Von's Oklahoma

Dennis W. Arrow, Oklahoma City University School of Law
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When I had my OCU “flyout” during late January of 1975, Von Creel was already an OCU legend. He’d just taken leave from the law faculty to serve as then-Governor David Boren’s first Executive Assistant. Von was 32.

Since, for some inexplicable reason, Von prioritized helping the State’s new Governor deal with the Legislature and an ice storm more highly than interviewing me, I didn’t have the opportunity to meet him during my brief flyout. But from the rest of Von’s law school colleagues I heard stories of his academic brilliance, masterful teaching, reliable judgment, and human decency. All of the “Von stories” were told with great pride and affection. Whoever Von was, I knew, he must be someone very special.

When I met Von after I joined the OCU faculty that fall, I discovered why. I came to know him better and better during each of the ensuing 36 years, and I’m now honored to narrate my own “Von story” with my greatest respect and affection.

A proud son of Oklahoma, Von was born in Ardmore in 1942, of parents whose families had settled during the 1880s in what was then the Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory (now Carter County, Oklahoma). When Von was 2, his parents resettled the family in Midwest City. Never succumbing to wanderlust, Von has lived in Midwest City for the past 67 years.

Von attended grammar and high school there, and early on developed his interests in politics, political campaigns, and history. He decided that he liked Ike in ’52, and reports that he can’t recall a time at which he wasn’t interested in politics and history. He pursued those interests as a history major at OU, receiving his B.A. with distinction in 1964.

* Professor of Law, Oklahoma City University.
After graduating, Von was awarded a Ford Foundation fellowship to do graduate work at OU and research work for Oklahoma’s Legislative Council. During his 1964–65 fellowship year, he began to develop personal relationships with legislators (and other Oklahoma officeholders and judges) that would enrich his understanding of Oklahoma politics, his teaching, and his scholarship. While I haven’t checked this with Von (and he’s too modest to characterize things this way in any event), my many conversations with Von have convinced me that he’s probably known almost everyone who was anyone in Oklahoma politics (or on the bench) during the last fifty years. I’m also convinced that he remembers almost all of what they said.

Von entered law school at OU in the fall of 1965, and graduated (Coif) with its class of 1968. Von describes that class as “the class of David Boren and others,” and with characteristic modesty describes himself as “one of the others.” All of the others who I’ve come to know describe Von as a leading light of that illustrious class.

After graduating from law school, Von engaged in private practice for a year and accepted a clerkship with then-Tenth Circuit Chief Judge Alfred P. Murrah in 1969. He left that clerkship upon his appointment to the OCU law faculty in 1971. With the exception of his 1975-to-1977 leave to serve as then-Governor Boren’s Executive Assistant, Von has taught at OCU for the last 40 years.

In 1977, Von married his magnificent wife Mary at a home he’d built in Midwest City a couple of years earlier; together they raised their family there. On the OCU front, Von continued his legendary teaching (in many areas, but mostly in Civil Procedure, which he describes as the “queen of all legal subjects”). His former students describe him as having a supportive (if neo-Kingsfield) teaching style, and they

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1. Von reports that his first post-retirement book will likely be about Josh Lee, a one-term U.S. Representative from Oklahoma’s fifth congressional district who was elected U.S. Senator in 1936. Lee, Von reports, had been an OU speech professor when he was first elected to the House, and when he successfully campaigned for the Senate in ’36, Lee was backed by a group of young supporters called the “rover boys.” Many of the “rover boys” later became state leaders, including Alfred P. Murrah, then 32, who later became the Chief Judge of the Tenth Circuit (for whom Von clerked).

   Josh Lee? The “rover boys”? Who else would have known?

2. A conversation about a University-related issue that I had with Von the other day provides a typical example that gives me such confidence. After Von and I turned over the issue a few times, Von observed, “Well, as [former Oklahoma Attorney General] Jan Eric Cartwright used to say, ‘You never have to explain what you don’t say.’” It was the perfect observation.
gratuitously comment to me on the appreciation they have for him as a teacher and mentor. At least with the wisdom of hindsight, all of them seem to have relished having to stand in Von’s class when called upon for a case. No OCU law professor is more beloved by former students, and none of Von’s former students has the slightest doubt about his genuine concern for their success.

