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Notes from the Basement

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NOTES FROM THE BASEMENT

Mary B. Spector*

MORE than twenty years ago Maureen Armour and I sat down to write an essay to serve as an epilogue for a symposium published in the *SMU Law Review* commemorating the 50th anniversary of clinics at SMU. I say we “sat down to write it” because that’s exactly what we did: one of us sat at the computer, the other sat across the desk as we talked through the points we wanted to make, committing them to paper as we worked. One of us would start a thought, the other would finish it, and then we would switch. The product was entitled *Theory in the Basement*,¹ and it was true collaboration—stronger than the individual parts—and a model for much of our work together over the course of nearly thirty years.

That experience made sitting down to write this tribute especially difficult. No one is sitting across the desk, talking as I type, or typing as I talk (to myself!). Where should I start?

I could start in the litigation section at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, where Maureen and I first met in 1987. Maureen had arrived a few years earlier and already was respected and valued for her brilliance and hard work. I was fortunate to work with her on a couple of cases and could see easily how she gained her reputation. My own work was always better than it would have been if I were working alone, and the experience always left me a better lawyer than I was before. During that time I also came to value her honesty, so when I was faced with an ethical dilemma not clearly covered by the Rules, it was natural to seek her input. Maureen listened carefully, asked a few questions, talked through her analysis and didn’t mince words: “Go with your gut,” she told me. “If it feels wrong, don’t do it.” It was good advice then, and it’s good advice now.

I could start in the clinic—the “Basement” of our essay’s title. Clinic teaching and Maureen were made for each other. She loved it and it showed. She brought her expansive legal knowledge and work ethic to the clinic where she expected as much from students as she expected from herself. Clinic teaching does not stop in the classroom, and neither did Maureen. Much of her teaching took place sitting side-by-side with

* Associate Dean for Clinics, Professor of Law and Director SMU Civil/Consumer Clinic, SMU Dedman School of Law. Professor Spector joined the law school faculty at SMU in 1995 where she served as co-director of the Civil Clinic with Professor Armour.

1. See generally Maureen N. Armour & Mary B. Spector, *Epilogue: Theory in the Basement*, 51 SMU L. REV. 1555 (1998).

her students in a clinic workroom, demonstrating how complex legal theory might be applied to solve a client's problem. Maureen could shift easily from and between issues of procedure, sociology, legal doctrine, strategy, and policy.² As the students moved from classroom to clinic to meeting room to courtroom, and beyond, Maureen guided them, encouraged them, and supported them as they grew into lawyers.

A good clinic teacher knows when it's time to step aside and let the students fly on their own—and Maureen knew when to do that too. I remember near the end of a week-long trial, the trial team gathered in the clinic library. The judge recessed early and planned to send the case to the jury the next morning. The student assigned to deliver the closing argument had a good draft that she circulated to the team, but it still had to be finalized. She sat at the conference table with the rest of the trial team. I remember thinking it odd that Maureen did not sit at the table with them. Instead, she stood in the corner and outlined a few key points that would have to be addressed in the argument. She praised the students for their hard work over the last months and days and reassured them that they had all the tools they needed to do the job. Then, she told them she would see them in the morning for one last practice round and left. The room went quiet; the students were stunned. I collected myself and followed her out the door wondering if I should have stayed behind. We did not say much as we went to our cars, but when we arrived at the clinic the next morning and listened to the students practice the argument one last time, I knew Maureen had been right. The students expected as much of themselves as she did; their work had been solid, and they had shown us they had the skills they needed to finish the job. They had earned her respect and she trusted them enough to let them fly on their own. They soared.

A snapshot of Maureen as lawyer and teacher does not provide a full picture. She has a big personality and a generous spirit. She is strong-willed, fiercely loyal, and not afraid to share an opinion, even an unpopular one. Whatever the subject or the task, she's all-in. Her list of interests is long and wide-ranging. It includes travel, nature, science, music, dance, philosophy, literature, mystery novels, trashy TV, good Scotch, chocolate, Oliver, cooking, and of course, her friends and family. Her son, Doug, and her daughter, Margaret, are wonderful reflections of all their mother offered. From science projects to sign language, basketball to dance, rugby to medicine, Maureen was there as coach, advocate, guide, devoted mother, and now mother-in-law to Christina. As they've grown into adulthood, Maureen is still there.

I started this essay by describing the collaborative way in which Maureen and I often worked. People work together in many ways: they may coordinate, cooperate, or exchange information, but collaboration is different. Several elements are common to successful collaborations.

2. *See id.* at 1557.

Among them are a shared goal, trust, respect, competence, skill, and belief in the other participants.³ It sounds a lot like friendship. Like a friendship, a successful collaboration doesn't require perfect agreement or synchronization. Indeed, differences often create opportunities that help move a collaboration—and a friendship—forward day by day, semester by semester, year by year.

Concluding this tribute is almost as difficult as getting started. No one is sitting across the desk talking as I type. I'll have to just go with my gut and conclude by saying how incredibly lucky I am to have collaborated with Maureen in our work as lawyers and as teachers. I am even luckier to call her my friend.

3. See *How to Collaborate*, COLLABORATIVE JUSTICE, <http://www.collaborativejustice.org/how.htm> (last visited Apr. 14, 2019).