it was during his clerkship with Justice Murphy that John first appreciated the importance of and the personal satisfaction to be found in championing the legal rights of oppressed or disregarded individuals. John hoped "that the activities in this seminar room will include learning that advances the public interest and other themes championed by Justice Murphy." This gift embodies what John cared for most, and it will serve not only as a tribute to the Justice, but also as a testament to his own influence on these same values.

John may well be the exemplary Michigan alumnus of his generation. He took advantage of the intellectual development and professional training provided by the law school and became one of the preeminent lawyers in America. He took to heart the school's valuation of citizen lawyers doing public service, and engaged in a lifelong effort to advance the cause of justice. And he learned to sing "The Victors" with the best of them.

He will forever have a special place in the Michigan alumni family, and will be sorely missed.