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A Friend and Colleague's Tribute to SMU's "Mr. Chips," Prof. William Bridge

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A FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE'S TRIBUTE
TO SMU'S "MR. CHIPS,"
PROF. WILLIAM BRIDGE

*Frederick C. Moss**

*"It's not what you gather, but what you scatter that tells
what kind of life you have lived."*

IT was a sunny, hot afternoon in July 1978. My wife and I had just driven from Boston to Dallas to start my new job teaching at the Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law. We visited the law school to announce my arrival, find my office, and meet my new colleagues. We could find no faculty in the building. Leaving Storey Hall and walking down the steps into the law quad, we ran into a fellow with a beard. He introduced himself as Bill Bridge. He had also just arrived in Dallas to begin his teaching career at the law school. As it turned out, not only had we graduated from the same undergraduate university (Georgetown), we ended up teaching the same three courses for thirty years: Criminal Law, Evidence, and Professional Responsibility. Thus began our long relationship as friends and colleagues.

It is difficult to describe the man I worked and socialized with for so long. My thoughts and memories of him sparkle and tumble like kaleidoscopic images. On a professional level, we spent hours sharing our thoughts, opinions—and mistakes—on legal issues. Often, I was in Bill's office running by him my understanding of a particular provision of the Model Penal Code, the Federal Rules of Evidence, or the Model Rules of Professional Conduct. Never was Bill too busy to stop, listen, and comment in his invariably tactful way.¹ Never did Bill decline or delay in reviewing drafts of my final exam questions (and scrupulously editing my grammar, punctuation, and syntax with his exacting red pen). I did the same for him (without the need for a red pen—Bill wrote flawlessly). Occasionally we collaborated on an exam question that ended up on both of our exams that semester. We co-authored a law review article on legal ethics in honor of the retirement of our colleague, Professor Walter Steele.² We constantly borrowed—thoughts, words, ideas, books, et

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1. Bill attended Georgetown's Foreign Service School, to which I always attributed his unparalleled grasp of the art of diplomacy. More on this later.

2. See generally Frederick C. Moss & William J. Bridge, *Can We Talk?: A 'Steele-y' Analysis of ABA Opinion 411*, 52 SMU L. REV. 683 (1999).

cetera—from each other. Some of the most fun, most stimulating times in my thirty-plus years at the school were spent in Bill’s office where he, our late friend and Evidence colleague, Professor Dan Schuman, and I would hotly debate rules of evidence. Invariably, each of us had a different position on every issue.

Bill’s office was the epicenter of the second-floor hive of faculty offices. Colleagues were drawn to Bill’s office. People would congregate in Bill’s office whenever I passed, discussing politics, teaching, students, the dean, a colleague, literature, movies, and Bill’s favorite television show, *The Simpsons*.³ Bill could afford—and obviously enjoyed—the time and attention because being single, he could spend long hours into the night preparing for class the following day.

Not one of athletic build or ability, Bill’s life-long strategy for being someone whom people admired was to be, as I called him, “Mr. Information.” If you had a question about almost anything, Bill would probably know the answer. Over his long tenure at the law school, he became the school’s informal historian. He knew more about the history of the university, the law school, its faculty, staff, and students than anyone. At faculty meetings, he could pronounce the exact faculty meeting years ago where Professor X proposed bylaw Y and how the faculty voted. He knew everyone’s birthday, where they went to law school, when they graduated, the names of every faculty spouse, all their children’s names, and when and where they were born. Mr. Information!

Bill’s primary interest throughout his career was his students. He had no discernable hobbies, other than going to the opera. He knew more about the seventy-five students in his class than most faculty knew about their fifteen seminar students. After a Criminal Law class, he invited the first-year students he had called on to his office for coffee and conversation to find out who they were, where they were from, and how they were coping with law school. He took a particular interest in the foreign students who were likely to be having a difficult time adjusting to life in the United States and the English language—particularly as spoken in Dallas, Texas. He became a personal advisor and career mentor to many, many students. His door was always open. Often, Bill volunteered to shoulder the heavy, time-consuming, and often distressing responsibility of representing students before the law school’s Honor Council. He did so zealously, unstintingly. He volunteered countless nights and weekends to coach and travel with the school’s two international moot court teams. For two decades or more, Bill was the faculty advisor to the Barristers, a general service organization of law students elected on the basis of scholarship, leadership, achievement, and personality.

He was a demanding teacher. Students he called on had to stand and face his questions for the entire class. He forced them to think on their feet; he motivated them to be prepared. But, being open, smart, funny,

3. Bill had a huge, ever-ready but slightly warped sense of humor.

and human, he won their respect, admiration, and loyalty. I am reminded what a beloved teacher he was whenever I meet recent or long-ago students of his. They always ask about Bill and tell of how they will never forget his classes.⁴

When Bill and I first arrived at SMU, the law faculty was quite uninvolved with the rest of the university. It was as if there were a moat around the law quad. The faculty's primary, almost sole concern seemed to be how much of the law school's tuition revenue the provost was going to let the law school keep (perhaps it still is). After all, that determined whether the law faculty was going to get a pay raise. Almost single-handedly, Bill changed that. He became the law school's ambassador to the rest of the university. He volunteered to sit on university standing committees, ad hoc committees, search committees, and task forces, to serve on the faculty senate (which he chaired one year), and to be deeply involved in the planning and staffing of the university's new Catholic Center. He was, without question, the first SMU law faculty in decades to become widely known and respected by the rest of the university. As a testament to his university-wide service, in 2018 Bill received the "M" Award, the university's highest recognition bestowed upon its students, faculty, staff, and administrators. To quote the university's website, the award recognizes recipients whose "efforts have been continuous during their years at the University and are not limited to a narrow vested interest. The 'M' Award honorees are an inspiration to others, giving unselfishly of their time and talents in order to make the University, and indeed the world, a better place."⁵ That describes Bill perfectly. Today, law faculty are increasingly involved in university affairs, but Bill led the way, showing the wider university community that law faculty could be valuable assets, not just those unknown, overpaid refugees from law practice ensconced in the northwest corner of the campus.

