

Never Unprepared

By Christine Grillo

Thirty-nine years ago, Professor Robert Keller gave up a promising career at a large firm so he could teach tax law. “I loved teaching from the first day,” he says, as he heads into semiretirement. “There’s never been a single, solitary moment in my life when I regretted the choice.”

His story begins in Philadelphia in 1963, when he graduated with honors from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, with a BS in economics. Three years later, he finished Harvard Law cum laude, and in 1966 he returned to Philadelphia to work in the tax department of the law firm of Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen. Over the course of his six years there, he came to suspect that the ideal life for him would not involve law practice, but instead, teaching. The problem? Keller believed he was too shy to teach. “I had this image that anyone who taught should be like William Buckley,” he says.

But his mentor at the firm, Jerome Kurtz, who was later the IRS Commissioner under President Jimmy Carter and who “had a whole new way of thinking about tax theory and policy,” pushed him to deliver presentations on new tax laws to different groups in the firm. Keller soon found himself going from luncheon to luncheon to give talks, and in the process discovered that he didn’t have to channel William Buckley to teach. All he had to do, he says, was prepare. Eventually, he says, “I knew I was much better at explaining tax law than I was at practicing it.”

In 1972, he joined the faculty of the School of Law and was promised by then Dean Cunningham a light load in his first year.

Keller recalls that the “light load” comprised courses in estate and gift tax, corporate tax, tax policy, and two sections of basic income tax. “I wondered what a heavy load would have looked like,” he jokes.

Nearly four decades later, he’s still uncomfortable if he has to talk about something spontaneously—but he’s never walked into a classroom without being thoroughly prepared.

Intellectually invigorated by tax policy, Keller admits to a long-standing fascination with numbers. “It’s just incredible to explain to people that while our tax system may look chaotic, it

“THERE’S A LOGIC to what a tax system should look like, and every time Congress enacts legislation that moves away from that logic, one must ask why?”

—Professor Robert Keller



Professor Keller was chosen to serve as honorary student marshal for the University of Maryland Commencement on May 20 and led the parade of students from all six graduate schools to their seats in 1st Mariner Arena.

doesn’t have to be that way,” he says. “There’s a logic to what a tax system should look like, and every time Congress enacts legislation that moves away from that logic, one must ask why?” Keller believes that his students become

some of the few people who actually “get” the tax system.

Richard Levine, one of Keller’s former students who is an attorney at DLA Piper, wrote recently in a tribute to Keller, “Several words come to mind when I think of Bob—enthusiastic, smart, charismatic, inspirational, approachable, intelligent, entertaining, fun, and intellectually curious. Once I took my first course from Bob, I couldn’t get enough.”

“Bob is one of a kind,” says David Abramson, a former student who practiced law for 25 years and is now president of Martek Biosciences Corporation. “To me, he was the single best teacher I had in college or law school. Period.”

Keller is humble about his story, providing a short version of it: “I taught for a long time, I wrote some articles, my students liked me, and then I left.”

He doubts he’ll be able to retire completely and will probably continue to teach one or two classes every year. “I still get a charge every time a student comes into my basic tax class gritting his or her teeth, and leaves with thoughts of becoming a tax lawyer,” he says.

