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A Tribute to Judge Lazer

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A TRIBUTE TO JUDGE LAZER

*Eileen Kaufman**

It's impossible to pay proper tribute to Leon Lazer in just a few words. His brilliant career as a celebrated lawyer, a renowned judge, and a beloved professor cannot be adequately reduced to a few paragraphs. So instead I will focus on what always struck me as Leon's defining attribute – his love of the law expressed through his unwavering commitment to getting it right. I witnessed this firsthand as reporter to the Pattern Jury Instructions Committee, which Leon chaired for over thirty years.

I first met Leon in 1988 when I interviewed to be a reporter for the PJI Committee. (The PJI Committee produces a multi-volume set of books each year that provides the black letter jury instructions in civil trials and also serves as a highly regarded treatise on New York law.) Like many before me, I was totally intimidated in Leon's presence – after all, I was well aware of his reputation as the towering intellect of the Second Department. Of course, he did very little to put me at ease – instead he grilled me on my experience, my work ethic, and my scholarly prowess.

Happily, he did hire me, and for eighteen years we worked together on the PJI Committee. At that time, the committee met one weekend a month in an airless room on the top of the criminal court building in lower Manhattan for eight or nine hours a day. By the end of the day some committee members were nodding off, but never Leon. Leon remained attentive to every detail, insisting that each word inserted into PJI was accurate, and questioning whether we had chosen the best way to convey the meaning we sought. Leon insisted on both technical accuracy and comprehensibility, two goals that are often hard to reconcile. Days after the meeting, Leon would send emails to the Committee indicating that he had been mulling over an issue and suggesting better language than what the committee had

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decided after hours and hours of deliberation. Writing by committee is always challenging but writing by a committee chaired by Leon Lazer meant the process took ten times as long and the final product was twenty times better.

We were so fortunate to have Leon on our faculty at Touro Law Center, where he shared a lifetime of knowledge and practical experience with our students. He brought the same dedication and commitment to his teaching that he brought to every intellectual endeavor. What better role model for our students than a professor who insisted on getting it right and who believed passionately in the nobility of the profession.

I saw Leon a few days before he died. While his health had clearly deteriorated, his mind had not. That last conversation was so typical – filled with talk about recent case developments and, of course, politics and current events.

Leon will always be a true hero to me – because of his passion for the law in pursuit of justice, because of his enormous intellect, and, although he often tried to mask it, because of his heart which was as boundless as his mind.