PROFESSOR VON RUSSELL CREEL: CHAPTERS

Vicki Lawrence MacDougall*

Any portrait of Professor Von Creel would, by definition, fail to capture the essence of the man. Professor Creel is blessed with the ability to enjoy very simple pleasures in life (family, friends, a good book, fine wine with a good meal, the art of conversation, furry friends, scholarship, and, of course, teaching); however, conveying the subtle complexities of his persona to provide the reader full insight into his character is a daunting task. Of course, Professor Creel’s love of books is well known, his favorite genres being history, biographies, and mysteries. Professor Creel not only owns thousands of books in his personal library, he has read and appreciated each volume.

1. Professor Creel has achieved a life-time record. He currently has five dogs (Toby, Buster, Red, Peanut, and Tinker Bell) and three cats (mother cat, Munchkin, and her two children, Lucy and Whiskers). Although there lacks clear definite proof, Professor Creel is suspected of occasionally providing bags of dry cat food to abandoned litters on campus. However, it is a proven fact that Professor Creel feeds “Percy” every day. “Percy” is a fox squirrel that appears on the ledge outside the window of Professor Creel’s third-floor office. “Percy” stands on his hind legs with his nose pressed to the glass until his food is placed upon the ledge. Professor Creel has fed “Percy” for at least thirty years. Because the maximum life expectancy of a fox squirrel is 12.6 years for females and 8.6 years for males (hopefully the reader will forgive the use of Wikipedia as the source of this trivia), the faculty strongly suspects “Percy” impersonators are afoot. Regardless, a "restrictive covenant" requiring the new occupant to feed “Percy” will most likely come with Professor Creel’s office upon his retirement.

2. Professor MacDougall and Professor Creel share a love of mysteries. Professor Creel and Professor MacDougall have had occasional conversations about books and authors through the years. Professor Creel is an incredibly literate man. Professor Creel has pointed out many authors that were unknown to Professor MacDougall, and Professor MacDougall has enjoyed countless hours of reading pleasure as a result. A heartfelt thanks for the reading suggestions.

3. Professor Creel acknowledges that he does not know how many volumes he has in his personal library. He eagerly observes that he would have a higher volume count if he included those books that are off-site. The subtle one-line wit is ever present. Professor Creel was referencing the number of books that Professor Creel has loaned to Professor MacDougall that perhaps have yet to be returned.

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development in one of his favorite Agatha Christie or Oklahoma’s own Carolyn Hart books takes place chapter by chapter. Each chapter provides a window into the soul and breathes life into the character. This tribute is an albeit modest attempt to provide a few “chapters” from the life of Professor Creel.

A huge chapter in any biography of Professor Creel would be devoted to teaching because Professor Creel is himself devoted to teaching and to his students. Professor Creel was born with “chalk dust in his veins.” Professor Creel remarked of his forty years at Oklahoma City University that it was “nice to be paid for something that he enjoyed.” There is no doubt that Professor Creel was referencing his interactions with students, both inside and outside the classroom. Professor Creel is a teaching legend at OCU. There are a multitude of factors that contribute to this legend, his Kingsfield-type style, his requirement that students stand in his first-year Civil Procedure class, his encyclopedic knowledge of the law in his main areas of teaching (Civil Procedure, Conflict of Laws, and Oklahoma Legal History), and his classroom presence and masterful delivery of material in his classic Socratic style. It is not surprising that Professor Creel’s favorite course to teach is Civil Procedure, “the foundation of all things.” Professor Creel provides an impression on the first day of Civil Procedure that will be imbedded into the memories of his first-year students for the remainder of their legal careers. Young 1Ls generally refer to Professor Creel as “Professor Von Creel.” “Professor Von Creel” appears to be the better title for the person responsible for the 1L experience of a lifetime, and it usually takes awhile before new students realize that “Von” is Professor Creel’s first name.5

4. The similarities with Socratic style, demanding classroom demeanor, and verbal eloquence invite comparison of Professor Creel with the legendary Professor Kingsfield from the classic movie The Paper Chase. Professor Creel enjoys Public Television, known for the annual marathons requesting pledges of support during selected programs. The Paper Chase was shown one year during the pledge campaign, and Professor Creel surprisingly watched his name scroll across the bottom of the screen with a promised pledge amount. Although it arguably was not the most ethical thing to do, Professor Creel appreciated the humor in the fact that one of his first-year students called in a pledge using his name while The Paper Chase was airing. In all good grace, Professor Creel simply paid the pledge. Professor MacDougall knows the names of the three culprits who thought this was a fine idea while under the influence; however, Professor MacDougall has refrained all these years from disclosing the identities to Professor Creel. Sober, these students greatly regretted this prank and were surprised that Professor Creel simply paid the pledge.

