

Widener University Delaware Law School

From the Selected Works of Thomas J Reed

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William J. Connor: April 14, 1919-April 5, 1987; Father, Husband, Political Leader, Community Leader, Musician, Professor, Lawyer and Friend

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WILLIAM J. CONNER

APRIL 14, 1919 – APRIL 5, 1987

FATHER, HUSBAND, POLITICAL LEADER,
COMMUNITY LEADER, MUSICIAN, PROFESSOR,
LAWYER, AND FRIEND

This issue of the *Delaware Journal of Corporate Law* is dedicated to the memory of William J. Conner.

Remarks of Dean Anthony J. Santoro and Associate Dean Thomas J. Reed***

For the second time in less than a year, we have been asked to write a memorial because of the death of a valued friend and colleague. Bill Conner's death in April of this year diminished the law school. His energy and enthusiasm were an inspiration to all.

Bill enjoyed a very distinguished professional career. He was a 1942 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the Minnesota Law School. After serving with Army intelligence during World War II and after brief service with the Justice Department, Professor Conner joined the Du Pont Company. For almost twenty years he remained on the company's legal staff. Bill was part of the Du Pont team which settled the massive celluloid antitrust litigation shortly after World War II. In the 1950s and 1960s, Bill was the environmental law expert for the Du Pont Company. Bill used to be proud that he was

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replaced in 1967 by a department which eventually grew to a staff of sixty-seven attorneys.

During his twenty year stay with the Du Pont Company, he was heavily involved in Republican politics. Though Bill acquired many mementos of his early days in politics, his proudest possession was probably a picture of Bill shaking hands with President Eisenhower. Bill had served as chairman of the Delaware Citizens for Eisenhower-Nixon in 1952.

Bill's wife, Louise, was, if anything, more involved politically than he was. Louise ran for State Treasurer unsuccessfully. She subsequently ran for State Senator from the fourth district in New Castle County, and was reelected twice. Bill and their four children were the greater part of the Louise Conner campaign staff for all of Louise's career.

As the result of the Conners' political activities, Bill became interested in public office. His opportunity came with the reorganization of New Castle County. From 1967 to 1972 he served as New Castle County's first elected County Executive. Being the first County Executive did not intimidate Bill. Indeed, if anything, it motivated him to demonstrate that government could be very efficient at the local level. His proudest achievement in office was showing that local governments can effectively manage local matters.

At the end of his term in office, Bill was given the opportunity to serve the federal government. In 1973 he moved to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare where he served as Press Secretary to Frank Carlucci, the then Undersecretary to Caspar Weinberger. The arrival of the Carter administration to Washington took Bill to a new job as Director of the National Center for State Courts in Denver, the position which he held until coming to the law school. It is amusing that Bill Conner, who for so many years had been influential in guiding the law school, came to it by accident. Unaware that a new law school had been started in his adopted state of Delaware, Bill was seeking to move to a lower altitude. Informed matter-of-factly about the existence of the fledgling law school, Bill inquired of the dean, and the rest is history.

Professor Conner taught Administrative Law, Environmental Law, and Legislative Drafting during his service to the law school. He was a very active member of the Delaware State Bar Association Continuing Legal Education Committee, performing the essential role of bringing the law school and the bar into partnership on continuing legal education programs. He also served as the faculty advisor to the Law Student Division of the Delaware State Bar

Association. In this capacity, Bill aided in developing a stronger relationship between the students and the members of the bar.

During the short period of time that we knew Bill, we came to regard him as a very special person. He was, of course, as intelligent and as well read as his distinguished career would suggest. He was also a very warm and caring person who believed that a person had an obligation to make this world a little better for having passed through it.

Bill and Louise Conner were special people. When a new faculty member came aboard, Bill and Louise would see to it that the fledgling faculty member was introduced to a number of well placed people in Wilmington. The Conners made a real effort to make newcomers feel at home here. Bill continued this effort after Louise's death in 1983.

There are many things that we will remember fondly about Bill. Of all the honors he received, he was especially proud of an award he received just two years before his death. In 1985 he was presented by the Delaware Humanities Council Alumni Association with the Joseph P. DeTuffo Award for Distinguished Service to the Humanities. That award was special to Bill because it was given to him jointly with his wife Louise who had died two years earlier. He had been extremely devoted to Louise and was proud that she was so honored. For him it seemed to mean that she was with him again, if only for a brief period.

