

REMEMBERING TOM DEBEVOISE AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO VERMONT LAW SCHOOL

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Thomas M. Debevoise, Dean Emeritus of Vermont Law School, died on February 1, 1995. During the course of our lives, we have all encountered a person who is especially remembered and admired for the qualities of wisdom, integrity, and strength of character. Many people share that memory of Tom. He had a remarkable life and a remarkable and varied legal career. He was, among other things, Attorney General for the State of Vermont, Assistant General Counsel for the Federal Power Commission, the senior partner in a law firm specializing in utility law, and Dean of Vermont Law School. His personal style was characterized by sincerity, informality, and a common sense approach to dealing with people and the tasks at hand. Tributes written by others will show the depth of respect and trust accorded to his legal and personal advice. I will comment on what I know best, the part of his life and career that was devoted to Vermont Law School.

It is impossible to think of Vermont Law School without remembering Tom Debevoise and the importance of his role in the school's growth and development. He assumed the deanship in 1974 at a critical point in the school's history, with the vision of a law school that would dare to be cast in an untraditional mold. Armed with limited financial resources, but enormous personal resources, he laid the foundation and charted the course for what would become a nationally and internationally recognized institution within the period of two short decades.

He recognized and appreciated the uniqueness of Vermont as the location for a law school and capitalized on its environment and values to foster a community-oriented setting for legal education. He also brought important personal and professional values to the school, values grounded in unwavering ethical standards, a personal and human dimension to the study of law and a commitment to public service. Students who studied Legal Ethics with Tom will remember him for those qualities.

Consistent with his personal professional values, Tom believed that a law school has a responsibility to provide public service. Under his leadership the law school developed links with the state and national legal institutions and established a legal

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clinic that provides legal services to citizens of Vermont who can not afford private representation. As a result, students have excellent opportunities to make public service a significant part of their legal education.

Tom understood that Vermont Law School needed an identity and a presence that would distinguish it from other institutions, while remaining true to the heritage of its location. He also recognized the need for leadership among institutions of legal education to address the nation's environmental problems. In 1978, the school established an environmental law program that, within a decade, was recognized as the nation's best. In a remarkably short period of time, Tom's leadership brought to fruition a prediction made by Judge Sterry R. Waterman in his welcoming address at the school's first commencement on June 5, 1976. Judge Waterman, speaking of the importance of the event at hand, noted: "[Vermont Law School] will have other firsts as the years go on and as its activities and as its influence become more widely recognized."¹

It is doubtful that a lesser person could have accomplished what Tom did in his eight years as Dean. The tasks were large and the obstacles formidable. He approached them with great wisdom, indomitable will, and gritty determination. He paid close attention to every detail, including the erection of the now familiar stone wall that gives the collection of buildings that is Vermont Law School institutional integrity. When he stepped down as Dean, the law school was fully accredited by the American Bar Association, the Association of American Law Schools, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. "It cannot be done" was not part of Tom's vocabulary. "If it is worth doing, we will find a way" was standard procedure.

After retiring as Dean, Tom generously gave his guidance as Dean Emeritus and as a member of the Board of Trustees. His enthusiasm for Vermont Law School never waned. Although Tom's physical presence will be sorely missed, he has left an indelible mark in defining Vermont Law School and its values. His influence and his accomplishments will remain an integral part of the fabric of the institution.

1. Welcoming address by Judge Waterman at the Vermont Law School commencement on June 5, 1976 (quoted in Thomas M. Debevoise, *Sterry R. Waterman—An Appreciation*, 9 VT. L. REV. 7, 9 (1984)).

Tom Debevoise and Vermont Law School are inseparable. He will be missed, but never forgotten.

