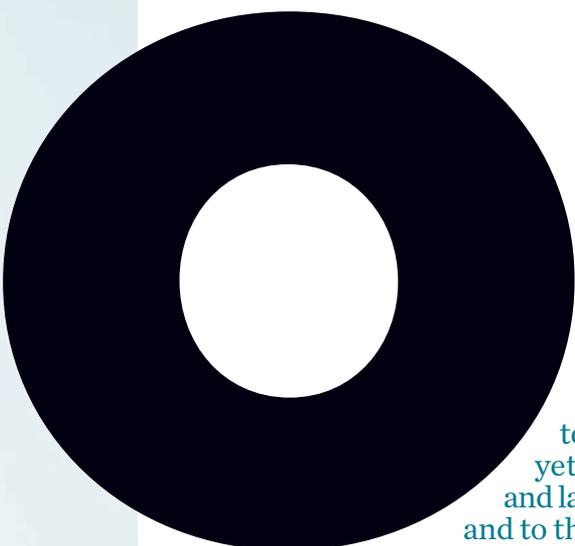




The Lesnick Legacy

By Larry Teitelbaum



One day last spring Howard Lesnick finished teaching his last class at Penn Law with the words, “Do not be daunted by the world’s grief.” Howard never has. In 50 years at Penn Law School, he never stopped innovating and working to repair the world. With a certain self-deprecation yet thoroughgoing idealism, he pressed lawyers and law students to be accountable to the profession and to themselves. As Howard becomes emeritus, let us count a few of the ways in which he stayed true to his vision.

That enumeration must start with the public interest program. Back in the 1960s, not many law schools pushed a public service agenda. But Penn was not most law schools and Howard Lesnick was not your average law professor. He reminded everyone that public service and the practice of law were inseparable. Proceeding from that proposition, he conducted a kind of dry run with a program in which students spent several hours a week working at Community Legal Services. But that wouldn’t do. He wanted something more engrained in the culture of the Law School. His intense advocacy led, years later, to a formalized program that is run by The Toll Public Interest Center.

The Public Service program has been described as one of the Law School’s glories. Think about what it has achieved during its 27-year history: several thousand students have performed more than half a million hours of service, the number of students pursuing public interest work after graduation has grown almost tenfold, and TPIC has affiliated with more than 300 public interest organizations in the United States and around the world.

That alone is enough to secure Howard’s legacy. But he’s done so much more, prodding the institution at every turn to expand the definition of what it means to be a lawyer, starting with his lifelong emphasis on professionalism. As with public service, Howard considered professional responsibility and legal ethics core values for every lawyer. With that in mind, he joined then-dean Robert H. Mundheim and several others in establishing the school’s original Center on Professionalism, which in its 10 years of existence earned a national reputation for the pioneering case studies and interactive exercises that Howard and his colleagues brought to lawyers and law schools all over the country.

Howard also brought glory to the institution by running, during the early years of the War on Poverty, the Reginald Heber Smith Community Fellowship, a program that trained and sent first 100 young lawyers, then 250 lawyers, then 400 lawyers around the country to represent poor people who needed counsel but couldn’t afford it.

As much as we like to lay claim to Howard Lesnick, let’s not forget what he accomplished during six golden years as one of the driving forces behind the then-new City University of New York School of Law. Howard was recruited to create a curriculum that integrated clinical practice and academic theory from the very first day of law school — a stunning and revolutionary concept at the time.

The motto he coined for the school — “Law in the service of human needs” — reflects the sum total of Howard’s career. We could talk about his dedication to humanistic education, civil rights and justice, and his tenacity in pursuing these goals. Howard mobilized armies of students and lawyers to continue his work for years to come. Suffice it to say, Howard strove to leave the world a little better than he found it. Of that there can be no doubt. ♥

On Lesnick:

AS SOMEONE WHO NOW THINKS about the “big picture” of Penn Law and its evolution through the years, I stand in awe of the impact you have had on this institution over the past half century. From the moment I set foot here as a junior professor in 2004, you have been a mentor and inspiration in your commitment to the highest levels of scholarship, critical inquiry, and public-mindedness. And I know how many thousands of students you have touched and inspired over a much longer time frame. Your career lives on each day in the lives of those lawyers who were educated here and who now work in the public interest around the world. Thank you Howard for all you have done for Penn Law, its students and graduates, and the broader legal community!

Ted Ruger

*Dean and Bernard G. Segal Professor of Law,
Penn Law School*

YOU SAVED MY LIFE WHEN I GOT myself in trouble. I was so out of my mind then. I turned to you because I knew you would understand how a student could get so tangled up in lies that he does not even know the truth any more. Every day of my 35 years as a lawyer I owe to you. After I graduated and passed the N.J. and N.Y. bars I went the other way—I went for the absolute truth in every facet of my life and practice. I became a lawyer and I graduated from Penn—one of my most treasured achievements—because of you. I came to your office and stood at threshold of the door and said I’m in trouble and you did not turn me away. May God Bless the moment you said yes to me and May God Bless you in your retirement.

