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Roy Morrow Bell, Chairman of the Board

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# A TRIBUTE TO DEAN MICHAEL H. DESSERT

*Roy Morrow Bell, Chairman of the Board*

I had the distinct honor and privilege to serve on the "search committee" that selected Dean Michael Dessent more than ten years ago. At that time, we were both unaware of how badly we needed Dean Dessent and how totally dedicated and competent he would be. As we look back, we could never have anticipated his contributions to the Law School.

Mike embraced California Western, our students, and our faculty as though they were his own family, which we now have become. As Mike returns to academia and sheds his Deanship, we are left with a healthy institution that has not only raised its academic status, but one which is now recognized on a national level. All but a handful of our distinguished faculty were recruited and brought into the Law School by Dean Dessent. We have expanded facilities, improved classrooms, and built a new administration center, all made possible by Mike's vision and dedication.

There can be no doubt that Dean Mike Dessent has left his mark on our 72 year old institution. But his mark is not in the bricks and mortar, or even the curriculum, but rather in the thousands of citizen lawyers whom he has touched. There is a tremendous burden on all who undertake to participate in the educating, nurturing and instilling of ethics and values into tomorrow's lawyers. I, for one, am humbled by the responsibility. Dean Dessent has never taken his eye off the sparrow, and because of that, we all can be especially proud and confident that today's graduates are prepared to be the leaders of the 21st century.

California Western School of Law is a stronger and better institution because of Dean Dessent. I have been proud to serve as this institution's Chairman of the Board, and in that capacity, to have served with Dean Dessent. We will miss Mike's leadership, but will never forget what he has done for us and we know he will always be there to support us.

*George N. Gafford, Chairman Emeritus of the Board; Professor Emeritus*

It was just about ten years ago that I learned what the word serendipity really meant.

The law school had long since moved into its then new building on the Point Loma campus, and it had attained its American Bar Association accreditation and membership in the Association of American Law Schools. It had endured the move away from Point Loma and the renovation of the great Italian Renaissance building on Cedar Street which had been the home of the school for Performing Arts, and it had suffered the indignities of arbitrary fire regulation. It had established a Law Review and an Internation-

al Law Journal. It had assembled an outstanding faculty, and it had instituted innovative and practical advocacy, clinic and counseling programs, and won numerous state and national competitions. It had weathered and divorced itself from the financial woes of its former university parent, and it was beginning to establish itself as a sound independent law school.

But it was ready for the next big step. It needed a strong and imaginative leader who could let the city, the state and the nation know what a really fine school it was. It needed an innovative academic with an astute business mind who could inspire the fashioning of programs, the establishment of management procedures, the raising of funds and the improvement of physical facilities, and the financial acuity which would enhance its income and control its expenses to make it financially sound—and take the school to the next plateau.

At that moment there became available and interested in California Western a man who had taught law, who had written on corporation law, who had practiced law in a major law firm, who had been legal counsel to the successively larger and more intricate corporate entities, and through his legal, business, civil and eleemosynary endeavors had developed remarkably wide and varied friendships and contacts in California and elsewhere. Despite the misgivings of some who might have preferred an individual who had been a lifelong law professor, but with the enthusiasm of others who thought—*serendipity*—he was precisely what the law school needed, Michael Dessent was appointed the third Dean of California Western School of Law in May of 1986.

Possessing the enthusiasm of youth, the experience of majority and the wisdom of maturity, Mike took the reins as if all that he had done before had been in preparation for being the Dean of this law school. Undoubtedly based upon many of his experiences with the Price Club, the new Dean promptly began taking on board outstanding assistants to establish a management team in control of carefully delineated departments. One of his early steps, perhaps inspired by his background with Fotomat, was to have a videotape prepared showing the advantages, the programs and the beauties of the school and its location for distribution to college career advisors and alumni recruiters. Likewise, many of his fiscal innovation and controls had more than likely resulted from his experiences with Central Savings and Loan!

The accomplishments of Dean Dessent during his ten-year tenure at California Western are awesome indeed. Perhaps it would not be inappropriate for us to be reminded of some of them here. By his tireless travel and his countless meetings with alumni and others in San Diego and throughout the nation, he has enormously enhanced the name and reputation of the school. Through his personal efforts and his guidance of a carefully fashioned student recruitment department and an excellent Admissions director, the number and quality of applications for admission to the school grew by leaps and bounds, far exceeding its competitors and the national averages.

Likewise by his own active participation, his selection of an outstanding Chief Financial Officer and his creation of a strong business office, the fiscal

management of the school and financial aid to the students have been precise, efficient, and reliable.

There have been well crafted and managed departments of Student and Minority Affairs, of Career Services, and Development and Alumni Relations. With great emphasis by Dean Dessent, and his recruitment of excellent Minority Affairs personnel, minority representation in the student body has risen consistently each year. Likewise, the record of placement by the Career Services department, again as the result of the recruitment and training of first-rate personnel and appropriate delegation, has been extraordinary.