Of course, there are other things to remember about Bill Conner. He was a man who loved a banquet or affair. Whenever two people gathered in friendship, Bill was delighted to join them. Indeed, whenever someone was needed to go to a function in the dean's stead, Bill was always ready.

There were many people in Wilmington whom Bill could count as special and intimate friends on both sides of the political fence. A party at the Conner house would be organized to bring together people because they loved music, not because they were politically aligned with his own philosophy of moderate, progressive Republicanism. Bill sang baritone in the Saengerbund in Wilmington for nearly two decades. He also played a wicked piano, supported by his ever-present "fake book" of popular music.

Whenever Bill had the opportunity, he would inch his way toward the piano during the course of the evening, and before long all in the house would be singing some happy rendition. He also managed to find the time to write original compositions, and nary a faculty member escaped being the subject of those compositions.

It seemed that at least one of us was always a special target—and we loved it.

Professor William J. Conner is missed by his colleagues at the law school, he is missed by the legal community of Delaware, and he is missed by the community he so deeply loved and served.

*Remarks of the Honorable Andrew D. Christie**

William J. Conner was dedicated to the idea that lawyers, because of their training and their knowledge of government, had a special duty to take an active interest in public issues and in government.

I first got to know him and his equally dedicated wife, Louise, almost forty years ago. He was then a busy lawyer with the Du Pont Company. He and his wife were active in a political club made up largely of relatively young idealists who were trying not only to uphold the traditions of their own political party but also to reform the election laws and state, county, and municipal governments. Furthermore, they wanted to reform their own party.

The Connors always actively sought that which they felt was right, and they did so cheerfully and optimistically even in the middle of controversy. To Bill, if the goal was sound and the means were both proper and legal, good people in general, and lawyers in particular, had a clear duty to render active support.

As one of those recruited by Bill to join that political group, I will never forget the general line of reasoning he took: If you think government is as it should be, you, as a lawyer, should pitch in to help keep it that way. If you think government needs to be improved, your voice as a lawyer can and should play a part in the improvement. If you don't take an interest and an active role, how can you be sure that others will?

The challenge which Bill and Louise presented to lawyers and others was reflected in their own activities and interests. In 1967 after twenty years as a corporation attorney, Bill left his secure job with the Du Pont Company to enter the very insecure field of politics. He was elected to be the first County Executive of New Castle County and served with distinction for six years. Thereafter, he served the federal government for three years and the National Center for State Courts for an additional three years. Meanwhile, Louise had served several years as a State senator.

* Chief Justice, Supreme Court of Delaware.

Bill became Professor of Law at the Delaware Law School in 1977 where he was able to share his experience and knowledge of law and government in numerous ways with both students and faculty members. As a trial judge and later as Chief Justice, I often called upon him for advice and for time-consuming service on all sorts of important projects. He never turned down an assignment and never failed to contribute to the project at hand, and he did so cheerfully.

Typical of Bill was his action the week before he died when he appeared with his pastor in the pulpit of his church to share his views with the congregation as to what might be done to reduce the danger of atomic war. He had been sharing his thoughtful views all his life.

The real way to honor Professor Conner is to strive to instill in future lawyers the urgent sense of dedication to service which he never ceased to feel.

*Remarks of The Reverend Bernard S. Hillenbrand**

Will the real Bill Conner step forward!

Is the real Bill Conner the slightly round Germanic looking gentleman with the mischievous smile playing the accordion and leading the group in a song that fills the room and our hearts with mirth and joy?

Is the real Bill Conner the astute political leader? Is he the elected County Executive of New Castle County who, teamed with his wife State Senator Louise Conner, fought so many battles for improved government and who jested that "bedfellows make strange politics"?

Or is the real Bill Conner the loving father and husband who was so solicitous and so proud of his family? Or is he the wise professor carefully preparing his classes? Or the astute lawyer weighing strategy and consequences in an important case? Or the community leader building support for innovative programs?