5. The author attended OCU Law from 1974 to December 1976, and the author
The initial exposure to Professor Creel no doubt leaves students in awe and perhaps fear. Respect soon follows. Perhaps more of a mystery is why Professor Creel has become the beloved professor among his students. It would be misdirected to point to the occasional classroom treats, such as the provision of a decorated birthday cake for his class to celebrate the anniversary of the landmark decision of *Erie Railroad Co. v. Tompkins* or the home-baked cookies that he brings on...
the last day of his classes each semester,\textsuperscript{10} as the reason that Professor Creel is held in such high esteem by his students. His excellent classroom teaching provides one piece of the puzzle. The other pieces that lead to his beloved status are that the students sense that Professor Creel genuinely has their best interest at heart, that he loves for students to learn, and that he cares very deeply about his students. Professor Creel always gives to his students his very best efforts,\textsuperscript{11} and he simply loves to teach and to observe students learn. Professor Creel’s favorite classroom moment is when a male law student proposed marriage to a female law student during Civil Procedure with the proposal duly accepted.\textsuperscript{12} How many students have had the honor of being taught by Professor Creel? A rough estimate is that Professor Creel has taught over 5,000 students in his forty years of teaching.\textsuperscript{13} Undoubtedly, he has

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\item[10.] When Professor Creel is observed carrying the cranberry cookies he makes from Mary’s recipe, another professor will inevitably remark, “Professor Creel, you are going to make the rest of us look bad.” Professor Creel will immediately respond, “Well, my colleagues make that so easy.” Professor, your colleagues will genuinely miss your one-liners.
\item[11.] Professor Creel’s devotion to his students is unequaled. Mary was in an intensive-care unit approximately a month prior to her passing. Von was by her side day and night. However, he only missed one class during this ordeal. The class he missed was for Mary’s funeral.
\item[12.] The male student requested permission for this rather unorthodox use of class time to which Professor Creel eagerly agreed. Another memorable teaching experience is the day Professor Creel taught Torts, or should I say, long minutes that Professor Creel taught Torts. One day before the author was to teach her Torts class, she and Professor Creel happened to meet outside the classroom. We were teaching in different sections, so I pointed out that it was simply unacceptable that half of the first year class was not exposed to the teaching mastery of “Professor Von Creel”; Professor Creel readily agreed to this statement. I suggested that he simply walk into my Torts class and call out a name to begin the first case to see the reaction of the class to the thought of “Professor Von Creel” as a substitute (the author was well aware that occasionally Professor Creel enjoyed a behind-the-scenes teaching prank like when he might suggest that we call on the same random student in both Torts and Civil Procedure when we taught in the same section). So Professor Creel walked into Torts with the casebook, the name of the first case, a list of students, and a verbal assurance that I would rescue him in “a couple of minutes.” Well, the author simply lost track of time (certainly not with malice aforethought) and entered the class to take over for Professor Creel a few minutes longer than perhaps Professor Creel was anticipating (what is ten or fifteen or twenty minutes among friends?). Professor Creel was, no doubt, conducting an excellent class, although he did not even know the subject before he entered the classroom, and even though my Torts book was upside down on the podium. For some reason, Professor Creel has reminded Professor MacDougall of this experience from time to time through the years.
\item[13.] With very few exceptions, Professor Creel always attends the Matriculation Convocation and Graduation each year. In forty years, Professor Creel believes he has only missed two Matriculation Convocations and no more than five Law School
had a major impact in the lives of countless young lawyers. When asked if he had any regrets regarding his career, Professor Creel responded that, “at one time, I really wanted to be a judge.”

