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Tribute to Adam Milani

Linda H. Edwards

University of Nevada, Las Vegas -- William S. Boyd School of Law

Terry Phelps

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Dedication

for Adam Milani

"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." So muses David Copperfield in the first pages of Dickens' eponymous novel, and these words seem a particularly fitting epigraph for Adam Milani's life. Adam's life took unexpected, even tragic turns that could have left someone with less character overwhelmed, completely victimized. But Adam remained the hero of his own life, down to the last page.

* * *

Many of you knew Adam as one of Mercer's stellar legal writing teachers and as an active scholar in disability law. My (Terry's) relationship with him goes back further, as Adam was my children's classmate at Saint Joseph's High School in South Bend, Indiana. When Adam was a junior, he was injured while playing on the ice hockey team. It was a moment that none of us will forget. Adam received an injury to his spinal cord that left him a quadriplegic and wheelchair bound. A promising young life stalled, it seemed. But not for long, not for Adam.

Before he even finished high school, he was on the move and founded the "Think First" Program, an educational project for high school students aimed at preventing spinal cord and head injuries. After high school he entered the University of Notre Dame. Once more, Adam didn't merely manage; he excelled. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received the Alumni Association's Distinguished Student Award. More than that, though, Adam transformed the University. He insisted that he and other physically challenged students have access to all the University's old, revered buildings, buildings that didn't have elevators, let alone ramps. And the University listened to this smart, determined, insistent student, blew off some dust and became accessible. Many of us still think of the young Adam Milani when we see wheelchair access to a century-old building on campus.

After Notre Dame, Adam enrolled in Duke University School of Law and channeled some of his Notre Dame football enthusiasm into Duke basketball (and the law, too, of course). Upon graduation, he clerked at the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Indiana and practiced for a few years with a large firm in South Bend. His family and friends were nearby; his life as "easy" as it could be. But easy and comfortable were never goals for Adam — he took on more challenges. He wanted his work to matter and he wanted to make a difference in the world.

So after four years of practice, Adam joined the faculty at the University of Illinois College of Law teaching legal writing. He had seen the power of language to bring about change in the world, and he wanted to teach fledgling

lawyers how to write well. Adam was loved and respected by his Illinois colleagues and students alike and he may well have remained at Illinois. But his position, like many at that time, was capped and after two years he had to move on. And, as had become characteristic, he chose well, joining the Mercer Law School legal writing faculty.

* * *

At this point, I (Linda) came to know him. At that time, Mercer's positions were contract positions and no scholarship was required for the job. Adam wrote, nonetheless. In addition to his excellent teaching, he produced cutting edge scholarship that was instrumental in demonstrating that legal writing teachers could meet tenure requirements. Just as in every other aspect of his life, all Adam asked for was a chance. Thanks in no small part to Adam, Mercer's legal writing positions were converted to tenure track, and after five years at Mercer, Adam received tenure.

Adam was an excellent legal writing teacher. He was usually at the law school and available to his students about ten hours a day. When his students had library assignments, he'd be rolling through the stacks in case anyone was confused. Watching Adam in the classroom was an inspiration. As he didn't have the mobility to inject physical energy into the classroom, he invented his own style to become an effective teacher. He expected the best from both himself and his students, and the students rose to his expectations. They commented

"What a privilege to have known you and been taught by you."

"Thank you for inspiring me to push myself."

"I was a slow learner who monopolized your time. Thanks for not minding."

In 2001, in recognition of his excellent teaching, Adam was selected by the graduating class to receive the first Honorary Legal Writing Certificate.

Adam's own writing did exactly what we hope our students' work will do; it influenced the lives of real people for good and helped to better the law. He had little patience for high theory. Instead, he wrote practical books and articles that could assist lawyers and lay people in extending rights to people with disabilities. He wrote four books and eighteen law review articles, and served as a consultant on disability issues. He co-wrote an *amicus* brief to the U.S. Supreme Court. He founded programs and served on boards.

And although it was difficult for him to travel and attend conferences, he was, nonetheless, an exemplary colleague, helping other legal writing teachers with articles and circulating his own work. He did manage to attend all three of the Notre Dame Legal Discourse Colloquia that we arranged, taking

advantage of the now-accessible campus buildings for which he was largely responsible.

Adam taught us all a lot more than good legal writing. He taught us about courage, humility, compassion, hard work, and wit. He rarely talked about his own disability and never about how hard the smallest things were for him to do. He treated every human being he encountered as a person who mattered, from the university president to the law school cafeteria workers and custodial staff. For me (Terry), he grew from my children's schoolmate to a trusted colleague and valued friend. Days before he died, he had called to chat with me about the fate of the legal writing program at Notre Dame (a note to myself — "call Adam" — was on my desk when I received word of his death). For me (Linda), he was a dear friend who taught me no less than how to live. I was out of town when he died, and when I returned, the message light was blinking on my phone. It was Adam's voice, telling me that his folks were there and that he was at peace with whatever lay ahead. At peace and surrounded by those he loved — definitely the way to live.

We miss you, Adam. You changed our buildings, our minds, and our hearts. You taught us more than you know. Thank you and Godspeed.

Terry Phelps and Linda Edwards

Teresa Godwin Phelps is Professor of Law and Director of Legal Rhetoric, Washington College of Law (American University).

Linda H. Edwards is Professor of Law, Mercer University Law School.

