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To Sidney with Love

The great film starring Sidney Poitier is an apt homage to Professor Sidney Picker. Like Mr. Thackeray, Sidney engaged, encouraged, and motivated his students, sometimes by sheer force of will, to learn. And by that engagement Sidney earned, deserved, and won the love and admiration of generations of students.

I was one of those students. I am not sure really how I came to know Sidney and through him, his lovely bride, Jane. I look back over these many years of friendship, mentorship, and connection and cannot see a start. I was not then, nor am I now, an International Law person. But I took Sidney's International Law class. But that was not the start. I was active in student life but that was not the start. All I know is that somehow, some way Sidney found me since I was certainly not looking for him. And I am forever grateful that he found me.

Throughout law school Sidney became more and more integral in my education, my career, and my life. Sidney and Jane threw fantastic dinner parties. The kind from Hollywood glamour movies of the '50s and '60s. The kind where amazing and interesting people would come to a home for conversation, cocktails, intellectual stimulation, and wonderfully prepared food. No caterers involved, no professional bartender, no pre-packaged anything. Instead, Sidney and Jane would select the guests, plan the menu, prepare the food, and set about being gracious hosts. Now I know this, not because I was ever on the guest list. Rather, I was the sous-chef, bartender, busboy, bottle washer, and general Boy Friday. But in that role, I got to meet CIA General Counsel Elizabeth Rinsdkopf Parker, the top legal minds from Cleveland like Jerry and Gale Messerman, and other guests from around the world. These events were exactly what you might imagine, filled with conversations great and small, libation without excess, and generally, an evening to remember.

It was in my third year that Sidney approached me to ask the question professors want answered from students they care about: "Michael (he always called me Michael), what are you doing after graduation?" Since I came to law school to be a public defender, I told him that I was hoping for a public defender spot but those would not be open until after bar results, well after graduation. Sidney simply smiled. That conversation led to the perhaps the greatest offer a student could want: an opportunity to go to Johannesburg, South Africa in the years just before President Mandela's election.

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In trying to think of how to describe Sidney the one word that kept coming around to me was "imp." I don't think there is a better word than that. An imp is generally defined as "a small, mischievous devil or sprite."[1] Like Shakespeare's Puck,[2] Sidney never sought to offend, but if he could have a bit of fun, all the better. And my journey to South Africa was a perfect example. Sidney developed a plan whereby the Legal Resources Centre would agree to take me on because the Biskind Fellowship agreed to fund me. AND the Biskind Fellowship would fund me because the Legal Resources Centre agreed to take me on. This plan required a bit of playing one off the other, but that was Sidney. The next thing I knew, I was leaving JFK Airport behind and was on my way to Johannesburg. And better yet was Sidney's last statement to me before I left: "Michael, don't screw this up." Well, I didn't, so I was allowed to return.

Over the next many years Sidney and Jane were woven into my life. They met our children, helped shepherd my career at the law school, connected me with untold numbers of unique students through RUSLEF, and always, always, always maintained that friendship and connection. I would get the call "Michael, we have a student coming to Case. I want you to meet him/her." Or "Michael, we are coming up for our hospital tour, can we meet for lunch?" A professor can teach you, a great professor can inspire you, and a professor like Sidney can change your life.

I will forever be grateful for his involvement in my life. I have no idea where I would be without him, but I know I am happier in my life for having him be a part of it. I will miss him, I will strive to emulate him, but there will never be a replacement for him.

1. *Imp*, Lexico, https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/imp [https://perma.cc/DZ57-7YSE] (last visited May 24, 2021).

2. *See generally* William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream.