

# *Nova Law Review*

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*Volume 17, Issue 4*

1993

*Article 2*

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Peter Thornton, 1974-75

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# Peter Thornton, 1974-75

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## **Abstract**

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## Peter Thornton, 1974-75

*Bruce Rogow*

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It must have been March 1974 when I came up to Fort Lauderdale to meet Peter Thornton, the dean of the non-existent Nova Law School.

I had read a small story in the *Miami Review* about the plan to start a new law school at Nova. I was teaching at the University of Miami Law School, and the thought of starting a law school intrigued me. I was familiar with Nova's external degree emphasis and was sympathetic to the alternative graduate educational opportunities that it and other *avant garde* schools were offering. The only other new law school on the boards was Antioch, which had started a clinical style program in Washington. I thought that Nova might have similar potential to expand the traditional curriculum to something more practical.

Peter Thornton quickly set me straight. We met at his office in the Parker Building, which was (and is) just west of our presently-sited new building. That is all there was to the law school—his office. We went to lunch at Rolling Hills Country Club. Recognizing my civil rights, legal aid, clinical legal education background, and anticipating my interests, he quickly set me straight: "We are not going to be the Antioch of the South." I quickly shifted gears and spoke glowingly of the virtues of the traditional law school curriculum, like it was taught at Notre Dame.

Peter had taught at Notre Dame for years. He was about 50 I guess, with beautifully white hair, blue eyes, and a reddish glow on his light complexion. He twinkled, and I sensed some clouds too. Little did I know that he had been promised a seven-figure starting fund at Nova, but had only received six zeros. In any event, I liked him, he liked me, and I was hired by a telephone call a week or so later. I was to teach civil procedure.

Over that summer of '74 I stopped by the Parker Building to see how construction was going. We had part of the first floor. On the west side were faculty offices; on the east, the dean's and law librarian's offices (a wonderful woman named Lucretia Granda); and in between, the library and two classrooms. I brought a few things into my office, looked at the admissions files, and began to look forward to the August beginning of classes.



The meeting was better than the waiting. The initial class was a wonderful mix of people who were willing to take the risk of a new, untested law school. Many of those students came to Nova because they had families in the South Florida area and could not go away to law school. Others had no choice—the new Nova was their only *entre* to becoming a lawyer. At that meeting Peter provided wisdom, humor, stability and, when introducing the faculty, made it seem like the students were lucky to be in on the ground floor of this new law school.

Peter Thornton was right. That first class had a special nature, and formed a special bond with themselves and the faculty, and, later, with the communities in which they went to practice. Their successes are a tribute to Peter Thornton's willingness to leave the safety of South Bend and create a new institution in a less than optimum physical, economic and educational environment. He put together the few resources he could find and actually made a law school. Today, almost 20 years later, we are ready to embark on the rest of our life. We are well housed, in a new building. We are well educated, with ABA and AALS accreditation. We are respected for what we have accomplished in our first two decades. We were lucky to have Peter Thornton as our Founding Father—the man who set us on the way.

Last year Peter Thornton came back for a class reunion at my house. His white hair was as thick and beautiful as always; his blue eyes as clear as that luncheon day in 1974; and the twinkle even stronger, for he was surrounded by many of those in the charter class: men and women whose lives were changed because Peter Thornton made a law school.