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**“HOW COULD ANYONE ‘ROAST’ JANA?”:  
A TRIBUTE TO MY COLLEAGUE JANA SINGER**

DONALD G. GIFFORD\*

My friend and colleague Jana Singer is well-known for challenging her students to solve problems and think creatively. In a similar vein, a few weeks before her retirement luncheon, I think Jana took peevish delight in challenging me to “roast” her at the event in her honor. When I shared news of this invitation—and this challenge—with my wife Nancy, she responded, “How could anyone roast Jana Singer?” Nancy’s comment was spot on. For years, Jana has probably been the most universally respected and beloved member of our faculty. However, after only a moment’s thought, Nancy responded to her own question by saying, “Ask Josh.” She was referring to Josh Prada, one of the two outstanding sons Jana raised, who had been my student and my research assistant. When I asked Josh whether he had any suggestions as to how to “roast” his mother, he initially responded with great relish, “I’ve been waiting my entire life for an opportunity like this.” Yet a couple of days later, even Josh acknowledged that he had little to offer to assist me in “roasting” Jana.

A high degree of intelligence and an outstanding academic background are necessary credentials for anyone receiving a law school faculty appointment at the University of Maryland Carey School of Law or elsewhere. Yet even within our faculty, Jana’s academic pedigree stands out. Her colleagues are all aware of her professional education at Yale Law School. But many did not know that as an undergraduate, Jana graduated Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude from Dartmouth. Typically, graduates who are recognized with these honors at elite schools like Dartmouth tend to be extremely driven and studious. Several years ago, I suggested to Jana that she must have been a very diligent student during her time there. She wistfully responded, “No. I really didn’t take my studies seriously until Yale. At Dartmouth, I was mostly a jock.”

Jana’s unwavering commitment to excellence, superb judgment, persistent cheerfulness, and unsurpassed kindness and human decency, were even more important to her contributions to the law school than her brilliant mind. Critics of “traditional” legal education frequently point their fingers at the anxiety that Socratic dialog causes first-year students. Jana is the last

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person on the faculty that could be regarded as a Socratic curmudgeon. However, if you actually talk with students and recent graduates, they will tell you that what brought them the most anxiety during their first semester courses was when Professor Singer asked a question in the classroom, and the student responded with a less than insightful answer, to which Jana would respond, “O-K-a-a-a-y.”

For the past fifteen years, Jana’s faculty office was only a few doors down from mine. Let’s face it, faculty-office hallways are typically serious and quiet places. Accordingly, I welcomed Jana’s wonderful laughter that frequently wafted down our hallway. However, on rare occasions when I passed her office door, I would see a look of exasperation and frustration on her face. Jana would be grading first-year writing assignments, and a poorly written paper caused her significant aggravation, as if she were asking herself, “What can I possibly do to turn this student into a better writer capable of practicing law effectively?”

It is difficult to state in words how committed Professor Singer was to her students. For several years, Jana taught Legal Analysis and Writing to the same groups of students whom I taught in Torts. It always seemed to me that her students were better prepared to think analytically than other students. One year in particular, her class of roughly twenty-five students ended up including two students who later clerked for federal court of appeals judges, and yet another student who was possibly the best research assistant with whom I have ever worked.

Jana’s colleagues also observed the tension between her unrelenting commitment to high standards and her personal niceness during faculty and committee meetings. We all knew that if a faculty committee was presenting the full faculty with a proposal or a candidate for a faculty appointment and the Dean recognized Jana to speak, she would begin by effusively praising the hard work and wisdom of the committee. Then would come a four-word transition: “But I have one . . . .” My colleagues and I would listen carefully for the next word. If that word was “question,” that is, “But I have one question . . . ,” there was still a fifty-fifty possibility that the proposal would pass, often after amendment. However, if the word following “but I have one” was “concern”—then forget it, the proposal was dead. Perhaps no other anecdote illustrates the universal respect that Jana commanded among her faculty colleagues.

As a former Dean, I recognize a pattern that I now confess both my successors as Dean and I have practiced. If there was a faculty appointment decision or a policy dispute that was likely to divide the faculty, Jana would be appointed to the committee assigned to handle the matter, often as its chair. Jana had the unique ability to talk with any of her colleagues, regardless of their differing perspectives, and find common ground.

People as universally beloved, kind, and tolerant as Jana are often not the ones regarded as agents of social change. Yet Jana's entire career was devoted to change within the law school community, in the legal profession, and in society beyond our community. When Jana first joined the law school faculty in 1985, seven years before my own arrival, she was among the first wave of women on the faculty. For many years, she car-pooled to the law school, along with her colleagues Karen Rothenberg and Diane Hoffman, at a time when all three lived in Bethesda. One can only imagine the topics of their conversations during those commutes, including, at times, the challenges they faced as part of a male-dominated institution and the tactics that would enable them to become transformative leaders at the law school. What success they achieved! Karen became the Dean of the law school in 1999, and both Jana and Diane served as Associate Deans.

Jana was also an agent of change for the legal profession and society at large. Before the United States Supreme Court recognized the constitutional right to same-sex marriage, Jana co-authored a set of comments to the Attorney General of Maryland, signed by sixty-seven law professors within our state, arguing that Maryland should recognize same-sex marriages celebrated in other jurisdictions. More recently, while acknowledging that "problem-solving" courts for family disputes are an improvement over the traditional adversarial model, she argued that the legal system must reevaluate its reliance on any kind of courts in resolving family law disputes.<sup>1</sup> Her teaching of family law was infused with a healthy dose of training in negotiation and other alternative dispute resolution processes. Her advocacy for change also went beyond the classroom and her scholarship. Professor Singer was and continues to be a participant and leader in various statewide and countrywide efforts to improve family law, not to mention her work with the American Law Institute, the Association of American Law Schools Section on Family and Juvenile Law—where she once served as Chair—and as a member of the Editorial Board of the *Family Court Review*.

At Jana's retirement luncheon, her colleagues and I tried to laugh to keep from crying, with limited success. I also apologized to my colleagues during the luncheon for perhaps contributing to Jana's premature retirement. Through the years, I had been relentless to the point of being obnoxious in sharing cellphone photos and stories of my daughters and, more recently, my grandchildren, with Jana and a couple of other friends on the faculty. As I watched Jana look at the cellphone pictures of my grandchildren, I knew that the time would come, too early from the law school's perspective, when Jana would retire to spend more time with her own grandchildren and step-grandchildren.

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1. See generally JANE C. MURPHY & JANA B. SINGER, *DIVORCED FROM REALITY: RETHINKING FAMILY DISPUTE RESOLUTION* (2015).

As lawyers and scholars, my colleagues and I like to think of ourselves as “wordsmiths.” Words, however, fail to capture either the full scope of Jana’s contributions to the school of law or our feelings for her as she heads into retirement. All we can say is thank you, Jana. For the past generation, you have been a uniquely beloved colleague, but also one of those leaders who defined the law school and made it special.