However, I really do not regret not being a part of the judiciary because I was better suited for the academy. My students really are my extended family, and I delight in hearing about and sharing in their accomplishments. I am very thankful to have been associated with my classes throughout the years.

Your students return the admiration.

Professor Creel’s steadfast dedication to teaching is also reflected in internal academic debates within the faculty. From Professor Creel’s standpoint, it is clear that the most important part of our job as a law professor is teaching and that our utmost goal as an institution should be

Graduation Ceremonies. That will likely be one of the few records that will remain unbroken. His near perfect attendance record at these events is caused, for the most part, by the fact that he really enjoys seeing his students begin and end their law school careers.

14. At one time, Professor Creel came very close to being nominated for the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

15. Professor Creel delights in hearing about former students and has forged lasting relationships with students through the years. Perhaps most notable is his friendship and collaboration with former student, and Oklahoma attorney, Bob Burke. Professor Creel and Bob Burke have coauthored biographies on David Boren, BOB BURKE & VON RUSSELL CREEL, OKLAHOMA STATESMAN: THE LIFE OF DAVID BOREN (2008); Mike Monroney, VON RUSSELL CREEL & BOB BURKE, MIKE MONRONEY: OKLAHOMA LIBERAL (1997); Judge Alfred P. Murrah, VON RUSSELL CREEL, BOB BURKE & KENNY A. FRANKS, AMERICAN JURIST: THE LIFE OF JUDGE ALFRED P. MURRAH (1996); and Lyle Boren, BOB BURKE & VON RUSSELL CREEL, LYLE BOREN: REBEL CONGRESSMAN (1991); as well as a History of OCU LAW, VON RUSSELL CREEL & BOB BURKE, OKLAHOMA CITY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW: A HISTORY (2008). Bob Burke, from Broken Bow (“Little Dixie”), was in the 1978 Evening Division and worked on the 1978 David Boren senatorial campaign as a member of the “Boren Broom Brigade.” The “Boren Broom Brigade” was inspired by the campaign jingle sung by the Wilburn Brothers. The lyrics of the first stanza were as follows:

Let’s Clean Up Oklahoma
Boren is the Man
Promote, Get Out the Vote
He’ll Sweep Out the Old Guard Clan.

During the 1978 David Boren senatorial campaign, Professor Creel served as the Chair of the Campaign Committee, and Bob Burke served as the Campaign Manager. After returning from a long weekend of campaign efforts, Bob Burke enjoys telling the story of being called upon by Professor Creel in Civil Procedure. And called upon again on the last day of class. No student ever really forgets their “Creel moment.”
strength in the classroom. To some faculty, teaching is only a means to the ultimate career goal of publication. Although another “chapter” on Von’s life could easily be dedicated to his scholarship and multitude of published works that make significant contributions to the development of the law or provide insight into obscure Oklahoma legal or political history, Professor Creel constantly reminds the faculty that legal education is about the students and that the quality of teaching matters. It is undeniable that OCU LAW will lose an irreplaceable teaching asset upon Professor Creel’s retirement and that the students will lose a very dedicated advocate for their education.

Another “chapter” on Professor Creel’s life could easily be devoted to his “mastery” of the law. His in-depth knowledge of the law and his astute legal mind led to a twenty-year relationship as Of Counsel with the law firm of Linn & Neville. Professor Creel has what can only be described as an encyclopedic knowledge of Oklahoma legal and political history, Civil Procedure, and Conflict of Laws. He can recite practically verbatim sections and subsections and sub-subsections of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. The author taught Conflict of Laws several times early in her career and would visit Professor Creel in his office to gain insight into particular cases. His knowledge of cases, without referencing actual courts’ decisions, is remarkable. Few have his knowledge of Oklahoma legal or political history. The law school community will lose a great reference source upon Professor Creel’s retirement.

