

American University Washington College of Law

From the Selected Works of Ira P. Robbins

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Our Taz

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OUR TAZ

Our dear friend Taz was an extraordinary human being. He was a brilliant and extraordinarily prolific scholar and a gifted teacher—one of the best in the nation. But to us, most importantly, he was good and kind and compassionate. He was also humble. It's rare to find that combination in a person—brilliance and humility. Most brilliant people we know are not humble. But Taz was. He never had a bad word to say about anyone and always saw the good in everyone. He made others feel good about themselves.

When Taz joined our law school in the fall of 2012, he fit right in. The faculty loved that Taz was so engaged in scholarly discourse, having written four books and dozens of law review articles and co-authored textbooks on criminal law, criminal procedure, and evidence. His body of work is as voluminous as it is respected—both in the academy and among criminal justice practitioners. Taz was always willing to talk through others' ideas for an article or book—he might even give you ten pages of his thoughts on the topic! We loved that Taz spent several years in practice, as a state prosecutor, before becoming a law professor. The Trekkies, the geeks, and the nerds on the faculty appreciated his love of sci-fi, his expertise on all things intergalactic, and his unique brand of quirkiness. And the students loved Taz right from the start—his knowledge, his energy, his innate gift for teaching.

In 2013, the law school held a faculty retreat to discuss many matters important to the future of the law school. As at many faculties' retreats, there were diverse ideas over how best to move our law school forward. We were all passionate about the students and about the law school, but we had different goals as well as different approaches to implementing shared goals. And then Taz spoke. He made some good points (as had other people), offered some good suggestions (as had other people), and then somehow found a way to analogize our discussions to *Fiddler on the Roof*. His quirkiness kicked into overdrive when he started to sing "If I Were a Rich Man" (and do a little dance!), and then "Tradition." Any tension in the room

dissipated as the faculty first started to smile and then to laugh. Some joined him in the refrain. After being on our faculty for barely more than a semester, Taz made our lives a bit lighter and a bit brighter at that critical moment. This was the “Taz Effect.”

And then there was the laugh. We suspect that Taz was not really aware of how loud and startling his laugh was. He laughed often, and heartily. It was infectious, and it reminded us of the need to let go, to enjoy the moment, and to not worry what anyone around you thought.

One of the reasons Taz wanted to come to the Washington College of Law was to help us launch an institute to promote criminal justice reform and train the next generation of criminal law practitioners. The five of us—but especially Taz—labored tirelessly to bring this about. He worked hard on the Institute’s mission statement, which describes our shared vision.¹ In the spring of 2013, the faculty approved the creation of the WCL Criminal Justice Practice and Policy Institute,² and the Dean appointed Taz to be its first Director.³ Sadly, just a few weeks later, Taz was diagnosed with cancer. He never got the chance to implement his vision for the Institute, although it endures and thrives today.

Taz helped us to usher in a new level of collaboration and coordination among the criminal law faculty at WCL—so much so that we began secretly calling ourselves “The Conspiracy.” (Obviously the secret is now out.) This is perhaps the best and most enduring

1. The mission statement reads:

The Criminal Justice Practice and Policy Institute seeks to study and improve the practice of criminal law and justice. Much of the work of the Institute is aimed at law reform, whether changing the law on the books or altering the policies and behaviors that impact the criminal justice system. Our approach is multi-faceted and all-encompassing: we address the on-the-ground efforts of all criminal justice system participants—police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, legislators, lobbyists, non-governmental institutions, and grassroots change agents who work domestically or internationally, locally or federally. Just as our aim is to include all participants, our curricular scope also includes all areas—including, but not limited to, street crime, white collar crime, terrorism, international criminal justice institutions, computer crime, public corruption, etc.—in other words, state, federal, international, and transnational crimes. Our focus is also interdisciplinary: the Institute promotes research involving social scientists, neuroscientists, and humanists, as well as law professors.

Mission Statement, Washington College of Law Criminal Justice Practice and Policy Institute.

2. See *Criminal Justice Practice and Policy Institute*, AM. U. WASH. C.L., <http://www.wcl.american.edu/criminaljustice> (last visited Nov. 21, 2014).

3. See *Founders of the Criminal Justice Practice and Policy Institute*, AM. U. WASH. C.L., <http://www.wcl.american.edu/criminaljustice/faculty.cfm> (last visited Nov. 21, 2014).

example of the Taz Effect at WCL—his warmth, his charm, and his instinctively collaborative nature have created a successful, vibrant, ongoing Conspiracy.

Taz aimed to make the world a better place. He was a great teacher, a great scholar, and a great champion for justice. But most of all, Taz was a great human being. It was a true gift to have had him in our lives.

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