Throughout the last ten years, Dean Dessent has delegated to well-selected Associate Deans the management of the law school's academic programs and faculty affairs. Twenty-seven of a present faculty of forty-four joined California Western during Dean Dessent's incumbency. In that time, the average faculty salaries and monies available to them for professional development have approximately doubled, due primarily to his efforts. As a result, the ability to recruit outstanding new faculty and retain the old has been greatly enhanced. In addition, with Dean Dessent's strong interest and financial encouragement, the faculty has made increasingly significant contributions in the publication of books and articles, in conducting and taking part in conferences, and in their participation in national and local professional and civil enterprises.

In the area of Development and Alumni Relations, Dean Dessent's accomplishments deserve the very highest praise. The Dean and his charming wife, Katy, who opened their lovely home and participated enthusiastically in numerous school activities, led by example with their remarkable generosity and philanthropy. From a Development Department which had hardly paid for its own expenses to one which obtains contributions from a greater proportion of its graduates than most long established law schools, the department under Dean Dessent mounted a successful capital campaign which raised over two million dollars, and over one million dollars in special grants.

The publications of the school are extraordinary, having become professional in appearance and content, widely circulated and appreciated. As a result of Dean Dessent's active participation, his boundless energy and commitment, and his fostering of remarkable enthusiasm and techniques among alumni as well as among law firms and other entities, the contributions to the school have risen to unprecedented heights, with annual giving having reached about \$100,000 a year in the last several years.

Another area in which Dean Dessent's leadership has been most evident has been the improvement of the physical facilities to the point where the school has changed almost beyond recognition. Major maintenance items in the main campus building, which had been deferred for years, were attended to, a magnificent new classroom was built, and extensive other improvements in furniture and fixtures in the sum of over 1.2 million dollars. The library was completely computerized at a cost of more than a quarter of a million dollars, and over \$600,000 was spent in upgrading both student and faculty technology.

The most dramatic change in the school's physical facilities was the addition of the administration and faculty office building on the northwest

corner of Cedar Street and Third Avenue, built as a result of Dean Dessent's indefatigable efforts. This attractive contemporary building, designed to blend with the handsome architecture of the older building, was completed at a cost of some six million dollars, imaginatively and economically financed through California Education Facilities Authority Revenue bonds and the very successful capital campaign.

Looking to the future, under Dean Dessent's management, the law school also acquired the valuable third corner across from the other two campus buildings for \$600,000. Presently improved with a small building which had been law firm offices, the property will be available for such eventual needs as a library expansion, clinic, specialized classroom or graduate programs.

Perhaps the most telling contribution made by Dean Dessent, the crowning achievement for which we must all be everlastingly grateful is evidenced, even after all the improvement and acquisitions, by the present financial condition of the law school. From a corporation with no reserves in 1986, California Western School of Law now has reserves in excess of nine million dollars. These reserves provide the protection and security so necessary to an independent law school which, while it has the freedom from the restrictive controls and fiscal limitations of a university, does not have the protection of its economic diversification.

Dean Dessent, we who love California Western thank you for all that you have done for the school. We hope that you have derived as much satisfaction from your ten years as Dean as the Board of Trustees, administration, faculty and students have enjoyed and benefitted from those years. We look forward to your continuing with the school as a member of the tenured faculty and are confident that your contributions to the school and to legal education have only begun. Few people have the opportunity or ability to exert a major influence on a education institution with such lasting effects as you have—you have acquitted yourself nobly, we salute and wish you well.

*Professor Michal R. Belknap*

I was the first person to join the California Western faculty after Mike Dessent became the Dean in April of 1986. I had been hired by Dean Ernest Friesen, but when I arrived I found someone else in charge. I also found a law school in rather dire financial straits. As I sat in my first faculty meeting, listening to a discussion of California Western's shaky economic situation, I found myself questioning my own sanity. Could anyone with all of his marbles have given up a tenured position at the University of Georgia to sign on to the crew of this sinking ship?

Ten years later I can look back on what once seemed like the height of folly and congratulate myself on a brilliant career move. With Mike Dessent at its helm, California Western has recorded some amazing achievements over the last decade. One building has become two. The faculty has nearly doubled in size, and the student body has grown significantly too. Yet, at the same time the quality of both has improved markedly. Many of the students in my first criminal law class back in the fall of 1986 could not gain

admission today. The professors who have joined the faculty over the last ten years are not only excellent teachers but also productive scholars, who have brought the school national acclaim in fields ranging from income tax to sexual orientation and from child custody to criminal procedure. The law school that once had to worry about how to pay the mortgage on its building now has enough money in the bank to begin a long-needed upgrading of the library's physical facilities.

Mike Dessent has not achieved all of this alone, of course. He had the assistance not only of the faculty but also of a superb and hardworking staff. But many of those who have contributed so much to the progress that California Western has made during the last decade are people Mike selected and hired. He has a talent for picking good people. One of his earliest acts as dean was to make Linda North Dewes the head of career services. Within six years she had become the president of the national law school placement directors organization. Mike once volunteered to serve on the faculty committee that recruits new professors. When that recruitment season ended, California Western had hired the largest and most impressive class of new professors in the recent history of the school.