Professor Creel’s talent as an orator could easily form the basis of yet another “chapter.” Obviously, his verbal talents contribute to his teaching ability and reputation. However, his talented delivery of a speech, whether it is presenting an award, an introduction of a colleague at the Legal Affair, a soliloquy about at colleague at a retirement dinner, or the delivery of a memorial at a service, is something that every aspiring attorney should witness. Professor Creel delivers flawlessly

16. Professor Arrow has artfully described Professor Creel’s many published works in the tribute entitled Von’s Oklahoma. Dennis W. Arrow, Tribute, Von’s Oklahoma, 36 OKLA. CITY U. L. REV. 17 (2011). His many published works on Oklahoma legal and political history demonstrate a profound love for his home state.
17. His memory of some decisions can only be described as “photographic.”
18. Professor Creel’s participation during high school and college in debate no doubt helped fine-tune his verbal skills. As a high school debater, Professor Creel faced as an opponent a Muskogee High School debater named Rennard Strickland. Some years later, Professor Rennard Strickland would serve as Dean of Oklahoma City University School of Law from 1994 until 1995.
with just the right emphasis along with a touch of dramatic pause. All without one written note. Any observer should be rightly impressed.

Any attempt to discuss “chapters” in Professor Creel’s life would be incomplete without discussion of the importance of his presence to OCU as an institution. Professor Creel helped build OCU LAW for over forty years. Professor Creel began teaching at the law school when OCU had only an evening division and was housed in the “barracks.” Through hard work and dedication, Professor Creel helped metamorphose OCU into its modern form. At critical times in the history of the law school, Professor Creel provided valuable insight and direction. Professor Creel holds both a Bachelor and Juris Doctor degree from the University of Oklahoma. There is no doubt that he is a loyal OU alumni and an unquestionably avid OU football fan. However, there really is no “house divided.” There is no question that Professor Creel is manifestly devoted to OCU and sincerely works for the best interest of the School of Law. Professor Creel has provided quiet leadership and guidance through the years to the law faculty. In recent years, when the faculty desperately needed a faculty leader, Professor Creel stepped up to the plate to fill that role as well as assume the position of the first “Chair of the Faculty,” elected to serve by the full faculty.

Of course, another “chapter” would have to be devoted to interaction with his colleagues. Professor Creel always has time to converse with colleagues. His advice and insight is readily sought among the faculty and is always appreciated. He is a very loyal friend and principled man. Professor Creel cares about his colleagues, and his colleagues...

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19. Professor Creel’s passion for OU football and his affinity for being an “armchair quarterback” were perhaps reasons why the students requested his talents as a “sportscaster” for the annual “Powder Puff Football” games. His co-announcers in successive years were Professors MacDougall, LeFrancois, and Spiropoulos. Professor Creel is the only professor that has been asked to return to the limelight for a command performance.

20. It is a credit to Professor Creel that he rarely says negative things about colleagues. If someone says something about someone else to Professor Creel (let me assure the reader that would be a rare occurrence among the law faculty), he is likely to respond, “Well, they speak so highly of you.” That constant reminder of civility (as well as the witticism) will be sorely missed by the law faculty.

21. Professor Creel is a very cultured man, and the author does not remember Professor Creel ever using a curse word. That is an admirable trait in today’s time (or perhaps, at any time). I suppose with so many other fine words at his disposal, Professor Creel really does not need or want to resort to profanity. He is well spoken by nature. The author might feel the same way, but will confess to succumbing to the occasional use of a four-letter word.
care about him. The law school really is an “extended family” for Professor Creel. The retirement of Professor Creel will leave a void among the OCU LAW family.

Measured by any standard, Professor Creel has had an illustrious career. When asked what was his greatest accomplishment, Professor Creel immediately responded, “Persuading Mary to be my wife.” The biggest “chapter” in Professor Creel’s life would have to be devoted to his beloved wife Mary Carrol Ahrendt Creel (April 29, 1945 to June 4, 2009). Mary and Von were married on December 17, 1977. On December 20, 1979, Mary and Von adopted Christopher David (birthdate, November 11, 1979). When they were notified of the adoption, they had no crib or baby supplies. Although they obviously had a lot to do, it is not surprising that their first stop after picking Christopher up was the Gold Star Building to introduce Christopher to friends. On November 16, 1981, Caren Cae Barge joined the Creel family, and Cory Slater was born a little less than a year later on November 5, 1982. November became the month for birthday parties in the Creel household. Professor Creel’s office became adorned with the artwork of his children, and it was not unusual to have one or more Creel children

22. Professor Creel received the call from DHS (Department of Human Services) that he and Mary were proud parents while working in his office in the Gold Star Building. Von immediately called Mary, who was working as a nurse in a hospital neo-natal unit. After Von’s call, Mary walked back into the neo-natal unit and exclaimed to her fellow nurses, “Guess what? I am going to have a baby.” After the congratulatory hugs and exclamations, the other nurses wanted to know when the blessed event would occur. Mary replied, “This afternoon!”

