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A Tribute to My Friend

Wendy Brown Scott*

I will never forget the day I met David Gelfand. After accepting a position on the faculty, I came to New Orleans in April 1989 to look for housing. (Having lived in New York City for eleven years, I knew it would take months to find a place to live—it took four days!) While at the law school, I heard that David was looking for me. He knew from my resume that I had been involved in city charter revisions in New York—so had he. In his characteristic fast-talking style, he came out of his office with an arm full of papers, talking like a whirlwind about charter revision and getting together for lunch, and then he dashed off! “Wow,” I thought, “he talks faster than John Kramer!”

This was the beginning of a long and precious friendship. David got me involved in all kinds of work designed to preserve racial and gender equality in the City of New Orleans. He worked hard and played hard. He loved his wife, Mary, of almost thirty-four years and adored his daughter, Katie. He cared for his mother with the kind of devotion I pray my son will have for me. His relationship with Andrea Brigalia, his assistant for many years, was special. He respected and protected her; and she kept him straight!

David’s credentials are impeccable. In high school, David excelled at debate, oratory, and acting. He was chosen valedictorian for his high school graduating class and majored in Political Science and Urban Studies at Columbia University. After graduating from Columbia with honors, David was awarded a scholarship to attend Oxford University. He graduated from Pembroke College of Oxford University with a Masters of Philosophy in 1974. In 1976, David graduated from Columbia Law School. He joined the Tulane Law faculty shortly thereafter in 1978.

Yet despite his stellar accomplishments, David never retreated to the lofty ivory tower. Instead, he chose affirmatively to seek out ways to advance our rights of free speech, freedom of religion, equality, and due process. David’s wife, Mary, shared a story with me about David’s high school speech contest, which illustrates how far back David

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demonstrated his commitment to a truly democratic society. When asked to define democracy in one word, David responded, “access.” In typical lawyer style, David continued, “equal access.” These two words truly defined David’s mission.

At the law school, David advocated for racial diversity in the student body and on the faculty. In 2004, he served on the university committee to design a new diversity admissions plan, following the United States Supreme Court decision in *Grutter v. Gratz*. He chaired numerous faculty committees and helped many students learn constitutional and land use law as his research assistants. Weeks before his untimely death, David founded the nonprofit organization, *From the Lake to the River Foundation*, to get the Tulane community involved in providing legal help to the citizens of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The Foundation’s mission is “to facilitate the fair and equitable distribution of disaster relief to New Orleanians wherever they may be” post-Katrina. In talking with David about the Foundation, I was inspired to propose the Disaster Relief & Recovery course that is now a part of our curriculum.

I miss David. We who had the privilege of knowing him will always miss him. But the best way to honor David is to “do justly and love mercy.” We owe him and this City no less.