

1-1-1986

Professor William J. Riegger--A Man Who Had a Gift with People

James R. McCall

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings_international_comparative_law_review

 Part of the [Comparative and Foreign Law Commons](#), and the [International Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

James R. McCall, *Professor William J. Riegger--A Man Who Had a Gift with People*, 10 HASTINGS INT'L & COMPL. REV. 5 (1986).
Available at: https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings_international_comparative_law_review/vol10/iss1/2

This Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UC Hastings Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Hastings International and Comparative Law Review by an authorized editor of UC Hastings Scholarship Repository.

In Memoriam

Professor William J. Riegger—A Man Who Had A Gift With People

If it can ever be accurate to speak of an institution as possessing human attributes, it is fair to say that Hastings completed the fall semester of this academic year with a heavy heart. Bill Riegger's unexpected death of a heart attack on October 19, 1986, caused great sorrow to many people who had been part of the Hastings community during the last sixteen years. No other person had played such a consistent and valuable role in the emotional life of the College during that time.

Through the periodic faculty strifes all professional schools endure, Bill was viewed as a fair-minded person of good will by all of his colleagues regardless of Bill's position on a divisive issue. He often played the role of honest broker in student-administration disputes during the times of troubles in the early and middle 1970s. Bill also enjoyed the highest respect of members of the Hastings Board of Directors while he was the Vice Dean of the College (1971-1978), a respect that continues to this moment. In addition, he was one of the few Hastings professors of his time to be viewed by large numbers of students with great and enduring affection.

Given considerations of time and place, all of the above seems unlikely, if not impossible. He was, after all, an administrator and teacher at Hastings College of the Law, a large urban law school standing alone in the midst of the Tenderloin, a decidedly uncloistered precinct of the boisterous, contentious community of San Francisco. More generally, times have been out of joint for appreciation of the quiet virtues during the last seventeen years. American society has changed greatly during that period—constant ferment is a phrase that comes to mind. Finally, Hastings became a very different law school during that period, with dramatic changes in the composition, aspirations, and demands of the students and faculty.

Through the tribulations and the good times of the Hastings experience from 1971 to last fall, Bill remained the same person I first met on my first day as a professor of law at this institution. He also had started

to work as the new Vice Dean of the College on that day, and was moving into his office on the first mezzanine in the 198 McAllister building when we met. The job of moving into the Vice Dean's office was complicated by the facts that the former holder of that title had not resigned voluntarily and had not completely vacated the office. While dealing with the physical problems of unpacking and shelving books, as well as the interpersonal difficulty of soothing the feelings of his predecessor, Bill was somehow able to welcome me warmly to the law school.

Over the years I came to see that Bill had a genius for devoting his time to the needs of others so that their needs were met. His ability on that score was a rare gift. I was one of the first Hastings people to share that gift; literally hundreds would share it over the next sixteen years.

Few people seem truly comfortable with themselves, their world, and their place in it. Fewer still raise the spirits of companions by simply being themselves. Bill did, and one of the main reasons was the combination of a love of the ordinary and a love of the exotic that was central to his life.

As Frank Walsh explains in his Tribute, Bill was a product of the middle west. His measured speech, general American accent, and obvious sense of decency marked him as a Minnesota farm boy, with his feet firmly on the ground wherever he might be. Bill also had a sense of place and propriety that was traceable to his farm boyhood. He would occasionally use a figure of speech that reflected his rural upbringing and could only be called quaint, at least in present-day San Francisco.

While he was an authentic product of rural Minnesota life, Bill also knew and loved the people and culture of Japan for forty years of his life. Hastings colleagues who knew the man well were not surprised that a number of Bill's friends came from Tokyo for the memorial service a few days after his death. His deep personal interest and involvement in the Orient, starting at a time when America generally viewed Asia as the locale of Terry and the Pirates, rather than the other side of the Pacific Rim, was most unusual for a farm boy. Bill's down-to-earth values and great curiosity about distant lands and cultures produced a unique personality, which was very comfortable to be with and very cosmopolitan..

It seemed quite fitting, once the grief of the event had begun to pass, that the immediate cause of Bill's death was an illness picked up a few weeks before, during his first trip to the Soviet Union. Few people at his age, and with his parlous health, would have thought of attempting a two-week barnstorm through European and central Asian Russia. Bill did not hesitate for a moment when he received the opportunity. He was

the only person I have ever known who was an avid and deeply appreciative reader of both Garrison Keilor and Yukio Mishima.

That he actively indulged his wide range of cultural interests to almost the day of his death was a blessing, for his health had been failing for the last five years. He never complained, at least in my hearing, of conditions that were almost constantly tormenting—emphysema and shingles make appalling constant companions. As a young man, Bill spent a year under a vow of silence in a Benedictine monastery in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in training to become a member of the order. Undoubtedly, the training and discipline of that year helped him deal with his illnesses.

His patience, depth of personality, and readiness to take the time to listen to people made him friends from all walks of life. Within a month of his death, he became a valued and well-remembered friend of the young woman who played the violin for coins in the United Nations Plaza BART station entrance. A long conversation and obvious interest in her life made a fast friend. A day or two later, Bill's advice was sought by one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in San Francisco, who saw Bill as so many others did: a friend with interesting views and valuable judgment.

Two remarkable facts about Bill will live in the memories of his many friends. The first is that he would always take the time to listen. The second is the remarkable ability he possessed for making his companions feel good about themselves, a rare and beautiful quality. He made time for people and he made the time of the people he knew better because of the time he gave them. Bill's gift with people was really a combination of attention, interest, and a sense of priorities that gave others a very high place. We were truly fortunate to have shared that gift.

By JAMES R. MCCALL*

* B.A., Pomona College, 1958; J.D., Harvard Law School, 1962; Professor of Law, University of California, Hastings College of the Law.

