

“CHARGE TO THE CLASS” IN HONOR OF LILLIAN BEVIER

*John C. Jeffries, Jr.**

IT is a real honor to speak on this occasion—and also something of an intimidation. The honor arises from the fact of your invitation, for which I am deeply grateful. The intimidation arises from the nature of the event. The “Charge to the Class” is like a commencement address. It is an opportunity for a person, usually of advanced years—and that would include me—to say something wise, witty, inspiring, and above all brief, to the vanguard of a younger generation, which presumably finds itself in need of advice.

Well, I honestly don’t think you need much advice, and if you did, I would not feel qualified to give it. In my observation you are not only extremely talented, but extremely sensible. You are well on your way to becoming good lawyers, and you understand the importance of human relationships and of personal reliability. You believe in and practice the virtues of this community, which include courtesy, civility, respect, and consideration. You know how to function as a member of a team, where success depends on working with others.

And you are responding with resourcefulness, optimism, and equanimity to the challenge of the job market. It’s the worst I’ve ever seen. In the forty years that I have been associated with the Law School, no class—not even that of 2009—has gone through anything like it. So I do not wish to be understood as standing up here telling you how to deal with a situation that neither I nor the students who went before you ever had to face.

If you needed to know something about the intricacies of federal jurisdiction, or the construction of a penal statute, or the qualified immunity doctrine in the law of constitutional torts, I might be able

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to help. But on the larger questions of work and life and family, I am no expert. But I think I know someone who is.

Lillian BeVier retires this spring after forty years in law teaching and thirty-seven years on this faculty. A couple of weeks ago, a former student and good friend from the class of 1980 was back in town on a college tour for his daughter. On hearing that Lillian was about to step down, he waxed rhapsodic about her teaching—wonderful in every way, the “best teacher I ever had,” and so forth. It caused me to wince just a little, as he had taken three courses from me and worked as my research assistant, but I respect his judgment.

I will not speak here of Lillian’s forty years of dedication in the classroom, but not because it’s unimportant. On the contrary, the first duty of a teacher is to teach. It’s the *most* important thing we do.

Nor will I have much to say about Lillian’s prodigious scholarship. She has a list of articles as long as your arm, many of them on campaign finance regulation, a subject on which she is a national luminary, and others on a variety of First Amendment issues, as well as questions of intellectual property. Scholarship is also important, but, like teaching, it is part of the job. Excellence and dedication in doing one’s job are completely admirable qualities, but in a sense they’re *expected*. They are commitments we all should have—or at least strive for—in our working lives. That Lillian is better than most at what faculty do is praiseworthy, but it’s not what sets her apart.

What is distinctive—and inspiring—about Lillian is her engagement, her participation, her felt sense of personal responsibility for the communities of which she is part. Let me repeat that phrase, as it is as close as I have been able to come to describing the way in which Lillian is unequalled. She has a conviction—ultimately, it is a moral conviction—of personal responsibility for the strength, the success, the happiness, and the welfare of the various communities of which she is a member. In thousands of ways that are unexpected, uncompensated, and often unremarked, she makes our lives better.

Let me begin by trying to give you some flavor of her activities outside the Law School. Lillian has led alumni organizations for Smith College and Stanford Law School. She has been several

times an officer in the Venable Elementary School Parent-Teachers Association and a volunteer tutor at that institution. She has sat on various boards and committees for the city, state, and nation, including most recently the Board of Trustees of the Legal Services Corporation. She has also served on the boards of private foundations and organizations that represent her concerns and commitments, including the Center for Individual Rights, the Atlantic Legal Foundation, the Independent Women’s Forum, the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, Piedmont CASA (which stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates), and the Federalist Society, for which she has criss-crossed the country, giving innumerable speeches.

And now for the big stuff. For ten years, she has been a member of the Board of Trustees of the Law School Foundation, and for ten years, served on the board of St. Anne’s Belfield, including two years as chair, and since 1991 has been involved with Martha Jefferson Hospital and the Martha Jefferson Health Services Corp. These are not honorary positions, where you have your picture taken and go to black-tie dinners twice a year. These are major commitments.

Take Martha Jefferson. Lillian served on the Board of Trustees from 1995 to 2003, ending in a stint as chair. Then she switched to the Board of Directors of the Martha Jefferson Health Center, which focuses less on financial and corporate matters and more on the delivery of health care. Among other things, she has chaired task forces on hospital-based radiology and anesthesiology and another on cardiology. These are difficult and, to a degree, adversarial negotiations between the hospital and the groups of doctors who will be retained to provide certain kinds of services.

There is nothing ceremonial or honorary about this work. It involved many 7:00 a.m. meetings, lots of time and study, and ultimately some difficult negotiations. It’s the kind of thing lawyers do for paying clients. Yet Lillian did it and still does it, for free, out of concern for health care in this community.

As impressive as this résumé material is, any account focused on positions and titles only begins to capture Lillian. What is special—in my experience unique—about Lillian are the small acts of hospitality, kindness, and generosity that create out of diverse individuals with diverse talents and interests a real community.

How many hundreds, indeed thousands, of students have been in Lillian's home? Every year, she hosts a barbeque for the incoming Law Review members when they come back in the summer a week before school. No one asked her to do that. She just does it. She has events in her home for the women in the Federalist Society. No one asked her to do that either. She simply saw the opportunity and volunteered. She has a dinner every year for the former Supreme Court clerks who are invited back to speak to admitted students. She has dinners for PILA winners, for the students in her seminars, and for all sorts of student groups who need to entertain guest speakers.

Lillian has likely entertained more students in her home than anyone in the history of the Law School. And though hospitality may sound like a small thing, it is not. Every act of hospitality, every participation in a student event, every act of assistance to a student organization, every gift of time and energy and concern is a small thread in the fabric that binds us together. Without that human fabric, law school would be dreadful. And that fabric has to be renewed—rewoven if you will—by every successive generation of students and faculty, who teach their successors, as you have taught each other and the classes behind you, what it means to be part of the Law School community. In that, Lillian BeVier is the greatest teacher of them all.

Now here is the point on which Lillian would insist were she speaking to you now.

Lillian's thirty-seven years here were not years of sacrifice or denial or self-abnegation. They were years of joy. Lillian gained by giving. Her countless acts of participation, generosity, commitment, and kindness were wise choices about how to live. Creating is more fun than complaining, and more rewarding too.

You, of course, will want to create your own communities, choose your own involvements, decide for yourselves to what—more accurately, to whom—you wish to commit.

Your commitments will differ from Lillian's and from each other's. You will pursue a wide variety of interests, causes, institutions, and affiliations, not all of which will always be perfectly aligned.

And that's fine. I am not speaking here of the substance of these activities. I am speaking not about what to do, but about how to

live. And this is the lesson taught by Lillian BeVier—and it is my hope for you: If you join in, participate, contribute, and engage, if you invest of yourselves in the people around you, if you cultivate a sense of personal responsibility for the communities of which you are part, then you will be happy—and you will be loved.