The answer is that the real Bill Conner was all these things and many more. He was, and for us will always be, a complex and wonderful man from his birth in Minnesota to his death in Delaware.

He certainly was one of Bemidji, Minnesota's most famous sons. He was one of the most effective and productive Presidents of the National Association of Counties (NACo) where I served as

* Executive Director, Chevy Chase Community Ministries, Washington, D.C.

Executive Director. He was also one of the world's worst drivers. I can look back in horror to a study tour in England where he insisted on driving. He, of course, began driving on the right. It was pitch black. We zinged down country lanes at great speed and he often missed road signs. Not to worry. He simply backed up and turned the car sideways so that the directions could be read in the headlights. Louise was calm and unconcerned and the rest of us sat frozen with fear!

Or the time he picked me up at my office in Washington and was so proud of his car which he had just got back from the shop. All the many dents were gone and with its fresh paint it looked brand new. We drove ten blocks to the Windsor Hotel and he promptly backed into a concrete wall and smashed in the rear bumper.

My favorite memory is Bill's coming to me in a very dark hour for both of us. It was the height of the Viet Nam war. He, the Republican, and I, the liberal Democrat, were deeply troubled. We had had NACo briefings by the Secretary of State Dean Rush and even President Lyndon B. Johnson. However, we could not understand or support the policy of intervention. I was filled with guilt that I did not have the courage to quit my job and go to jail in protest. He was equally troubled but always capable of responding in a level headed fashion. Bill pointed out that being arrested in a protest might satisfy our egos but it would be at the expense of the constructive things we were trying to do in county government.

The last time that I was with him he was planning a great trip to China and Russia, and he was borrowing some of our books. Typically he was filled with excitement and very interested in getting every scrap of information in advance of the trip.

When someone makes a bad pun (as he so often did) or displays a smile that seems to come from miles down inside (as he also so often did), I think of Bill and Louise, for they were a real team. These adjectives come to mind to describe our great friend: bright, sensitive, humorous, caring, determined, bull-headed, honorable, courageous, gentleman, warm friend, dedicated, reformer, leader, fun-filled, joyful, God-loving, innovative, and an American.

In short, in private and in public life, Bill Conner was a real human being. A minister once said that he believed that in heaven we will continue for all eternity to study, question, learn, and grow towards perfection—never quite getting there. It is easy to see Bill, reunited with Louise and both of them growing and glowing with interest and excitement. He leaves this place better and more beautiful than he found it by both his direct actions and his great impact

upon others. In the great classroom of life, we are all in one way or another his "students" and he is our "Professor."

*Remarks of James T. McKinstry**

I had the good fortune to know Professor William Conner in various contexts. I worked with him in citizen reform movements, as a partisan political worker and candidate, a lawyer, law professor, and early advocate of the cause of continuing legal education. I knew him as a friend. I witnessed his keen interest in his church and his involvement in church music many years ago. I visited him in his home while his young ones were growing up and knew, so well, his beloved wife, Louise, who gave so much of herself to her myriad of interests which coincided remarkably with his own. What a team they were!

Bill Conner was consistent in what he brought to all of these callings and relationships. Always, he injected an infectious feeling of enthusiasm and total commitment into the project at hand. He was goal-oriented with a clear and reliable sense of what was right and wrong and the capability and courage to convey that sense to others when appropriate to do so. He was tireless in all that he did. Above all, he had a sense of humor that helped sustain his co-workers and colleagues during the inevitable times of disappointment and discouragement and which added zest and exhilaration to those times of success and accomplishment. I don't think that Bill Conner ever became tired and was never daunted or discouraged by the frustration of occasional disappointing news and developments.

I was always pleased to understand that Bill considered me a personal friend and that he claimed to rely on me in some of his many causes. This was the mark of the man as a leader. He instilled in people the feeling that they were important and effective contributors to worthy causes that he was advocating or directing. He had the ability to harness the contributions of the many people whom he involved in community service and projects and to bring them together to achieve the goals that he was working toward. He made us all feel important. I will remember Bill for his high sense of purpose and enthusiasm for the work at hand, as well as for his humor and upbeat, positive view of life. He is missed by all who knew him and worked with him.

