Dedication to Professor Thomas P. Anderson

The Honorable V. Stuart Couch
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A coffee cup sits on Professor Tom Anderson’s desk with the following words inscribed on it: “You may be whatever you resolve to be.” I know that cup and the saying quite well; it is a gift from me with the inspirational words of General “Stonewall” Jackson, given in recognition of our shared interest in Civil War history and my appreciation for Tom’s role as my mentor while I was a student at Campbell Law School. In recognition of Professor Anderson’s retirement from the faculty after twenty-nine years, I reflect on his successful fulfillment of Jackson’s sage words and how he resolved to be a teacher, a mentor, and a friend in the lives of his colleagues and many students who have all shared the privilege of his presence in our lives.

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

—Benjamin Franklin

Any student who has endured the mandatory trial advocacy course at Campbell Law School knows Benjamin Franklin was right. I wish we could count the number of trial lawyers who were taught by Professor Anderson, or measure the impact his training of them has had on the quality of practice before the courts of the Great State of North Carolina and the Nation. His practical, no-nonsense approach to teaching trial advocacy earned him not only the North Carolina Academy of Trial Lawyers’s prestigious Charles Becton Award for Outstanding Teaching of Trial Advocacy, but more importantly the undying appreciation of those of us who labor in courtrooms of all jurisdictions and daily apply the skills Professor Anderson has taught us. His method of “teaching by doing” ensured that by the time his students graduated from Campbell, they not only knew the law, but had actually used it in a mock trial exercise. Rarely, it seems, do recent law graduates know the Rules of Evidence and Civil Procedure “by the
numbers,” but that is exactly how Professor Anderson taught his classes—much to the relief of fledgling advocates and patient trial judges alike. And his students not only know the rules by number, but what they really mean and how to quickly apply them as the facts arise in a case.

I still recall his “three most important words” of trial advocacy: preparation, preparation, and preparation. Tom himself was always prepared for class, and that example taught his students the value of preparation. Every subject Professor Anderson taught instilled the concept of professionalism along with it, providing new practitioners with the tools of the trade along with how to use them ethically on behalf of their clients.

“Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them become what they are capable of becoming.” —Goethe

Professor Anderson was never content with just teaching black letter law. Webster’s Dictionary defines a mentor as “a trusted counselor or guide,” an apt description of the role Tom played for me and so many others whom he coached as members of his trial advocacy teams over the years. Tom’s trial teams are the stuff of legend: several regional champions, numerous top ten finishers in national competition, and a national runner-up team. But as any team player will tell you, the true measure of a coach is found more in how they treat defeat than how they revel in victory. Over the years Tom shared with me the successes and failures of his various trial teams, but his descriptions were practically the same because he always focused on how the students worked hard and performed, rather than on where their team placed in competition. My experience with Tom was that he always got the best out of students because his evaluations of them contained equal parts of praise, critique, and suggestion.

So much of being a successful litigator depends on how one manages the ego; Tom exemplified that for all of us by using our egos as motivation towards hard work, rather than sources of self-defeating hubris. Of every trial advocacy student or team member that Tom spoke of to me, he always accentuated their positive attributes, how much progress they had made, and how he imagined they would be successful attorneys in the future.

Tom once told me that he lived vicariously through the careers of his students; given the accomplishments of Campbell attorneys over the past twenty-nine years, I think Tom has lived well indeed. The pride he carries for each graduate is obvious and well deserved, as a mentor whose humble guidance is in large measure responsible for the lawyers we have become.
“There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship.”

—Thomas Aquinas

I was a transfer student to Campbell in my 2L year, and Tom Anderson helped make my transition bearable. He was one of the first professors to introduce himself to me and offer any assistance I might need in my new surroundings at Buies Creek. His southern gentility put me at ease, at least until he stood me up in his Evidence class.

During my 3L year, I experienced a death in my family the day after returning home from a trial team competition. That was the first time I got to know Tom as a friend through the occasional notes he would put in my mailbox, or pulling me aside in the hall to ask how I was holding up. After suffering a bitter trial defeat a couple of years later, Tom was there for me again, lending a listening ear and sage advice to a young trial lawyer with a badly bruised ego. Tom offered the same encouragement he had given me before: more hard work, avoid the hubris.

My enduring memory of Tom will have to be seeing him on the dais during this year’s graduation exercises, the last of his long and storied career at Campbell. There he stood on the stage—his trademark white pony-tail and spectacles intact—placing the juris doctor hoods over the heads of each new graduate. That scene was a fitting exit for Tom, a final act of friendship so characteristic of him: still helping his charges as they head off towards the bar exam and the practice of law beyond. But what I knew then, and those newly-minted attorneys perhaps did not, is the sense of security that comes from having a friend like Tom who is always there to help celebrate one’s successes, and share in one’s disappointments, both of which come along with a career in litigation. One of the strongest attributes of Campbell Law School is that it fosters a spirit of friendship between its faculty and students, and attracts professors like Tom who are willing to engage with their pupils as future peers rather than peons.

With his retirement Tom Anderson’s resolution to be a great teacher is now complete, but my hope is that his service as a mentor and friend will endure for many years to come. While his steady influence and gentility will not be experienced by future generations of Campbell Law students, his example lives on and remains a challenge to those of us who know and love him, who resolve to be a teacher, mentor, and friend to others. God bless you Tom Anderson, in a retirement so richly deserved.
The Honorable V. Stuart Couch*

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