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A Life of Incredible Joy

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School of Law Dean Lisa Kloppenberg offered the March 26 eulogy for Fran Conte, the longest-serving law dean in University of Dayton history. He returned to teaching in 2001 after raising the funds to build Joseph E. Keller Hall. On March 20, he died of cancer, at the age of 68.

Here is her eulogy:

We are here today with heavy hearts. Francis J. Conte passed too quickly and too soon from this life. Yet, as Fran recently asked his family: “Who has had a better life than me?” He maintained that he had lived a charmed life, with a loving family, a multitude of opportunities, and an amazing vocation.

The oldest child of Anthony and Eleanor Conte, Fran grew up in a little town north of Boston with his brother Tony and sisters, Joyce and Cheryl. Fran felt loved surrounded by his large, exuberant family – his father’s ancestors had emigrated from the hills outside of Naples, Italy, and his mother’s Irish family came from County Meath.

Not surprisingly, Fran was a very bright, industrious child. Fran played baseball and basketball. He delivered newspapers. And he had a byline, working as a sports reporter for the local newspaper. In other words, he played the game, then ran home and wrote about the game, and then delivered the story to his readers!

After Fran graduated from Penn State, he studied law at the University of Texas. For about seven years, he practiced law, primarily as a legal aid attorney, working for indigent clients and eventually directing legal services for Northwestern Pennsylvania. In 1977, he began teaching law full-time at the University of Montana.

One summer, while traveling in Ireland, Fran was listening to traditional music in a pub in Doolin on the rugged, gorgeous West Coast. There, he met a lively young woman who shared his Irish roots and Catholic faith, Kathleen McShane. At the end of the evening, she casually suggested that Fran look her up in Windsor, Ontario, if he ever visited there. Sure enough, Fran did visit. Indeed, within a year or so, Fran found a job nearby, at Detroit College of Law! He soon married Kathy and they had four children within 3-1/2 years. Fran often said that having children was the most fun, satisfying and important thing he ever did.

The Contes came to Dayton in 1987, when he became dean at the University of Dayton School of Law. He was our creative and energetic leader for 14 years, making him the longest-serving dean in Dayton Law history and one of the longest-serving law deans in the United States. Always looking to the future, Fran helped to start one of the country’s first programs in law and technology, as well as an innovative Legal Profession Program.

During the 1990s, Fran was the visionary behind our beautiful and functional Keller Hall. He worked tirelessly to secure funds and delved into planning the details. It wasn’t just that he cared about a striking edifice — Fran wanted to create a fantastic learning space so the school could continue to attract stellar students from across the country, and he sought to create a space manifesting Marianist principles of community to all. When visitors from other law schools tour our building, they still express admiration and envy. . . . Fran just loved that!

As important as outstanding academic programs and facilities are, people were always at the heart of Fran’s mission. He cared about justice for all, equality and greater access to the legal profession. As dean, and then as a senior faculty leader, Fran helped to develop an excellent and diverse group of faculty members, and mentored a new dean. He prized diversity in our student body. Fran not only served on committees; he also rolled up his sleeves, met with students, made calls to lawyers and judges, and created opportunities for students. His phenomenal fundraising helped the school to build scholarship funds and provide opportunity for many students.

Fran was a warm, generous person; he saw the best in people and gave people the benefit of the doubt, winning over alumni and students with his sincere, personal touch. He remembered names, wrote personalized notes on admissions letters, and reached out to alumni years after graduation (and not just to ask for donations!). In the classroom, Fran was an enthusiastic teacher; so enthusiastic, in fact, that he often held his students over the allotted time. When Fran headed off to teach, he clutched a large pile of papers flying in every direction. Every line of his textbook was underlined and the margins were filled with preparatory notes. He found incredible joy in his vocation, in class and beyond.
Fran was an inquisitive scholar, passionate about human rights. After his long service as dean, I admired how Fran mastered and published in a whole new area of law, international law, particularly, European Union Law. Whether he was teaching in Keller Hall or on his Fulbright visit in Poland, Fran's keen, open mind focused on justice for all. Fran was a great storyteller; he described his travels and gently bragged about his kids. He loved to talk, sometimes "carrying on" a bit in the very best of Irish tradition. His adventurous spirit led Fran and his family around the world, and he brightened our lives with tales of the people he met and places he visited. At home, he was always "on the go," off to Flyer games or running or hiking.

Last summer my husband and I spent a quintessential "Fran Conte day." Fran picked us up for a day trip in Dublin, Ireland, and assured us that despite his kids' opinions, he really was an excellent driver — in any country, at any speed, and on either side of the road. The next few hours tested that declaration. On our drive and over lunch at a tiny village pub, Fran regaled with stories about his Irish roots and his children. He said they had grown into wonderful adults and friends, not just kids.

When we reached our destination, the ruins of a centuries-old monastery, Fran led us on a beautiful, but vigorous, "walk." After an hour, the rain began, and our car seemed miles away. Still, Fran pointed a few hundred yards up a steep cliff and said, "St. Kevin the hermit's cave is just up there!" Without sharing his enthusiasm, we headed up the trail and arrived out of breath and soaked from the storm, where we were greeted by the sun coming through the clouds, a spectacular view of the valley and ruins, and a rainbow over the two lakes that gave the monastery the name Glendalough.

We never would have experienced this mystical moment without Fran's sense of adventure and persistence. Our day also ended in typical Fran fashion: driving back as cars whizzed by too closely and getting so carried away in our conversation that we missed our exit and spent an extra hour with Fran driving on the busy streets of Dublin. At his core, Fran was rooted in faith and family. Both inspired his constant energy and great optimism. Fran knew that life was about more than accomplishments on a resume. He knew how important it was to stop a moment and savor nature's beauty, relishing summers with family and friends on Percy Lake in Ontario. He knew how important it was to stop in Keller Hall, to look a student in the eye, and ask how he or she was really doing. He knew how to relax and enjoy a glass of wine or coffee and dessert with an old colleague or a new friend.

Fran felt truly fortunate to share his life with Kathy, the kids and his extended family. He was elated to show UD students the exact spot where he had met his beloved "Kath." His pride in Brendan, Clare, Cieran and Fiona was so evident. He delighted in the strong individuals they have become, oriented toward others, each so different and each so talented. Fran believed that his children are his living legacy. We can see that Kathy and Fran taught them they were given life to love and help others, to be inquisitive about the world around them and abroad, and to treat all people they meet with respect and kindness.

Fran lived a rich, full, happy life, contributing so much to others. Even as he suffered in the final days with cancer, Fran felt God was near. He found special grace in being secure at home, close with Kathy and all of the children. Fran was very much at peace, savoring his charmed life.

Beyond our sorrow, we might feel a measure of gratitude today — gratitude that we shared a bit of this life with Fran Conte. May his memory continue to inspire us to use our talents for others and to appreciate the time God gives us, to live deeply and love fully.

In conclusion, let's offer an Irish prayer for Fran and his loved ones, as we all wish them deep peace:

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

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