



2022

Tribute to Elizabeth G. Thornburg

Tom Melsheimer
Winston & Strawn LLP

Recommended Citation

Tom Melsheimer, *Tribute to Elizabeth G. Thornburg*, 75 SMU L. REV. 265 (2022)
<https://scholar.smu.edu/smulr/vol75/iss2/7>

This Tribute is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at SMU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in SMU Law Review by an authorized administrator of SMU Scholar. For more information, please visit <http://digitalrepository.smu.edu>.

TRIBUTE TO ELIZABETH G. THORNBURG

*Tom Melsheimer**

IT is not uncommon to hear of a great teacher being an inspiration to her students. But Professor Beth Thornburg was an inspiration to me as a lawyer who never had the privilege of being her student.

I entered college with the dream of being an English professor at a picturesque liberal arts college in the northeast. I exited college with the reality of attending law school. Following the path of many of my classmates at the time, I joined a large downtown Dallas law firm in the late 1980s.

The work was interesting, and the money was more than I ever imagined making as an English professor. But something was missing. So, I ended up doing two things that changed the path of my career. I went to the United States Attorney's office to work as a federal prosecutor. And I met Beth Thornburg.

At the time, the legal writing program at SMU Law School was staffed by practicing lawyers who guided first-year students through legal research, the writing of legal memoranda, and the persuasive writing of a legal brief. Professor Thornburg was in charge of finding willing lawyers in the Dallas legal community to teach an early morning class for a relatively small stipend. The details of how she found me (or did I find her?) are lost to history but find me she did. Along with my new job at the Department of Justice, this job under her guidance unleashed in me a professional enthusiasm that made going to an 8 a.m. class the best part of my work week.

There was formal training that went into the job, of course. The law school had a curriculum that needed to be covered, and it provided a number of course materials. But what was great about teaching the class in those days was the confidence that Professor Thornburg showed in all of us. She convinced us we knew what we were doing long before we shared that confidence. She did all that while teaching a full course load of her own. Her message to all the instructors was unwavering—what we were doing was likely going to be one of the most important things any law student encountered at the law school. Long after the Rule in Shelley's Case was forgotten (see, you've forgotten it), the students would be taking the skills they learned in finding the law, writing about it, and putting it to use as practicing lawyers. What could possibly be more impor-

<https://doi.org/10.25172/smulr.75.2.7>.

* Winston & Strawn LLP, Dallas Managing Partner.

tant than that? And yet she insisted we have fun, not take ourselves too seriously, and realize that we could always come to her for help.

Her advice to have fun and be myself led me to create classroom examples drawn from my work as a prosecutor. I told stories, mostly true, of my cases to illustrate points about how to research a tough problem or how to craft a persuasive argument. The students ate it up. Even though the class was the first of the day, the students, it seemed to me, showed up engaged and eager to hear more.

I still remember the trepidation I felt when Professor Thornburg provided me with my first set of class evaluations from the students. “They liked you a lot. I hope you’ll come back next year,” she said. I was not only relieved; I was exhilarated. Because I really liked it too. I ended up teaching the class for several more years and, in addition to the professional satisfaction it brought me, I met many young lawyers-to-be who would become outstanding lawyers and good friends (like Marquette Wolf), and one, Brett Johnson, who has been my law partner for over two decades.

My experience in the first-year legal writing class provided me the opportunity to pitch Professor Thornburg with teaching upper-level classes at the law school, including antitrust and white-collar crime. She vouched for me with the law school, and the next thing I knew, I was teaching a substantive law school class. I wasn’t wearing a tweed jacket and teaching a seminar on the Victorian novel, but it was pretty close to what I had imagined myself doing just ten years earlier. Standing up in those classes, faced with answering tough questions about complex subject matter, has been no small contributor to my ability to stand up in court in front of judges and juries all over the country. So, it follows that Professor Thornburg’s encouragement is, in part, responsible for my success as a trial lawyer.

No doubt, given her long tenure at SMU, Professor Thornburg has countless stories of students she counseled, exhorted, and inspired. They owe her a tremendous debt of gratitude. From a different perspective, I join that chorus of thanks.