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Mike Jacobstein: Truly a Giant*

Robert C. Berring**

¶1 It is sobering to think that Professor J. Myron (Mike) Jacobstein, whose life we celebrate in this issue of *Law Library Journal*, retired from his position as law librarian and professor of law at Stanford in 1987. Many who read this set of tributes never had the chance to know him or, even better, to work with him. But Mike Jacobstein’s reach extends to 2005, and it will carry on for decades to come. It is vital for the profession to remember its roots and to honor its heroes. For all of us this is a chance to reflect back upon a man who was truly a giant.

¶2 Mike Jacobstein is a difficult man to capture in written words. He was inherently vital. You really had to meet him. The artificial atmosphere of the cloistered halls of academia and the day-to-day grind of administrative tasks make the retention of one’s essential humanity an unreachable goal for most of us who choose academic law librarianship as a life’s path. Not Mike. He was honest, engaged, and intellectually alive. He was a scholar, an author, an innovator, and a transformative figure in our profession. But writing those words does not tell the tale. You had to see the gleam in his eye, hear the wisdom of his words, and feel the generosity of his spirit to understand his power.

¶3 Mike’s institutional career makes him a seminal figure in the profession of law librarianship. His roots run all the way to Miles Price, the legendary law librarian at Columbia,¹ for whom he worked as assistant librarian from 1955 to 1959. To my generation Price was a larger than life figure. But this was not Mike’s first job. He had begun as a cataloger at the University of Chicago from 1950 to 1952, working under another preeminent law librarian of the time, Elizabeth Benyon, the author of *Classification: Class K, Law*, published by the Library of Congress.² After earning his law degree at Chicago-Kent in 1952, he worked at the University

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1. For a tribute from Jacobstein to his mentor, Miles O. Price, see J. Myron Jacobstein, *The Dean of Law Librarians*, 91 LAW LIBR. J. 227 (1999). Jacobstein notes that he “first met Miles Price in 1950, while attending the School of Library Service at Columbia University.... By 1950, Price was known throughout the world of law schools as the ‘Dean of Law Librarians.’... During those years whenever a law school dean needed a law library director, Price would be called for recommendations. Similarly, whenever a law library director needed to recruit a staff member, he or she usually contacted Price for names to consider.” Id. at 227.

of Illinois from 1953 to 1955 before moving to New York City and taking the position at Columbia University in 1955. Working for Miles Price, Mike gained firsthand a deep appreciation of bibliographic integrity and professionalism (as well as a wealth of great stories). After a brief time as librarian and professor at the University of Colorado Law School (1959–63), Mike moved to Stanford in 1963, part of that bevy of brilliant hires by Stanford that changed its status from that of a fine regional law school to a permanent fixture at the top of everyone’s list of the country’s premier law schools.

§4 At Stanford, Mike built a marvelous working collection for the law library while simultaneously stressing the provision of good service in a supportive atmosphere. He helped design the beautiful Robert Crown Law Library, and as he developed a great collection of books for it, he ushered Stanford into the age of the computer. Perhaps most important, he brought together an incredible staff of dedicated professionals who shared his goal of service. And he never elevated himself above that staff. I remember Mike showing me tricks on using LEXIS in the early 1980s. Mike was a hands-on administrator who wanted to understand how to use each tool in his library. He would no more ignore the onslaught of technology than he would accept it without a major grain of salt. Mike never stopped being a reference librarian. No one had a clearer vision of what was going on in legal information and he never gave up on learning. I have full confidence that he would be Web-surfing if he were working today, though he would be pointing out the problems of credibility and permanence while he did so.

§5 Institutional history is often so much dust in the wind, but Mike’s contributions to the profession of law librarianship should not be forgotten. As AALL president in 1978–79, Mike was the right man at the right place at the right time. He personally pushed through AALL’s support of a new index of legal periodicals, a move that eventually led to an agreement with Information Access Corporation and the creation of Current Law Index and its Read Only Memory-Computer Original Microform (COM) counterpart, Legal Resources Index, the forerunner of today’s LegalTrac.3 Although this was a controversial move at the time,4 it was an important first step away from the binding hold of tradition. The days of ossified indexes and limited coverage of materials are hard to remember, but there is a reason for that. Mike started us down a new road that has now become so accepted that it is hard to think of how constricted things once were. Fueled by the same