Gareth Keene L’80

Self-employed Attorney

WHEN I TOOK MY POSITION LEADING the Toll Public Interest Center, I did so with great apprehension about the tremendous responsibility of nurturing a program with such extraordinary roots. I can say now that I am so very grateful I overcame that apprehension, and that is largely because of you. I will forever appreciate every opportunity I have had to work with you. You are a visionary who has changed the course of so many lives thanks to your bold pursuit of what you so clearly see is just and possible—even when others may question and doubt. It was not until I arrived at Penn Law that I fully appreciated the scale and impact this public service program could have. I feel like I could work many more decades and still not come close to helping the program realize its full potential because it is truly limitless—and I believe you knew that from its inception.

I am inspired every day that I am here to nudge us closer to that pinnacle of ensuring access to justice for all, because I have learned from you that all things are possible with vision, ideals, hard work, sometimes a bit of a fight, and perhaps with unlikely partners in unlikely places. On a personal note, your kindness has meant the world to me, and I am truly grateful for all that you have offered me, our students, our school, our profession, and countless underrepresented causes and communities around the world. Thank you for bending the arc so profoundly towards justice throughout your career, and for inspiring me to do whatever I can do to do so as well. With deepest respect and warmest regards.

Arlene Rivera Finkelstein

*Associate Dean for
Public Interest Programs*

AS I SIT HERE IN NEW YORK CITY helping my newborn granddaughter and her family, I am reminded of the deep connection human beings are capable of having for each other. That is exactly what Howard stood for: harnessing the law to deepen these connections in recognition of the humanity of all people. As a result of Howard's commitments to place humanitarian values above all else, he gave "birth" to the programs such as the public service program at Penn Law, courses that addressed the ethical component of legal practice and informal mentoring of law students and particular staff, including me. He created a space for many future humanitarian and public interest practitioners to explore their own values and their career paths and choices. As he moves on to retirement he will actually still be teaching as hundreds of former law students and colleagues (including me) will continue to benefit from his past mentoring, institution building, nurturing and writing.

Judith Bernstein-Baker SW'75

First director of the Penn Law Public Service Program

PROFESSOR LESNICK WROTE ONE of my letters of recommendation that allowed me to become a law professor. He helped me to enter a wonderful profession and to have a great life. One of my areas of expertise is business ethics. In my work, I often think of the lessons that I learned from him. He is a great professor, and Penn Law was lucky to have him on its faculty.

Eric Chaffee L'02

Associate Dean for Faculty Research & Development and Professor of Law

IN 1970, WHEN THE IDEA OF A credit bearing internship was downright radical, Professor Lesnick led the way to enable me to spend a semester in Washington at the Center for Law and Social Policy. As a result, I was one of the very first of what has become hundreds of Penn Law students to embark on a career in public interest law because of Professor Lesnick's leadership. I am indebted to him, as are the countless clients who have benefited from his work.

Andrew Schwartzman C'68, L'71

Benton Senior Counselor, Georgetown University Law Center Institute for Public Representation

IN THE THREE DECADES I HAVE known him I have been awed by Howard's unflagging ability to engage with the humanity of those around him, in large things and in small. By his unwavering regimen challenging himself to grow and learn. By his ability to transmute hard and righteous judgment into compelling and empathetic action. And by his boundless support of students, colleagues and friends. In one of his books, Howard tells the story of a question posed to the staff of Dorothy Day's Catholic Workers House. He asked, "Do you think that all of your efforts have been effective?" One of their number answered "We have not tried to be effective, we have tried to be faithful." My friend and teacher Howard has been effective because he has been faithful. I am in his debt, and I join a grateful throng of those nourished and inspired by his commitment, by his insight and by his faithfulness.

Seth Kreimer

Kenneth W. Gemmill Professor of Law, Penn Law School

I WAS SURPRISED AND A BIT apprehensive to be invited to lunch by Howard Lesnick. I had not had him in class and, in so far I could recall, I had never met him. And in the few times I spied him in the halls of the law school, he did not strike me as a chatty type. We went to a local restaurant. Perhaps we ordered, or maybe it was even before the ice water had arrived. Howard looked up and asked, "So, how do you pray?" That is not a question I ever expected anyone to ask me in law school. And yet, it was so characteristic of Howard cutting through banter to the heart of some matter that concerned him and posing a question with the confidence that the person he is talking to has something to say worth hearing. What was revealed in the ensuing conversation and the friendship that has lasted for twenty years was a ferociously curious mind open to information and inspiration from a huge variety of sources and the most unlikely of people. I will never forget that lunch or the influence and example of Howard Lesnick. His erudition, decency, and fundamental disposition toward wonder are powerful touchstones for me as a lawyer, as a continuing student of a variety of things, and most importantly as a human person.

John Grogan L'93

Co-Founder, Langer Grogan & Diver