Von’s interests in history, Oklahoma politics, and Oklahoma legal history enrich all of his published scholarship, whether substantive-law oriented or overtly historical. Substantively, he has written about capital punishment and right-to-work laws in the State. His works on the history of Oklahoma’s courts include articles about federal courts during Oklahoma’s pre-statehood Indian Territory years, state courts during Oklahoma statehood, and the jurisdictional “no-man’s land” that existed for some criminal-case appellants during the transition from territorial to state courts. Still other of Von’s work addresses the impact of socialism and the early-twentieth-century “progressive” movement on Oklahoma’s political and legal history.

Von is also interested in people, and in how interesting and influential people affect the political, legal, and cultural environment around them. Unsurprisingly, Oklahoma’s first century (and Von’s own


personal knowledge about many of its most influential citizens) presented Von with a tapestry of characters from which to draw, and some of his published work is biographical. His interests in Oklahoma legal history have also caused him to write about Oklahoma's law schools.

Von’s strong commitment to law school and university faculty governance, his sound and balanced judgment, and the breadth and depth of his experience have caused him to become a universally respected voice about law school and university governance issues at OCU. He has served as the law school’s representative to the University’s Promotion and Tenure Committee, it seems, “the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.” After a well-deserved hiatus, the law school faculty again elected him to the Faculty Senate Executive Committee two years ago. And when the law school faculty determined a few years ago that a faculty member should serve as Chair of the faculty and its meetings, there was little doubt who would be the best among us to so serve. Von’s tenure as the Chair of the law school’s faculty has been marked by his equanimity, professionalism, and efficiency, and though his retirement will force us to elect a new Chair for AY 2011-12, no one other than Von has ever been elected to that position.

Both Von and Mary suffered significant health challenges over the last decade, and Von’s beloved Mary passed away in June 2009. She, too, was a very special person, who to the very end faced her health challenges not only with great courage but also irrepressible good cheer. Despite the fact that no one has ever loved a spouse (or children, or grandchildren) more than Von, he dealt with her loss (and his own health challenges) with as much dignity and courage as can be imagined.

But Von (who takes the stairs to his third-floor office while I ride the


elevator) has now returned to good health, and has returned full force to his former role(s). When I recently asked him why he was retiring at such a young age (and at the very top of his game), he responded with a conversation he had had with Mary at a restaurant near its closing time a few years ago: the upshot was that he wanted to leave the restaurant without first being asked to leave. Von: *let not your heart be troubled.*

Because Von is unique, I fear that I haven’t done justice (and perhaps can’t) to what he has meant to me, to OCU, and to Oklahoma. But the following story (if at the micro rather than the macro level) may help add a touch of humanity to his most impressive *vita.*

Nearing Christmas times past, Mary would bake sensational “dishpan” cookies [would they be chocolate chip? coconut? cranberry?], and Von would bring gift-wrapped packages of them to the faculty and staff members to whom they were the closest. Though I’d inevitably forget the tradition in the crush of fall finals, I’d be delighted to find the delightful holiday present in my box (or if I happened to be in my office on “cookie day,” personally delivered by Von to my office door). On both of their behalves, Von still carries on that tradition, and my wife, Ju-Chuan, and I continue to enjoy “dishpan” cookies during our annual Christmas sojourns to Hawaii.

And how could one even attempt to describe what Von is really like without mentioning the OU football team?

Oklahoma made Von its own, and he’s all of the best (generous, genteel, informed, honorable, unpretentious, brilliant, friendly, and wise) that Oklahoma has to offer. He pretty much likes all things Oklahoma (well, maybe the OSU Cowboys a *little* less), and I haven’t heard as much as a mini-grouse from him about the Great Blizzards of ’11 (which continue into mid-February). In return, Von’s experiences, teaching, writings, and stories have made Oklahoma Von’s own, and he’s made Oklahoma both better and better understood. For Von’s very being, the same may be said of Von’s law school, his students, his colleagues, his friends, and his family.

So while we’re all very sad (for ourselves) to see Von retire, he’s earned it exceptionally well, and we’re all eager to see him flourish and enjoy his retirement.

But since we’re all also just a wee bit greedy (and since only Von could write it),¹¹ maybe we could coax Von to write just one more book

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¹¹. See, e.g., *supra* notes 1–2 and accompanying text.
than he’s already planned: maybe Stories in Oklahoma Political History (or something exactly like that)?

Von: Thanks for your inspiration, your wisdom, and your friendship. You’ll all too soon be retired, but please don’t be a stranger. You’re a hero. All the best.