Symposium on The Civil Rights of Public School Students

For Jack, Bibliophile and Librarian

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FOR JACK, BIBLIOPHILE AND LIBRARIAN

Mary G. Persyn*

Jack Hiller was a bookman and a bibliophile. The fact that he was both a scholarly bookworm and a lover of books was immediately obvious to anyone who walked into his office. He was literally surrounded by books. He wrote a lot, but always on a small typewriter. There was never a computer on his desk.

Some are unaware that Jack began his career at the law school in 1955 as librarian as well as an instructor of law. At VU in the mid-twentieth century the librarian’s position seems to have fallen on a junior member of the faculty, rather than on someone who had professional training in librarianship. This was not all that uncommon in law schools at the time. As best we can tell, Jack served as librarian from 1955 to 1959 and again from 1962 to 1966. The records are a little unclear. We know that he was also teaching legal research and writing at the same time. Jack would remind me from time to time that he had been the librarian “in the old days.”

In this instance the decision to assign the duties of the law librarian to Jack proved to be a wise one. Jack had a deep knowledge not only of legal literature, but of literature much more broadly—indeed comprehensively—understood. He truly enjoyed selecting books for the Library and being the first person to read them. Long after there were professional librarians running the Law Library, Jack was still recommending books for purchase and examining the new materials that had been added to the Library collection.

Jack’s love of the visual meant that he also wanted our Library to contain art. He donated beautifully framed, black and white photographs that illustrate important themes in legal history. For example, two hauntingly powerful images from the WPA Project show young boys in the pits of a coal mine at the beginning of the twentieth century, and young barefoot girls working at huge machines in a New England factory. He did not need to label these images with words: “exploitation of child labor.” The images spoke for themselves.

One of the last searches I ran for Jack was to try to locate a copy of a photograph of several men looking at the books on the shelves of the bombed-out Holland House Library in London during the Blitz in 1941. (Search Google for Holland House Library if you would like to see the picture. You can see why it appealed to Jack).

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Jack, Paul Brietzke, and I worked closely on the publishing of the Third World Legal Studies Journal. From 1985 to 2003, Valparaiso was responsible for publishing one of the two legal journals in existence that examined the role of law in the development of the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Jack’s particular interest was Africa, although the years he spent in Malaysia later in life, changed his area of interest somewhat. Jack was a fine editor, but his work was always done with pen and paper, not in electronic format. In the 1980s that was not uncommon, but as word processing became more prevalent, Jack stuck with his pen, or his typewriter.

After Jack retired, he moved his office into a corner of the Law Library. You could always tell when Jack was in his office because you could hear the sound of his typewriter clicking away. Jack never used voice mail because he didn’t like “talking to a machine.” To the end, he was a message-taken-by-a-secretary-on-pink-message-paper kind of guy.

He was also a bibliophile to the end. One of my fondest memories of my work in this law schools is the discussions that Jack and I had about books, and the way electronic sources seemed to be taking over the world of legal scholarship. Jack was not happy with the changes.

As a book person to the end, Jack willed the Library first refusal on his personal library. I am pleased to report that many of these volumes have now become part of our permanent collection. In this small way a law school that is poorer for Jack’s passing is enriched by the constant presence of one of the things he loved greatly: precious—he would say “real”—books. He has bequeathed to us not only important information about life itself on many continents, but also challenging interpretations of life’s most pressing questions and tight arguments about the deepest meaning of the law. For these gifts and his many contributions to the life of our law school, I am grateful to claim Jack as a colleague and fellow librarian.