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

"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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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."

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."

Professor Ester always had a terrific sense of humor. The law can be very dry and boring, but he had a way of bringing the law to life.

He was obviously intelligent and cared about teaching and that made him extremely effective as a teacher. He is one of the greats.

"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.

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."

"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.”

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.