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A TRIBUTE TO BETH THORNBURG

*Mary Emma Karam**

IT is an honor to reflect on Professor Emerita Elizabeth G. Thornburg as a colleague, professor, and friend. For thirty-eight years, Beth dedicated her career to educating students on civil procedure and alternative dispute resolution at SMU Dedman School of Law.

For as long as I have known Beth, I have considered her an unsung hero. She is brilliant, and everyone in our law school class respected her. From the earliest days, she was generous in sharing her knowledge. I recall she made an antitrust outline and shared it with anyone who asked. I was not even in the antitrust class, but she gave me her outline. I enjoyed learning from her clear, concise depiction of a complex area of the law. It seemed only natural that she later went on to teach law.

It came as no surprise when she was awarded the Don Smart Teaching Award in 1991 for being the favorite professor at the law school. She also later received the University Scholar/Teacher of the Year Award in 2013 and the Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor Award in 2016, and was named a Richard R. Lee Endowed Professor of Law.

A fellow member of our law school class, Mitch Bell, partner at Locke Lord, shared with me two things he learned from Beth: “First, if you want to AmJur a law school class, be sure she isn’t enrolled in it. I learned this the hard way. Second, many things in life can be explained by the ‘tough titty rule’ that she either adopted or devised (I’m not sure which) and eloquently applied to a variety of incomprehensible situations. Here is something that I and a multitude of others know about Beth: She is beyond terrific. I wish her the best in the next chapter of her life.”

In authoring this tribute, I also connected with former law school classmate Martin L. Camp, who now serves as the Assistant Dean for Graduate and International Programs and a Professor of Practice at SMU Dedman School of Law. Martin, like so many others, praised Beth for her intelligence.

“Beth was one of the smartest students in our class of 1979,” he wrote. “In those days, first-year grades were not curved by sections and professors gave numerical grades. Some professors would give grades in the low

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90s but many did not, and it was possible to make the highest grade in a class and still have a lower grade than someone in another section with a more generous professor. It was the same with upper-level classes. I remember hating to discover that Beth was in one of my classes because I knew she would blow the curve and make the highest grade by far. She was that brilliant.”

As a classmate, Beth was not only smart and generous but also had, as Martin put it, a wicked sense of humor and an easy laugh. “She once suggested in a satirical writing that the Supreme Court adopt a new form of writ in the tit for tat world of appellate law for tough cases,” he noted.

Martin later returned to SMU in 2005 as Dean of Students. As a colleague of Beth’s, Martin saw her tireless dedication to helping students. Early on, he wrote, Beth embraced best teaching practices and eventually served as director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at SMU. She was tireless in her efforts to help students adjust to the rigors of the law school curriculum and developed materials to train law students in the ways of thinking, articulating, and writing as lawyers.

“She went from being one of the most outstanding students to one of the most outstanding professors,” he noted. “She is already missed by all in the law school community.”

Elizabeth Lang Miers, former Justice of the Texas Fifth District Court of Appeals, previously worked with Beth at Locke, Purnell, Boren, Laney & Neely. In an email, she shared with me: “Beth started to practice after completing a clerkship and, from the start, was already a full blown, mature, smart, and knowledgeable lawyer who was immediately in constant demand. But it wasn’t just those qualities that drew people to her. She was—and is—also enormously funny, enjoyable to work with, and very practical. We were all disappointed when she chose to go to the law school and leave private practice. But we knew that she would be enormously successful, well-respected, and well-loved by the students and faculty.

“Her legal career has spanned a clerkship, practice with a law firm, and a distinguished career as a law professor. She is a creative and innovative thinker and combines tremendous scholarship and pragmatic approaches to teaching law students, lawyers, and judges on a number of issues. She has been deservedly honored many times for her teaching and scholarship. She is always in demand as a speaker, and her presentations have educated untold numbers of lawyers and judges. I have personally learned so much from her presentations and publications over the years and appreciate her for taking the time and making the effort to share her knowledge and ideas. Her contributions to the law are extraordinary, and we will continue to learn from her enormous and excellent body of work.

“It is hard to believe that she is retiring. I know students, faculty, and everyone at SMU Dedman School of Law will miss her—just as we missed her when she left Locke Purnell. Although her retirement is a major loss to all of us, I wish her the best retirement possible. She de-

serves it.” She added: “Thanks, Beth, for all you have done and enjoy your retirement.”

One of Beth’s students happened to be my younger sister, Miriam Ackels Claerhout. Now an attorney at Ackels & Ackels L.L.P. in Dallas, Miriam reflected on Beth’s impact as a professor. For this tribute, she wrote: “Professor Beth Thornburg was always very encouraging and friendly to law students. I always saw her as our peer, and she didn’t make you regret asking a question, and she didn’t try to play games in the classroom. She was really just approachable, rather than standoffish or dismissive of you. In all things, she showed us respect. She was an excellent teacher and a straight shooter. We all wanted her for a complicated course because you knew she was going to relay the information and explain it to you in a way you would understand. We all wanted to take her class. I always respected and admired her.”

Karen Sargent, who previously served as Dean of Career Services at SMU Dedman School of Law, wrote: “All of my interactions with Beth really touched on very personal aspects of our lives. When I was practicing in Houston with Andrews Kurth and she was with Locke Liddell, we were both expecting our first child. Beth called me to ask if Andrews Kurth had a maternity policy—we didn’t. Beth had been asked to write a maternity policy for the firm. That was at the time when we had a baby and went right back to work. I think I took off six weeks.

“It is because of Beth that I had my long-standing relationship with SMU and the law school. When Jim and I moved to Dallas from Houston in 1984, Beth called me soon after we settled into our new home. She had left Locke Liddell to go back to SMU Law School to help run the legal research, writing, and advocacy program. She called to ask me to teach as part of her team, and I taught one or more courses at the law school for the next fifteen years while my sons were growing up. And then, she was a good friend and confidante for the next seventeen years as I worked as Dean of Career Services.

“While she served as the director of the legal writing program, Beth started teaching contracts to first-year law students. She ultimately was awarded her title as a full professor because of her scholarship, excellent teaching, and contributions to the law school. Her calm demeanor and very reasonable approach to the issues of administration earned the high respect of her faculty colleagues. The law school will greatly miss her.”

Beth may have been quiet in the work she does, but her impact on countless students speaks volumes. She is truly a credit to the legal profession.