3. See J. Myron Jacobstein, President’s Column, 10 AM. ASS’N L. LIBR. NEWSL. 119, 119 (1979) (announcing Jacobstein’s authorization by Executive Board to negotiate agreement with Information Access Corp. for producing “two types of indexes for law”).

impulse to push the legal research world into new areas that led to the creation of the *Index to Periodical Articles Related to Law* which Mike and Professor Roy Mersky had long produced, Mike’s support of a new index was a recognition that legal information was coming of age.6

¶6 Mike was not at all confrontational but he never backed down from a good fight for a worthy cause. Mike also strongly advocated for the Association to hire a permanent executive director. I still recall his remarks at an AALL business meeting urging us to look to the future.7 At the time this was even more controversial. Mike saw that AALL had to transform itself from a club of library directors to an association of professionals who took on large challenges. While lamenting the loss of the intimacy of the old association, he saw that it was time to professionalize and to begin to assert ourselves. He was the bridge between Miles Price and the AALL of today.

¶7 Mike was also a major force in legal research. The many editions of *Fundamentals of Legal Research* which he coauthored with Professor Mersky long dominated the teaching of legal research in law schools.8 The practical, straightforward approach of the book and its easy acceptance of changes in technology and legal information had a greater impact than most folks realize. For generations the “red book” set the tone. I will never forget Professor Jacobstein coming to the Tarlton Law Library at the University of Texas to work with Professor Merksy on a new edition of *Fundamentals*. While teams of us would be swarming about him, Mike would be sitting at a manual typewriter writing his chapters.

¶8 For all of his accomplishments as a librarian at Stanford and in serving AALL, I personally will always treasure Mike as a teacher. I was privileged to be his student and his research assistant at the University of California-Berkeley School of Library and Information Studies in 1974, so I got a full dose of Mike in the classroom.9 He was the most easily impersonated professor I have ever had. Jingling the coins in his pocket, ending his sentences with the characteristic

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5. *INDEX TO PERIODICAL ARTICLES RELATED TO LAW* (Roy M. Mersky & J. Myron Jacobstein eds., 1958–).
6. “With the acceptance of Mike’s version of the *Current Law Index*, Mike’s place in law librarianship was assured.” Price, supra note 4, at 14.
9. *See Robert C. Berring, In Honor of J. Myron Jacobstein, 40 STANFORD L. REV. 1, 2 (1987)* (serving “as a surrogate for all [his] students,” Berring describes Jacobstein as a “student’s teacher” and a “great person-to-person teacher”). This article is part of a tribute to Jacobstein published on the occasion of his retirement from Stanford. Other contributions are by Gerald Gunther, Professor of Law, Stanford University; Roy M. Mersky, Professor of Law and Director of Research, University of Texas; and Kathleen Price, Director of the Law Library and Professor of Law, University of Minnesota.
hum that we all came to love, Mike was an original. He was also perhaps the best
teacher I ever had. He was smart and he was honest. Combining a gentle spirit
with blunt honesty is a trick that he managed better than anyone else. You knew
that Mike would tell you the truth but that there would be only honesty, not malice
or arrogance, behind his words. The greatness of his spirit and his heart shone
through. We loved him. When he offered me the chance to be his research assistant
over the summer, I already was studying for the California bar exam and I had a
part-time job at a law firm, but I could not possibly turn him down. Who could
pass up a chance to work with him? It was the right decision.

¶9 Nor was his teaching limited to the classroom. Mike was always teaching,
always mentoring. In his informal, open manner he would talk with even the new-
est law librarian. He loved to talk shop and he loved to chew over ideas. He was the
least pretentious great man I have ever met. It was once said of Ulysses S. Grant
that he could sit down and talk to any man he met: that was Mike.

¶10 Mike taught me a lot about what matters most in life. His beloved wife
Belle and his children Ellen and Bennett were never far from his thoughts. He
knew what counted. Family came first. He once told me that the best thing about
law librarianship was that you could give it your best but you did not have to give it
your soul. Your soul was for your family. Like other things that he said, that remark
struck me deeply and I have always remembered it.

¶11 The world never has enough people like J. Myron Jacobstein, but when we
are lucky enough to come across one we can take comfort in the fact that he will
live on in the lives of those he touched. The reminiscences in this issue of Law
Library Journal will show the tip of the iceberg of Mike’s legacy. May his spirit
stay alive in our hearts.