* Partner, Richards, Layton & Finger, Wilmington, Delaware.

*Remarks of Millard H. Ruud**

Barbara Dailey and I came to know William J. Conner and Louise Thompson shortly after we became first year law students at the University of Minnesota in September 1940. My special memories of Bill Conner during our law school years include the spirited exchanges during the weekly *Minnesota Law Review* case reporting sessions. The members of the editorial board and the aspirants for it reported on the cases they found in their assigned reporters which they thought deserved comment in the *Review*. The extinct but wonderful institution attracted such faculty members as William Prosser, Stefan Reisenfeld, and Henry Rottschaeffer. We enjoyed the exchanges among the faculty. Bill did more than his share in making each session an intellectual challenge and joy. I remember, too, the Phi Delta Phi luncheon meetings and parties. The minutes for the former by custom were required to be efforts at humor. I unfortunately had to match Bill's efforts when I succeeded him as secretary.

Bill and Louise loved to sing even then. Whether the venue was a party, the Little Brown Jug (a campus beer joint), or even the law school late in the evening it was fun. I remember, too, his participation in the after-the-library-closed-to-all-but-the-law-review-types debates or discussions on new developments in the law. Irving Shapiro, who was later to be Bill's boss at Du Pont, was a participant too in those late hour sessions.

The Phi Delta Phi initiation process in those innocent days included an interview or interrogation during which the elders had their fun by trying us neophytes. I still remember Bill's interrogation in which he used "meretricious" and "meritorious" to test the knowledge and mental agility of this neophyte.

As a law student Bill manifested his interest in and enthusiasm for the law's intellectual challenge and in legal education.

Our paths were not to cross again until years later. Bill and Louise had married, raised a family, and found their careers. And so had Barbara and I. Bill Conner had come to Washington in 1973 to serve as Deputy Undersecretary for Regulatory Affairs, Department of Health, Education and Welfare. That fall I came to Washington to serve as Executive Director of the Association of American

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Law Schools. While the Association had an interest in some new regulations, our association was largely social. In 1974 Bill became Associate Director of the National Center for State Courts, then situated in Denver. We then had a professional association also. The venue was the periodic meetings of the national organizations interested in continuing legal education of the bench and bar.

When the National Center decided to move to Williamsburg, Bill Conner's career was at another crossroads. Switching the roles we had as students, he came to me for counsel. What was law teaching like and what were the possibilities?

Fortunately for Delaware Law School and for him, Dean Arthur A. Weeks and his colleagues had the good judgment in 1977 to ask William J. Conner, Esquire, to become Professor William J. Conner.

At the Association's meetings and workshops, Barbara and I had opportunities to visit with Professor Conner about the "good old days" and the happy present days. Louise's death was an especially great loss to Bill, but he manifested good spirits and continued enthusiasm for his life in the law. I did not have the good fortune to be Bill's faculty colleague. However, I know that he was a delightful colleague and that his enthusiasm and respect for the law and legal profession infected his students.

We shall all miss him.

*Remarks of William E. Wiggin**

I had the good fortune to know William J. Conner for many years. I first knew him as that genial and accomplished public servant who set the style for modern county government in Delaware. I came to know him far better in the last three years of his life, when he was giving so generously of himself to our profession, both to the Bar, and to those students from whom the Bar must renew itself by periodic infusions of the talented and the well trained. His professorship at Delaware Law School was more than academic, embracing not merely the acquisition of learning but the effective application of learning to practical ends in our world of work as lawyers.

I am reminded in particular of his dedication to Continuing Legal Education. He served with distinction in the Bar effort to establish the present system of mandatory instruction. Bill made it

* Executive Director, Delaware State Bar Association.

his business to be informed about the best and most innovative ways of bringing to the Bar that continued enhancement of past learning necessary for continued excellence. His counsel to the Continuing Legal Education Committee of the Delaware State Bar Association was decisive in shaping this instructional service we now bring to members of our profession.

In the closing years of his life, those of us who worked with him were all beneficiaries of his accumulated experience and humane wisdom. To lose a man of Bill Conner's quality is a deprivation, for which, nevertheless, we may to a degree console ourselves in remembering that we were privileged to know him at his extraordinary best.