Within the Dallas bar community, Bill was widely known and respected. He was in constant demand as a speaker at continuing legal education programs, and lectured often on ethics and evidence topics. For many years, he was a moving force in the functioning of the law school's William "Mac" Taylor American Inn of Court, which is dedicated to promoting professionalism amongst the bench and bar generally, and enables Dallas lawyers and judges to meet SMU law students socially and develop mentoring opportunities. He served as Inn president, as long-time member of the Inn's executive committee, and as liaison between the Inn and the law school.

As a friend, you had to accept that Bill was everyone's friend. You had to share—especially when others were in need. If those who visit the sick

4. How a teacher's students feel about him years after they have graduated is the true test of a teacher's lasting impact—positive or negative.

5. *Prof. Bill Bridge receives prestigious 2018 "M" Award*, SMU DEDMAN SCH. OF L. (Apr. 17, 2018), <https://www.smu.edu/Law/News-Events/2018/April/ProfBillBridgereceivesprestigious2018MAward> [<https://perma.cc/V5VJ-8SHJ>].

are Blessed, then Bill is Most Blessed. (You could almost see his Roman collar) When members of the law community or his extensive family “back east” were ill, injured, or infirm, Bill went to their bedside. My wife called him “Father Bill.” He often interrupted his life to fly home to care for an aunt whose home care provider needed a break, or to attend family weddings, funerals, graduations, birthdays, and births. My wife and I would invite him to join us for a movie only to learn that he was treating the widow of a deceased law colleague to the opera. When the law school had new or visiting faculty, Bill was the informal law school concierge. He greeted them, took them to lunch, and generally helped them get settled and familiar with Dallas and the law school. Bill invited new faculty families to show them around the Texas State Fair, so they could get a sense of the “everything is bigger in Texas” state of mind. He did not want visiting faculty to feel isolated or overlooked, the way many law schools treat them. Every Thanksgiving morning—usually before I was out of bed—Bill would deliver to his closest friends’ doorsteps a bottle of that year’s just-released Beaujolais Nouveau. He devoted countless hours volunteering his advice and assistance to the Dallas Legal Hospice. For over twenty-five years, he and colleague Tom Mayo served on Parkland Hospital’s Ethics Committee, where they consulted on some of the most heart-wrenching, life-and-death medical decisions imaginable. Bill did more than just care. He acted, with little regard for the personal sacrifice exacted.

I never saw Bill be rude or angry. Not once. It just is not in his DNA. Of course, in over thirty-plus years at the law school, there were certainly people and incidents to get angry at. In contentious faculty meetings (and some of our colleagues could be very contentious), Bill’s exquisite tact and diplomacy would pour oil on troubled waters, offering a moderating interpretation of an ad hominem thrust or suggesting a helpful compromise that would allow opposing camps to save face and move forward. If opposing a colleague’s proposal or position, he did so with due deference, never offending.⁶

Professor William J. Bridge was the law school’s Mr. Chips. As you may recall, in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, James Hilton tells the story of Mr. Chipping, nicknamed Mr. Chips, who taught at an English all-boys boarding school.⁷ He was not a very good disciplinarian, was intimidated by his students, and was unenthusiastically going through the motions of teaching until he married Katherine. She taught him to speak his mind, love, share joy, and—most of all—to have fun and laugh. Despite his wife’s untimely death, Chips begins to enjoy himself and ultimately discovered another true love—his students. Mr. Chips becomes the most beloved teacher at the school. On his deathbed, he overhears a comment from

6. I was deeply jealous of his tactfulness, because I sorely lack that attribute. Thankfully, Bill was usually there to smooth things over after I made yet another gaff: “Perhaps what Professor Moss meant to say was”

7. JAMES HILTON, *GOODBYE, MR. CHIPS* (1934).

one of his gathered colleagues that it was a pity he never had children. He corrects the person. He has had children—thousands of them. Shutting his eyes for the final time, he is comforted by thoughts of his beloved students.⁸

Now, Bill is not on his deathbed. Far from it. However, I compare Bill to Mr. Chips because like Mr. Chips, Bill has no children of his own. His students were his children. He cared and sacrificed for them as if they were. Like Mr. Chips, Bill thinks independently, speaks his mind, loves, shares joy, has fun, and laughs and laughs. Like Mr. Chips, Bill's departure from the law school is greatly lamented. The entire SMU community has suffered a profound loss. He has left a hole in the fabric of this community that cannot be filled. His students miss him. His colleagues miss him. We, the fortunate few, are all better for having had him as a colleague, but especially for having had him as a friend.

8. See *Good-bye, Mr. Chips Summary & Study Guide*, BOOKRAGS, <http://www.booksrag.com/studyguide-good-bye-mr-chips/#gsc.tab=0> [<https://perma.cc/4ZRK-VCNT>] (last visited Feb. 9, 2019).