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Leon Lazer: The Giant Among Us

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LEON LAZER: THE GIANT AMONG US

*Howard Glickstein**

One of my early missions, when I became dean of Touro in January 1986, was to introduce myself (and the school) to the leading members of the bar, judiciary, and political world. As I compiled my list of people to meet with, Leon Lazer was a person consistently recommended to me.

At the time I first met him, Leon was a member of the New York State Supreme Court, Appellate Division, Second Department. It is no exaggeration to say that Leon was considered the intellectual leader of that court. His opinions were the most scholarly and the most persuasive. His views did not always prevail, however. He wrote an opinion in an early school financing case that found the then system of financing schools to violate the New York State Constitution. He was reversed by the New York Court of Appeals where there was a dissenting opinion by Judge Jacob Fuchsberg. A few years ago, the New York Court of Appeals changed its mind and agreed with Judge Lazer's earlier conclusions.

My first meeting with Judge Lazer was in a diner (I would have suggested a better place if I had known of his interest in food and wine). I discussed with him Touro's plans for the future and urged him to become involved with our development. Judge Lazer had long been a leading figure in the Huntington community having served as Town Attorney and in many other important positions. He agreed that he would lend his prestige and wisdom to assist the school in any way he could. He soon became a member of our Board of Advisors (now Board of Governors) and a member of our faculty, a development I will relate in a moment.

Unfortunately, Judge Lazer became a victim of New York's

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judicial election system, a system that frequently injects politics into the judicial selection process and unseats many fine judges. To the dismay of those who knew of Judge Lazer's contributions to the judiciary, he was defeated for reelection. I let the dust settle a bit and then spoke to him about teaching at the law school. He declined and instead chose a large Manhattan law firm. That was a short lived experience, and he was then receptive to my invitation to join Touro's faculty.

Judge Lazer's transition to academia had a few rough spots. As a member of the judiciary, he was accustomed to saying "it is so ordered" and as a member of a large law firm he had an army of assistants to call upon. At the law school, he was more at sea. He once asked me when pads and pencils would be delivered to him. I told him he was on his own and had to seek them out at faculty services. In the classroom, however, he was not at sea. He is a magnificent teacher who shares with his students his deep knowledge of the law, its role in society and the functioning of the many institutions that are a part of our system of justice.

And Judge Lazer's impact on Touro goes far beyond the classroom. When Judge Lazer speaks at a faculty meeting, faculty members stop reviewing their class notes and listen. His is a voice of wisdom and creativity. He has participated in developing policy for the law school and been a member of the most influential faculty committees. His reputation continues to enhance the reputation of the law school. He remains admired and looked to as a leader by members of the bar and the judiciary. The well established Leon Lazer Supreme Court Review program is now one of the State's preeminent continuing legal education programs. Judge Lazer started that program and is responsible for its growth and success.

Leon Lazer has had an indelible impact on Touro. He has been a leader of our faculty while, at the same time, remaining active and influential in the wider legal community. I remain convinced that one of my principal contributions to Touro was my lunch at a dinner with Leon Lazer.