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MEL GOLDBERG: UNLOCKING THE LAW

Tim J. McGuire[†]

Most of us in this worship space today have not been a part of Mel Goldberg's valiant struggle for the past eleven months. Few of us watched Mel fight like the dickens for the last five weeks. Our sorrow and grief at seeing such a young, vibrant life end is genuine and real.

But amid grief and sorrow it is important for us to celebrate the life of Mel Goldberg, because Mel was one of those life-giving forces we meet all too seldom.

Paula asked me to speak today on behalf of students—and at my age that was an offer to good to refuse. Yet in many ways, as a mid-career student, I was Mel's kind of student.

Mel was passionate about William Mitchell's role in educating older students who want to pursue the law as vocation or as avocation. Mel often fretted to me that he worried that Mitchell might one day stray from its core mission of educating students with varied experiences. Mel loved the intellectual and vocational diversity of William Mitchell's late career students.

Many former students have taken time in the last few months to send Mel and Paula touching notes about how Mel affected them as students. To all of you who did so, God bless you, you thrilled Mel and made him very proud of what he accomplished. Those letters represented lots of different takes on who Mel Goldberg the professor was. For me, Mel Goldberg was the professor of enthusiasm. He loved the law, loved what it could do for people and loved to show students how they could use the law to do good.

I'm reminded of a country song—I've got a \$50 bill that says Mel never imagined a country music reference at *his* funeral—the country song says “for you love is a prison, for me love is a key.” For

[†] The following is the text of a eulogy given by Mr. McGuire at Professor Goldberg's funeral on September 1, 1998. Mr. McGuire is editor of the *Star Tribune*, and a former student of Professor Goldberg's. He received his J.D. from William Mitchell College of Law.

so many instructors and lawyers the law is a prison. It is limiting and stifling. But for Mel, the law was a key he could use to free indigent criminals; a key he could use to unlock the sad lives of people with mental health problems; and most importantly to Mel, the law was a key he could hand to William Mitchell law students to allow them to unlock new worlds.

For Mel, the law was never in those huge textbooks we spent ungodly sums on, the law was in the people, and he was intent on exposing students to real people with real problems.

Mel and I kept in touch after I left William Mitchell in 1987 with occasional lunches, most at the Lexington in St. Paul.

Those lunches used to follow a fairly predictable pattern. First, Mel would hand me three or four cases and/or clippings that concerned a particular case he wanted the *Star Tribune* to cover. Then, he'd brag on Paula's work at Pacer. We'd trade tales of children and then Mel would revel in some of my tales of the newspapering business.

And even though we disagreed on the precise role of a particular historical religious figure, we talked of faith.

And I remember vividly in our last lunch a couple of years ago, the passion with which Mel talked about this synagogue and the congregation. His pride, his sense of accomplishment, and his conviction that bringing the faith to the suburbs in a very tangible way was the right thing to do were palpable.

Those rich passions for students, for William Mitchell, for the law, for Mel's family and for this faith community could be gone today because Mel has left us.

But if we let those passions die with Mel we're not really celebrating Mel's life.

I pray that we all find a way to take our little piece of Mel's enthusiasm and passion and inject it into our own lives.

That would be convincing proof that Mel Goldberg's life was indeed . . . a key.