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Professor Theodore E. Lauer

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JACK VAN BAALEN — A TRIBUTE

*Theodore E. Lauer*¹

What is a teacher? A teacher is as indefinable as a chicken. But all of us know one when we see one. We have seen a great and memorable one in Jack Van Baalen.

What makes a teacher great and memorable? Teachers come in every conceivable form. But every law school needs one tough teacher, one bramble bush who scratches out student eyes, a necessary precondition to the student scratching them back in again. Wyoming has had its tough teacher in Jack Van Baalen. This role is as tough on the teacher as on the student. Dirty work, but someone has to do it. It is an immediately thankless task, that stores riches for the future of the legal profession. The student who rages against the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the tough teacher often has neither understanding nor kind words. There is no guarantee that in later professional life the former student will come to appreciate the influence of that teacher. But with the passage of time, many do. It can be a slowly ripening appreciation, one difficult to acknowledge or express.

To become the very best lawyers they can be, law students must cultivate habits of diligence, precision, hard work, deep thought. Law is complex and demanding. It can be frustrating. To practice it well one must be willing to reach into the very depths of ability and endurance. Van Baalen students appreciated this, although not always eagerly. His classes were often mystifying, his examinations always terrifying. But all of it was done with the sole purpose to shape law students into the best lawyers they could be.

Jack Van Baalen's influence among his colleagues has been subtler, more difficult of precise definition. His has been a steadying influence, a generous and reassuring presence. At faculty meetings while the vociferous exhausted themselves in contentious bickering, he waited patiently to offer sensible and acceptable solutions. He has given assistance and wise counsel to new professors, and to old ones in distress or doubt. By his example in teaching his students, he has given others of us renewed determination in teaching ours.

1. Professor of Law, University of Wyoming College of Law.

Van B has constantly astonished. From his teaching in contracts and commercial law, we tend to assume a certain intellectual confinement. But he has refused to be confined. His sabbatical took him to Thailand. He has written on industrial siting and mineral law. He is a member of the American Law Institute. He guided a team of client counseling competition students to a national and very nearly an international championship. Perhaps most surprising of all, he served as coordinator to the committee which compiled the 1978 Wyoming Criminal Pattern Jury Instructions.

Jack has been a true friend to me during the short years at Wyoming. He is almost certainly the gentlest and most humble person I have known. From time to time as our conversings have turned to matters more significant than law, to questions of philosophy and religion and what it means to be a human being, the true grace and humanity of Jack Van Baalen have shone forth. In an age when cynicism lurks everywhere, his steady confidence in the essential goodness of men and women has provided solid assurance.

In his retirement, time does not hang heavily upon Jack Van Baalen. There simply is not enough of it. He is traveling, reflecting, reading, conversing, enjoying his family. New projects are germinating. At the College of Law, we hope to continue to enlist his counsel, his reassuring presence. While he has escaped attending faculty meetings, he remains a colleague. And while for students new to the College of Law he metamorphoses from demanding presence to legend, for that generation of students who directly felt his influence he provides everlasting inspiration.

It is indeed fitting that the students who edit the Land and Water Law Review have elected to dedicate this issue of the Law Review to Jack Van Baalen.