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Tributes

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My route from home to SMU takes me directly past the university president's home. For many months after Ken Pye died in July 1994 I would, driving to work occupied with thoughts of the coming work day or trying to find some music on morning radio, look up at the stately home and be at once shocked and saddened when I again realized Ken was no longer with us. His presence at SMU loomed so large during his presidency that it was hard to imagine the institution without him. I found it difficult to accept that he had been taken from us.

A. Kenneth Pye was a remarkable man, known and respected throughout higher education, the legal profession, Washington political circles, intercollegiate athletics, and wherever his professional life led. I was fortunate to know and work with him during the last eight years of his extraordinary life. Among his finest characteristics were his integrity, an unerring sense of fairness, his care and concern for individuals and for the institution he served, his candor, an incisive wit, a great intellect, and astounding problem-solving skills.

As is frequently the case for those with exceptional ability who rise to positions of prominence and influence, Ken was often misunderstood. But he never let public perception, inaccurate though it might be, sway him from a proper course of action. He understood that leadership sometimes demanded the making of tough, unpopular decisions, and from these he never shied.

It is well known that in 1987 SMU's Board of Trustees handpicked Ken Pye as our ninth president to lead us back from the abyss. A football scandal had rocked SMU to its very foundation, forcing us to reassess our institutional principles and change even our governing structure. We desperately needed someone beyond reproach to reestablish our academic priorities and restore integrity to our athletics program. Kenneth Pye was, as history now tells us, the perfect choice.

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The task proved even more difficult than Ken thought it would, and he knew it would be very difficult. For openers, the financial condition of the university as a result of the scandal was more perilous than he had been first led to believe. Rebuilding our shattered athletics program and restoring the credibility of the institution in the eyes of the faculty, our graduates, the church, and the community presented a tremendous challenge for even as renowned a troubleshooter as Ken. As tough as that was, he was faced first with simply balancing the university's budget, a task that occupied every working day his first couple of years here.

By no means a "good ole boy," Ken's actions were frequently misinterpreted during his tenure at SMU. Sometimes he found himself between the proverbial rock and a hard place. For example, in rebuilding athletics he immediately initiated a new admissions policy and procedure for prospective student-athletes. The basic premise was simple: no one should be admitted to SMU without a reasonable prospect of graduating from the university, a university notably devoid of the soft majors employed by many football powers.

The local press never could get this right and repeatedly reported that Ken Pye was out to destroy football at SMU. Unfounded rumors about admission denials of prospective student-athletes were treated as fact and, to read the local scribes, only potential Rhodes Scholars need apply for athletic scholarships at SMU. This misinformation constantly fueled the resentment and disaffection of our athletic boosters. They readily believed Ken Pye was unwilling to give athletics (read football) a fair chance, reason enough for them to withdraw their financial support of the program, further hindering its recovery.

On the other side of the spectrum was the faculty, tired of being dragged through the muck after athletic scandals and suspicious of even the new athletic department and its professed aims. The fact that average SAT scores for student-athletes in some sports were 150 to 200 points lower than for the student body at large strongly suggested to them that standards were still much too lax.

Athletic budget tightening was necessary because of the university's general financial plight and inadequate support from alumni. To many within the university, athletics were depleting the academic "side" of essential resources, while to the boosters and the press, it was proof positive of Ken's design to wreck the program.

Through that maelstrom Ken stayed the course, never wavering in his fundamental belief that college athletics was an integral part of one's college experience and that competition should be by true student-athletes who are fully integrated into campus life and who graduate, even, heaven forbid, in Division I.

The fact of the matter is Ken loved college athletics and attended as many contests on campus as his schedule would allow. Sitting next to him at a game was a real experience. He could be tough on officials, so much

so that I understand at Duke his basketball seats were moved to the upper deck to spare the officials some of his rod.

But he generally kept his priorities in order. In the second game of our first season back participating in football, our team, made up of almost all freshmen, defeated the University of Connecticut on the last play of the game. It was a glorious comeback win, and our student body went wild, racing out onto the field to celebrate and attacking the goalposts. Ken could make only one comment amid all the hysteria: "Get off of my goalposts. They cost $10,000."

In any situation, Ken was the quickest study I have ever seen. He could grasp the nuances of a complex issue while most of us in the room were still trying to decipher the question. He possessed confidence in his intellect and his sense of right and wrong. As a result he reached decisions quickly, some would say too quickly. But Ken was always willing to listen to reasoned argument. He could and would reverse himself if convinced that his initial reaction had missed the mark. Ken was more interested in getting it right than in any prideful adherence to an earlier position.

Outside of his amazing intellect, Ken's renowned candor and wry sense of humor were perhaps his most visible attributes. Ken did not mince words and always called them as he saw them. And sometimes he was not long on patience. Tom Read tells of the time when Ken was a law school dean and Tom was his associate dean. One day Tom was confronted with a prominent but unhappy alum whose son had been denied admittance to law school. Tom's best efforts aside, the individual insisted upon seeing the Dean. Ken granted the individual an audience, carefully explaining to him why his son was not competitive in the school's highly competitive applicant pool and suggesting that the young man would be better off at another, less competitive school.

After all this, the alum responded with, "Well, I still don't understand why you won't admit my son."

To which Ken immediately and forcefully replied, "Well, if you don't understand that, you are as dumb as your son."

