

RENNARD STRICKLAND HELPED SHAPE A YOUNG LAW SCHOOL

*Sheila Simon**

Southern Illinois University's law school is not an ancient, tradition-bound school. We're getting ready to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary, and young enough to remember our teenage years. And like many teenagers, we took some risks. One of those risks was selecting Rennard Strickland as our Dean. He had never been a dean anywhere else. He was taking a risk too—leading a school that wasn't old enough to even buy a beer. It turned out to be a great choice for both.

Those who were on the faculty at the time remember him as an ardent supporter of the law library, health law, and a work/life balance way before that was part of the national vocabulary.

Frank Houdek, our retired library director, recalled that before Dean Strickland arrived in Illinois his books did—two moving vans full. Dean Strickland later donated 1,300 of those books to the law library, the largest collection we have ever received. It was part of what Dean Strickland orchestrated as the “Year of the Library.” The books were not just law books, but biographies, histories, and fiction that put law in a context. Frank Houdek continued that tradition and expanded it with an outstanding collection of law-related movies.

Retired professor Gene Basanta remembers Dean Strickland as someone who set the foundation of a strong health law program here at SIU. Basanta and others, at Strickland's request, laid out a long-range vision of what the school could do, including a bioethics lecture series, and an MD/JD program, both of which continue to serve students and the community today.

Dean Strickland was also the driving force behind “Kite Day,” a spring day where classes were cancelled and students and faculty went out to nearby Giant City State Park for hiking, softball, chili, beer, and of course, kite flying. While we have not continued Kite Day here, I like to think we have continued a healthy balance of school and playtime. Even a pandemic hasn't stopped that—hiking in our national forest has become even more popular. Our plentiful outdoor space helps—the law and medicine society had a movie night last fall that was held outside.

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I knew Dean Strickland as my professor of Indian Law. While I teach at SIU now, back when he was Dean, I spent my last semester of law school as an SIU student. The class was large by our measures here—maybe thirty people. I don't think any of us knew a darned thing about Indian Law, but it sounded interesting, and Dean Strickland beat all of our expectations.

Dean Strickland was a wonderful teacher. We had a textbook, but I remember more of what he told us than what we read. He told us about the Busk, a green corn ceremony, celebrating the arrival of new crops. As Illinoisans we have lots of access to fresh, local corn, and I think those of us in the class were declaring Busks on a regular basis, just for fun. I also remember that he took us out of the school building and over to the museum on the main campus, to give us one extra perspective on the topic. He had an influence on us.

His influence wasn't limited to academics. He was a regular at a small restaurant on "the Strip" in Carbondale. China House, owned and operated by Carmen Fang was his groove. He ate there so often that Carmen renamed one of her dishes "The Rennard." The Rennard stayed on the menu long after Dean Strickland left Carbondale.

Rennard Strickland was an accomplished scholar when he arrived here to be our dean. He left with administrative skills that he used to serve as dean at two other law schools. I hope the SIU community helped him get started on that track. I know he had a positive and long-lasting impact on us.