Echoes from the Past

by Betty Lynne Leary

Words spill forth from the wellspring of students whose lives Professor John Ester touched. Their laughter and his music can still be heard today—for a short while.

In 1960, John Ester came to Baltimore. Fresh out of graduate law school and newly married, he embarked on a teaching career that would impact the lives of more than 4,000 students. After 39 years, Ester prepares to teach one more class, grade one more exam, and reflect on the changes he has seen and experienced as part of the history of the University of Maryland School of Law.

John Ester probably had more impact on my law career than any other professor. He took a real interest in the students and challenged our minds. He was very analytical and we used to look forward to his exams, not because we had to study, but because the questions were incredible.

The Hon. Benjamin L. Cardin '67

The road to becoming a renowned professor began for John Ester in law school at Willamette University in Salem, Ore. The Dean of the school invited Ester to lunch one day and asked about his career plans.

"I told him I wasn’t sure," Ester recalls. "So he told me to consider graduate law school and a teaching career." Ester took the advice and, after passing the California bar exam, strapped all his possessions to his 1952 black MG convertible and headed east to the University of Illinois where he earned his L.L.M. The Dean at Illinois, who also recognized Ester’s talents, suggested that the University of Maryland might be a good place for him to start a teaching career.

"He was right. The University of Maryland was a good place not only to begin a teaching career, but to have a career," Ester says. "The primary reason we accepted the offer to come here was to find out what the East Coast was like. Baltimore turned out to be a great place to live."

John Ester was very young, only two years older than me. He fit right in with the other students because he was fresh out of law school himself. He was an excellent teacher with a very dry sense of humor. Estates is a deadly course, no pun intended, but he certainly kept the class interesting. He was very down to earth and didn’t place himself above anyone.

Carl Wannen ‘62

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"Hopefully they’ll remember me as a pretty good

The initial days of his new profession held some surprises for the young teacher. When Ester walked into his first class, he was shocked to see almost everyone wearing a coat and a tie. Most of the evening students came to class straight from their day jobs.

“The dress was much more casual on the West Coast, and it kind of scared me when I walked in and saw all those white shirts and ties,” he says. “I was not prepared for that.” On closer inspection, Ester realized something else about his new students. “Not only were they wearing shirts and ties, but they were older than I was,” he laughs, “and I discovered fairly quickly that most of them were making more money than I was. So it was an interesting experience.”

Ester relishes many memorable moments during his tenure from having lunch with Chief Justice Earl Warren, who dedicated the current law school building in 1966, to a tense day in the moot court room when members of the Black Panthers spoke as part of a lecture series. Ester played an integral role as Chairman of the Appointments Committee during the time when the clinical program was created and the elective curriculum was greatly expanded.

“The clinical program is perhaps the most dramatic change I’ve seen,” he says. “Today we have so many different clinical experiences that a student can find out what he or she wants to do after graduating by doing it before graduating. You couldn’t do that in 1960.” Ester also served as Associate Dean from 1985 to 1987, but the events of 1986, when he also served as Acting Dean, remain unforgettable.

“My wife will testify that I worked about 80 hours a week. It was like being a CEO at a large corporation,” he claims. “I tried to learn the mysteries of the University’s budgeting system, which has some really strange features. But what I learned most is that when I grow up, I want to be a middle-aged school teacher, not a Dean. It reinforced the fact that being a teacher is what I really enjoy most.”

Ester’s infectious enthusiasm in the classroom made learning more enjoyable for generations of students. When the school stopped using a bell to signal the start of class, Ester began ringing his own bell to bring students to order. The bell soon gave way to a wider variety of instruments including a plastic tambourine, horns, a wooden whistle, clackers, a toy trumpet, and a tiny keyboard on which he plays a soulful rendition of “Amazing Grace.”

“On my student evaluations, I actually had some students say the music relieved their fear and anxiety about law school because, after all, how can you be afraid of an old man who comes in and plays a plastic toy trumpet to start class?” Ester muses.

His classes were great fun, very lively. He was a mentor to me and gave me a lot of encouragement early on which meant a lot. The law can be dry but he brought wit, common sense and intelligence to the classroom and made it a lot of fun.

The Hon. Kathleen O. Friedman ’66
Ester's favorite class to teach and the one he is perhaps most famous for is torts. He enjoys teaching first-year students and finds it easy to keep students interested in what he calls "the rather dramatic and entertaining subject matter." Contracts, on the other hand, is one course he's happy to yield to another. "Contracts and I just didn't get along," he admits. "I don't mind questions that I can't answer but with contracts, I didn't even know what the questions were sometimes. I really had to work hard to get ready for contract classes because I didn't want to cheat the students."

"I started in '58 and John Ester came two years later. A course is made by the personality of the professor and people like Ester and Brumbaugh are legends of their time. They taught generation after generation of students."

Herbert Belgrad '61

In May, when the last lecture is delivered and students stream from his classroom one final time, Ester plans to shout for joy. He predicts an even louder shout after the last exam is graded. He wants to spend more time with his wife of 39 years, his son, two daughters and granddaughter. He has more murder mysteries to read. He will also continue serving as one of the law school's most passionate ambassadors as the Director of Student Recruiting, a position he's held since 1986.

"I visit approximately 15 universities and three law school forums each fall," he explains. "I talk to prospective students about the merits of the University of Maryland, which I'm delighted to do because I think we're one of the best law schools in the country."

An avid music fan, Ester plans to continue adding to his burgeoning collection of cassette tapes that now occupy an entire closet in his home. He might relearn the trombone, which his wife insists will be an outdoor activity.

"I also want to learn how to use that thing," he says, pointing an accusing finger in the direction of his computer. "I think it's about time an old dog learned new tricks."

As spring draws near, Ester enjoys his torts class perhaps a little more each day. He admits he will miss the students, but quickly adds that he won't miss grading their exams. Generations of students will remember him for his wit, curiosity and brilliance, his musical talents, and his countless contributions to the law school.