



PROFESSOR JONATHAN B. FORMAN

## OPENED DOORS: A TRIBUTE TO JON FORMAN

*Katheleen Guzman\**

It has been hard to walk down the hall past Jon Forman's office this year. Lani, Carmen, and Neil have been in to sort through his things—action figures across the top and magnets down the side of the metal file cabinet, bird knickknacks next to a large globe that seemed to float over the desk, a book of quotes. Much has been taken away, leaving a tidier version of the space where for so long he'd researched, written, and talked. Jon has not been in there for some time, but so many books remain, along with his name on the door. Those shelves and cabinets reflect a life. And although the door is now closed in a way that it rarely was before, Jon's presence is there too, in the items his office contains.

One could try to summarize Jon by recounting the proxies: over three hundred publications and hundreds of citations; membership in the American College of Tax Counsel, American College of Employee Benefits Counsel, National Academy of Social Insurance; Board of Trustees, American Tax Policy Institute. Head down and working parallel on committees, symposia, books, Order of the Coif, and as a Professor in Residence for the IRS; running the College of Law's VITA program; coaching (and winning) with its tax-based teams. These things do matter, and they mattered greatly to Jon. From Northwestern to Iowa to Michigan Law to George Washington—all players and parties could be found there, joining with him in his work.

But to so render him flatly on a page, list or count does insufficient justice to who Jon was. It is in other memories that he comes to life: he speaks passionately in our Bell Courtroom, sharing his convictions about *Making America Work*; he sits, shy and beaming in a Beaird Lounge ceremony, an illustrious alumna singling out him and him alone—after decades—as the professor who had set her course toward the heights that she had achieved. Like the hard work next to whimsy one could find in Jon's office, he held each of those qualities himself, along with so much more.

Jon could be blunt and sharp both: “that new class would be dreck”; “stop being an academic dilettante”; “here is how I construct my syllabus—I see less value in yours.” Or this, moments before a presentation on which a future might hinge: “That's your job talk? You are brave.” But here it is: his candor was borne of love. And his words always contained at least some measure of uncomfortable truth (even if just for the pondering). Whether standing in the doorway or holding forth near the coffee, Jon made us think and pushed us to

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act. There was always encouragement there, and surprises. And just when one figured to know well how he felt or who he was, there would be Jon in a Hawaiian shirt or a Snoopy tie, demanding you join him for a ride in his white '71 Impala convertible; giving you Spiderman figures "because your sons might like them"; congratulating you on a placement and asking the types of deep questions that revealed he'd actually read the piece. Wisdom from Jon: "get out more," "spend more time with family," "children don't stay young forever," "you didn't marry your work."

Jon lived his advice. Poignant memories of him include his sharing with all who would listen the play-by of his son's pinewood derby, or holding his daughter's hand as she sold cookies for the troop. Or hearing Lani tell how she'd stared longingly at a brooch in a case in an antique store in an alley in Vienna, only for Jon to turn to her and say, "You deserve that," as he handed a credit card to the clerk. He expected a lot of himself and of others, pushing and inviting in equal measure. But he also knew what most mattered, and when.

Jon died in August of 2021 while traveling through Western sky with a motorcycle, a saddlebag, and a pup tent, a "last hurrah" of sorts before the new academic year. His death was a blow. Tributes poured in from friends and colleagues across time and place, sharing how smart Jon was; how encouraging, committed, considered, and considerate. This issue of the *Oklahoma Law Review*, containing scholarship that he has inspired, is dedicated to him. For just as he believed in the power of expressed ideas to change and persuade and "make work," he believed in each and every one of us, and in our promise, deeply. He inspired us even when he (or we) might not yet have realized, and in ways that might yet be discovered. "He opened doors for others and pushed them through."

Lani shared a few short scenes with me last fall. There is a viewmaster from the 1960s, containing 3-D photos of a thirteen-year-old Jon in Cleveland, dressed up in a brown suit and black shoes at his bar mitzvah. His sisters are there, as are his friends; he is talking with them and laughing. A new picture clicks in: Jon turned full on toward the camera, eyes fixed on the lens. Look closely and there you will see complexity—pride and anticipation, trepidation. On the next slide he has turned back to the group with the wry look that we all can envision when we close our eyes. And joy. I flash forward to Jon at his desk, in a doorway, and then in the hospital last August, sitting up in bed. His eyes light upon Lani. "I am lucky." So were we all.

Jonathan Barry Forman, Kenneth E. McAfee Centennial Chair in Law  
May 19, 1952 - August 16, 2021