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## Jefferson B. Fordham: Dean, Mentor, and Friend

JESSE H. CHOPER\*

Jeff Fordham was the first person associated with legal education that I ever met. The time was a winter evening in 1957. The place was a hotel room in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., a small city in the northeastern part of the state where I had grown up and was then a senior at a community college. Dean Jefferson B. Fordham of the University of Pennsylvania Law School had come to town to give a talk at a dinner for local Penn alumni. A college professor of mine, who thought that I should be heading for law school instead of a public accounting firm, had written to Dean Fordham and the dean had agreed to see me. My professor and I had called the dean's hotel room from the lobby and were told to come up. When we entered, we were greeted by the dean of one of the nation's major law schools; he was in his undershirt just completing a pre-dinner shave and change of clothes. He welcomed us warmly, in the marvelous courtly fashion for which Jeff Fordham has always been known. I was nervous — perhaps not scared, but certainly in awe. He immediately put me wholly at ease. Although I knew that he was due at the alumni gathering in less than half an hour, he told me about his law school, unhurriedly and with a gentle pride and enthusiasm. He also interviewed me in a way so perceptive and subtle that I didn't quite realize it at the time. I decided then that I liked Jeff Fordham very much and I have liked him very much ever since.

The next occasion that I spoke to Dean Fordham was about a month after I had come to law school. Penn did not have a huge student body, but we numbered more than five hundred. Of course, I had seen the dean at a distance a number of times since enrolling but hardly supposed that he remembered me. He did. He stopped me one morning between classes when we passed in the rotunda of the law school, reminded me of our earlier meeting, and asked with obvious sincerity how I was getting along. Similar conversations between us took place with some regularity thereafter. Nor was this experience peculiar to me; he took the trouble to know who we were. Perhaps my generation of students simply respected deans as a matter of course,

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but I had then (and have now) the sense that my classmates carried a special feeling of esteem — and friendship — for their dean. I admired Jeff Fordham greatly then and I have greatly admired him ever since.

Two special incidents during my third year in law school further illustrate Jeff's exceptional concern and sense of responsibility for his students. In December of 1959, I attended the AALS Convention in St. Louis to seek a teaching job. In those simpler days, before the advent of the separate Faculty Recruitment Conference, most interviews were arranged by personal introduction in the hotel lobby or hallways. Several times during my approximately 48 hours of bewilderment (and frequent dismay), Jeff Fordham took time out from his packed schedule of decanal obligations to walk with me, his arm around my shoulder, and present me to an appropriate professor from a school that was in the market.

Earlier that year, the Penn faculty had nominated me for a clerkship with Chief Justice Warren. At about 6:30 p.m. one evening in February of 1960, I encountered Dean Fordham just leaving his office, obviously on his way home. He spontaneously observed that I appeared perplexed. I told him that I had several attractive teaching offers that were about to expire and that I was uncertain what course to take because I had not yet heard from the Supreme Court. He immediately turned around, unlocked his office, invited me in, sat down at his desk, and penned a letter to the Chief Justice. Within two weeks, I learned that I had the clerkship. I was enormously grateful to Jeff Fordham then, and I have been enormously grateful to him ever since.

I leave it to others in this dedicatory issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Law* to salute Jeff Fordham for his seminal contributions to the fields of Local Government and Legislation, and to pay tribute to his lifelong dedication to individual rights — often at times and places when it was singularly unpopular to bear that torch. My homage is from the perspective of a young law student. That was more than a quarter of a century ago. I repeat: Jeff Fordham was the first person associated with legal education that I ever met. I have met no finer since.