



January 2018

A Library's Legacy

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Recommended Citation

Natalie Nanasi, *A Library's Legacy*, 71 SMU L. REV. 27 (2018)
<https://scholar.smu.edu/smulr/vol71/iss1/8>

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A LIBRARY'S LEGACY

*Natalie Nanasi**

AS a relatively new member of the SMU law faculty, I never had the privilege of meeting Professor McKnight. But from what I have come to learn from conversations with both colleagues and students who had the honor of knowing him, he was an unparalleled scholar and dedicated teacher. However, it was not until I followed a librarian deep into the bowels of the Underwood Law Library that I felt a true connection to this legal legend.

It was the spring of 2016, and I was halfway through my first semester of teaching students in the Judge Elmo B. Hunter Legal Center for Victims of Crimes Against Women. We were representing survivors of gender-based violence, a cause Professor McKnight would surely have supported. As the principal architect of the Matrimonial Property Act, which granted Texas women equal legal rights after marriage, he believed strongly in gender equality. The work of the Hunter Center was both challenging and rewarding, but it was being performed in an aesthetically dismal place, as I had not yet found the time to purchase, frame, and hang the colorful and inspirational artwork that now adorns our walls.

The worst part was the empty bookshelves. Two entire walls were taken up by the bare space, a sight that seemed antithetical to the spirit of learning and search for knowledge I hoped to instill in my students. Desperate for even a lowly magazine to fill the void, I reached out to the library. This was how I found myself winding my way through underground stacks filled with books that likely had not seen the light of day in decades. I walked past dusty Reporters from the early 1900s and yellowing old exams to a series of shelves that stood out for the variety of books upon them. "These are part of Professor McKnight's collection," the librarian told me.

I spent hours poring through the tomes on the "McKnight shelves" and dragged cartfuls up into the light and into the Hunter Center's workrooms. I had known that Professor McKnight was a family law expert, but the books that now grace our shelves evidence the fact that he was a true renaissance man. Students representing survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and human trafficking can take inspiration not only from legal treatises on Texas Matrimonial Property Rights but also from books on topics ranging from "Women of the South" to a retrospective on Legal

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Aid; “World Peace Through World Law;” works on Jefferson, Lincoln, Jefferson and Roosevelt; and even “The History of Tattooing.”

Professor McKnight’s name is handwritten on the front cover of nearly all the volumes that now reside in our office. I am honored to have his spirit in the room as my students and I seek justice for survivors of violence who have often been marginalized by society and the legal system. As we raise their voices, we remember the work and acknowledge the many contributions of Professor McKnight and hope we honor his memory in the fight.