I served on that Faculty Appointments Committee with Mike. When I learned he had put himself on it, I was less than thrilled. My assumption was that, because he was the dean, he would make all of the decisions and do none of the work. To the contrary, Mike shouldered most of the same responsibilities as the professors on the committee, yet deferred to us on matters where our expertise was greater than his.

That is typical of the way he has run the school. Mike's approach is to pick good people, then get out of the way and let them do their jobs. If you needed his help, he was always there to provide assistance and support. When I required money to travel to distant archives to do the research for a book on the history of the Warren Court, Mike found it. When I published something, I could always count on a congratulatory note from the dean. But unlike the academic autocrats who run some law schools, Mike did not micro-manage. He delegated responsibility for academic matters to the faculty and encouraged us to resolve problems ourselves. That has made teaching at California Western a bit more work than teaching at some other law schools, where the professors meet their classes and write their articles, and the dean takes care of everything else. But it has also made it far more enjoyable and rewarding.

Mike's approach has also left California Western well equipped to carry on without him. Since he is the only dean I have known during my ten years at the school, it is going to seem a little odd to have someone else presiding at faculty meetings and occupying the corner office on the second floor of the Campus Center. But I know that California Western can get along without Dean Dessent. We can get along without him because he has equipped us with the financial resources, the personnel, and the confidence to continue to improve and advance under another dean. Today California Western resembles far more the aircraft carriers some of us can occasionally glimpse from our office windows than it does the sinking ship that Mike Dessent and I boarded ten years ago. As Mike prepares to turn the helm over to Steven

Smith, I cannot help but reflect on how far we have come together. The Dessent decade has been one of truly remarkable progress for California Western.

Thanks Mike—for a whole lot more than just memories.

*Professor Arthur W. Campbell*

Let others cite Mike for doubling our school's faculty size and structural space, tripling our student applications, quadrupling our budget: res ipsa loquitur for a human dynamo. I want to thank Mike for what I regard as his unique leadership style: human touch coupled to humor. He maintained this style through periodic faculty revolts, staff breakdowns, and trustee grumbles evidenced true leadership—and his own personal integrity. In ten years I never saw him encounter an individual's need without an immediate personal response; never saw him unable to snap a tough situation—political or personal—into perspective with an instant humorous story or quip. Nobody else I've known or read about could have led our school through such challenging times, persuaded us to embrace so many innovations, yet kept us from slipping into a clumsy bureaucracy. He made us a first-rate law school; put us on the national map; and preserved us as a caring institution.

*Professor Marilyn J. Ireland*

Michael Dessent is one of a handful of people to whom this law school owes its very existence. Those who saved it from the collapse of California Western University obviously deserve much credit. But equal credit should go to Dean Dessent, who undertook the seemingly impossible task of saving this school at a time when all of legal education was in crisis. His vision and leadership have provided an essential ingredient to the emergence of California Western School of Law into the world of excellence in legal education. He did this by applying a management style that is perfectly suited for an educational institution; selection of the best people for the job together with support and encouragement for their endeavors.

Mike Dessent runs in the same class as the giants of legal education. There have been very few great law school deans. Those that come to mind share the attributes that Dean Dessent gave to California Western School of Law; a love of the law and a trust not only in his own judgement but in others who share his vision and dedication. California Western School of Law has been fortunate to have the services of one of the best.

*Professor Jacquelyn H. Slotkin*

Mike Dessent has been our Dean and CEO at California Western since 1986. He was a cum laude graduate of Northwestern University School of Law, Order of the Coif. Mike Dessent was an attorney at Gray, Cary, Ames

& Frye (when the firm had twenty-four lawyers), executive vice-president, general counsel and member of the board of directors of the Price Company, Fotomat Corporation, and Central Federal Savings & Loan. He is the author of *The California Corporation Manual*, a two-thousand page treatise on California corporation law which was published before he was thirty. He also knows more about baseball than anyone I know: he has a seat from Comiskey Park in his office, he has served on the Advisory Board of the San Diego Padres, and he has coached more "bobby socks" softball teams in La Jolla than any other coach. When I think "Mike Dessent", I think of "Cal Westernwear." For the nine years I have known Mike, he has worn something from the Cal Western logo—braces, tie, watch—almost daily. His Christmas gifts to faculty and staff—picture frames, jackets, letter openers, even wine—exhibited the Cal Western logo. He is proud of our school.

On a personal note, Dean Dessent has enthusiastically supported the Legal Skills program and its faculty. In his introductory remarks to visiting directors at last summer's conference, he stated that "law firms don't have time for training programs, and as a result, the burden on legal writing and skills teachers is enormous . . . [we] are right on the forefront of training people how to be effective as counsel when they graduate."

Dean Dessent has run Cal Western like a small "big business" and helped our law school—faculty, staff, and student body—to diversify and to grow. He is unique—a balanced combination of businessman, administrator, fashion plate—and a great sport!





MICHAEL H. DESSENT