23. Some memories do last a lifetime. The author was working at her desk when she saw Von and Mary, with Christopher in Mary’s arms, walk into the building. The author and many others in the law school family were delighted to share this thrilling moment with Mary and Von.

24. Professor Creel would immediately point out that November 16th is Statehood Day. Professor Creel’s in-depth knowledge of Oklahoma history reveals itself in almost any conversation.

25. For a brief time each year, Caren and Cory are the same age.

26. Three stair-step children would be daunting at times. One morning, the author dropped by Professor Creel’s office to discuss the law when she noticed that Professor Creel had shaved only one side of his face. One side was clean shaven; the other, covered in whiskers. Professor Creel always dresses professionally when he teaches, and he was in a suit and tie. So this did strike the author as a tad unusual. The author finally asked if Professor Creel realized he had only shaved half his face. He stated that he was in the middle of shaving when one of his children started crying, so he wiped off his face and went to help Mary (the joys of parenthood). When calm was restored, he got dressed and came to work. He noticed his half-shaved condition right before class. What did he do? What else? Professor Creel walked into class as if he owned the classroom and
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adorn the Gold Star Building. Prior to his marriage to Mary, Professor Creel lived for the law and Oklahoma politics. Marriage to Mary completed Professor Creel. As stated by Professor Creel, “The best thing that ever happened to me in my whole life was Mary. She taught me to appreciate autumn, pansies, trout fishing on the White River, and that everything tastes better with Tabasco.”

The retirement “chapters” of Professor Creel’s life have yet to be written. His retirement plans are obviously different than he expected them to be with Mary’s passing. Professor Creel has already committed to writing a book after retirement. He intends to spend more time with his grandchildren, Cody Devlin (born, December 7, 2004) and Carson Daniel (born August 15, 2006). Otherwise, Professor Creel does not have definitive plans for retirement; rather, he will move on with his life page by page. Hopefully, he will not forget his law school friends and will still remain an active part in the life of the law school. When asked about his forty years at OCU, Professor Creel remarked that he felt “very blessed to have had forty years at OCU.” Professor Creel continued, “Blessed be the person who finds satisfaction in his or her labor, and I have been so blessed.” With all due respect, Professor Creel,

27. The family vacations for the Creel family included three grandparents. Usually the grandparents would ride in a separate car. One year, the family was on the way to Spider Creek in Arkansas when they needed to make a quick stop at a convenience store. As any parent knows, pandemonium reigns when trying to quickly exit and reenter a car with young children, especially following a long car ride. After the foray into the convenience store, Professor Creel was starting to put the car in reverse when he heard a tapping on the driver’s window. He looked over, and the clerk was holding Cory up on the outside of the car. Oops! What could make the situation worse? Professor Creel looked over to see a look of horror on three pairs of grandparents’ eyes staring out from the other automobile. Perhaps this incident explains why Professor Creel enjoys the movie Home Alone.

28. The author suspects that Professor Creel will occasionally visit a casino or two.
it is OCU that has been blessed by your presence. OCU LAW has been blessed by your commitment, your loyalty, and your steadfast devotion to building an institution. The legal community has been blessed with your scholarship. The faculty has been blessed by your friendship, leadership, insight, and inspiration. And finally, your students have been blessed by your excellence in teaching, your commitment to the learning process, and your caring about them as students and as professionals. It is with great honor, and some sadness, that the Oklahoma City University Law Review dedicates the Spring 2011 issue to Professor Creel. Reflecting upon Professor Creel’s forty years at OCU LAW, the law school community simply says, “Bravo, Professor Creel.” A standing “O” for “Professor Von Creel.”