Only Ken could say something like that and get away with it. Tom reveals that the individual left shaking hands with Ken and thanking him for his time.

Ken Pye could say more with fewer written words than anyone I have known. As a university president he had to respond to the letters of disgruntled people all the time, whether students, parents, graduates, faculty, or members of the community. If the complaint had merit, Ken tried his best to right the wrong. If it did not, he would write just that and indicate that he intended no action, using three lines or less. His two or three line responses to four or five page letters of complaint were absolute masterpieces.

Ken did not laugh much. About all one could get from him was a smile or a chuckle. But in his view, life was quite amusing. He had a penetrat-

ing wit, which he used, it seemed, about every other sentence. He had a unique ability to quickly observe and voice all of life's ironies and inconsistencies. He might wonder aloud, for example, why a prominent graduate favored higher academic standards except when it came to the admission of his son or daughter or why a faculty colleague who failed to produce any scholarship in years was so tough on the tenure and promotion of others. No one fooled Ken Pye.

Although tough on the exterior and very thick-skinned, Ken was really a softie. He did not suffer fools lightly, but at the same time he had trouble getting rid of anyone who was trying to do his job, no matter how incompetent. He called one morning to tell me that he had an eleven-o'clock meeting with a senior administrator and that he was going to terminate him. He called back in the early afternoon to tell me he had decided not to. Although he couched his reversal of mind in institutional terms, I later learned what I suspected all along: he had simply been unable to drop the ax.

To the surprise of many, when publicly accepting large gifts to the university that benefitted students such as endowments for scholarships, Ken would often choke up in expressing his gratitude. Investment in the education of bright young minds struck a very deep and personal cord in Ken, and he could scarcely get through an acceptance without his voice breaking.

His gruff exterior notwithstanding, Ken had a personal warmth and graciousness that was perhaps not always obvious from his public persona. He possessed a great memory for detail and always remembered an individual's personal interests. Socially, he had a splendid knack of making people feel as if he were really interested in them, and he genuinely was. For example, he never failed to ask my daughters about their horseback riding. Ken could pick up a conversation with my wife Lynn after several months without missing a beat. In the interval, he must have spoken to hundreds of people.

Although a workaholic, Ken was devoted to his own family and loved simple pleasures in life such as walking his dog and reading murder mysteries. If he had a rare Friday night free of social obligation he could be found at the local Blockbuster Video searching for a movie to take home to watch with Judy.

I owe much to Ken professionally. For some unknown reason he thought I should have positions of responsibility. Shortly after he arrived, he asked me to serve as faculty athletic representative and to help him create an SMU Athletic Council which would have significant oversight responsibilities for our athletic program. Although it was our provost who appointed me law school dean, I feel quite sure that Ken had some hand in that decision as well. (While I was serving as acting dean, Ken and I attended a small dinner party at a dinner club at the top of a large office building. As Ken and I entered the parking garage after the meal, he pulled me aside to tell me that it looked like they were going to ask me

to be dean and how pleased he was. I thanked him for his confidence in me and went off to find my car. The problem was, for the life of me, I could not find it. About fifteen unsuccessful minutes later after trying several levels of the garage, I ran into a mumbling Ken, who was still looking for his car. The leadership of the university had lost their cars in a parking garage!)

In his storied career, Ken had served as a faculty athletic representative and a law school dean and was in a very real sense my mentor. He had been where I was now going. There was little he had not seen or experienced. I valued his judgment and wisdom greatly, although he was careful not to give advice unless asked. He took pains not to interfere in my responsibilities as dean while at the same time making himself available when I asked him to attend law school functions.

We sometimes disagreed, but he would always hear me out. Indeed, like many fine lawyers, Ken enjoyed good, sharp discourse. Of course, he did not shy from controversy, although neither did he thrive on it. He did know how to endure it and knew it was part of the necessary troubleshooting and problem solving of running a university. Ken was a pragmatist and had the acumen and nerve to make decisions which were in the best interests of the university in the long run, even though not popular at present.

I, plainly put, found working with and for Ken Pye inspirational. He had the unique ability to lift the capabilities and competence of those around him. The mere force of his intellect, his calm under fire, his toughness through adversity, his tenacity, shrewdness, determination, and endurance were awe-inspiring. I found that no matter how bad a day I was having, his was probably worse. He never complained but would always lead with one of his seemingly endless dry witticisms about the course of the day.

Equally inspirational were his principles, his never-ending sense of fairness and moral integrity, and his uncompromising honesty. He didn't preach, he just did, and he left a wonderful model to follow.

Characteristically, Ken handled his terminal illness with courage and grace, battling to the end. He had always talked of spending his last few years before retirement back on the law faculty, doing what he loved best, teaching. Sadly, fate intervened before that could happen.

Shortly after Ken's illness caused him to resign the presidency in June 1994, I called him at home to tell him that the law faculty had voted to confer on him the William Hawley Atwell Professorship of Constitutional Law, effective immediately. Ken, his voice choking with emotion, told me that nothing could mean more to him. I, my voice choking with emotion, told him that I could not wait to see the day he returned to the law faculty. There was little else to say. It was the last time I ever spoke to Ken.

I was in Korea two weeks later when I received a fax that Ken had died.

Ken Pye was a remarkable man and an inspirational leader. His legacy to us does live on and will not soon be forgotten. I, for one, am still inspired when I think of him. And I, as do so many others whose lives he touched, think of him often.