Beloved tax professor dies
University community mourns L. Hart Wright

L. Hart Wright, the Paul G. Kauper Professor of Law at The University of Michigan and leading expert on U.S. federal and European tax procedures, died Tuesday, April 12, at the age of 65. He succumbed to radiation pneumonitis while undergoing treatment for lung cancer at Johns Hopkins University Hospital.

Law students, colleagues on the Law School faculty, and the many people throughout the University and Ann Arbor community who worked with Professor Wright and delighted in his tenacious enthusiasm for analysis and debate were deeply saddened by his loss. The Lawyers Club was filled with members of the Law School Community who gathered to mourn and reminisce about Professor Wright, about his unique style of wit, his upright and generous spirit, his superb skill and dedication as a teacher of legal analysis. In addition to the memorial by Robben Fleming which is given on the facing page, moving testimonials to Professor Wright’s impact on individuals and the community were offered by his long-time colleague Allan F. Smith and by former student Warren Elliott of the class of 1952.

In a written memorial statement, Dean Terrance Sandalow said: “In an era in which many members of university faculties have given primary allegiance to their scholarly specialties, Hart Wright consistently adhered to an older tradition. For more than 35 years, the University received his undivided allegiance. To it he gave unstintingly of his time, his energy, his many talents, and—he would have been unem-barrassed to say—his love. He received in return the only reward that was important to him, the respect and affection of his colleagues and of countless students.

“For all of us who were his colleagues, Hart’s death represents the loss not only of an esteemed colleague, but of a cherished friend. We shall miss his counsel, but even more, his comradeship.”

Born in Chickasha, Oklahoma, Professor Wright earned a bachelor of arts degree in 1939 and a bachelor of laws degree in 1941, both from the University of Oklahoma. After service in World War II, he earned a master of laws degree from the University of Michigan Law School in 1946.

At that time, Professor Wright joined the Law School faculty and began a long career of devotion to the welfare of the School and the larger University. During his more than 35 years on the faculty, he served on many University-wide committees, notably the faculty Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs. He chaired the Board in Control of Student Publications and the SACUA Committee on Staff Excellence in addition to numerous committees within the Law School.

Professor Wright earned an international reputation as a student of taxation, and his contributions as a public servant were of sufficient importance that the Treasury Department conferred upon him the Civilian Meritorious Service Award, the highest civilian award given by the government. But it was as a teacher that he made his most significant contribution and from which he derived his deepest professional satisfactions. He brought to the classroom consummate professional skill, intense moral commitment, and a profound concern for his students. Among generations of graduates of the Law School, Professor Wright’s scorn for the mere transmission of information without critical analysis and his skill at cultivating the powers of legal reasoning are legendary.

Many alumni will join with present students and faculty at the Law School in mourning the loss of so vital, provocative, and generous a member of this intellectual community. A committee, chaired by Jerome Libin of the class of 1959, has just begun raising funds to establish a memorial endowment for Professor Wright. Those wishing to make contributions to this endowment may send them to the Law School Fund Office, indicating they are to be included in the L. Hart Wright memorial endowment.
Memorial for L. Hart Wright
by Robben W. Fleming

Hart Wright would not have wanted us to meet in sorrow today, and indeed if I allowed myself to speak in sorrow, I could not speak at all.

Hart was such an enthusiastic, exuberant, humorous, dedicated man that I hope you will find it possible to smile with me as I think back over two occasions which were typical of him.

The first involved one of those small bets he loved to make. They usually varied in amount from one cent to five dollars, with the average being five cents. Interestingly, for one so politically conscious, he never corrected these amounts for inflation!

In any event, you will find in the archives a complete record of one such bet. Hart and Bill Haber had bet five dollars on whether and when Richard Nixon would leave office. Thereafter, as one would expect from two such fun-sters with so large a wager at stake, an argument arose over the proper interpretation of the bet. Hart then persuaded me to represent him in the matter. Accordingly, I wrote Bill a stern letter advising him to pay or we would sue. Upon receipt of that letter, Bill engaged Allan Smith as counsel. Allan promptly wrote to me, saying among other picky,icky things, that he doubted that I was admitted to the practice of law in Michigan.

After allowing due time for the dust to settle, Allan and I then conspired to advise both Hart and Bill that our fees now far exceeded the wager, but that we had agreed to split the five dollars being held in escrow as a down payment. Naturally, though totally without justification, this turned both Hart and Bill against their lawyers. I am glad to report that the matter ended peacefully at a wonderful dinner.

And then there was the golf course. The Wrights and the Flemings frequently played together. The harsh truth, on which there is no reason to dwell, is that none of us were very good golfers. But if you could survive Hart’s meticulous system, which apparently involved going through an extensive check-list of do’s and don’ts before making any shot, it could be great fun.

Phyllis, his wife, had a unique way of coping with Hart’s study periods before each shot. She simply proceeded on down the course, advising others to do likewise. This may have been unorthodox, but it did not seem to bother Hart or to encourage him to speed up.

Hart did everything with intensity and vigor, whether it was mowing the lawn, painting and remodeling a room, talking with pride about his daughters, arguing American foreign policy, expounding on a needed revision of the Internal Revenue Code, or insisting on the deficiencies in the pass-fail grading system. As a matter of fact, it was frequently difficult to get into the conversation at all unless you were quick about anticipating the slightest pause.

On the more serious side, perhaps one reason Hart was so close to many of us of his generation was because we shared so many memories and experiences. He was a product of small-town America, fiercely loyal to his home state of Oklahoma, dedicated to his family, and infinitely proud of his country and its democratic institutions. His was the generation which was called into service in World War II, perhaps the last time that young Americans were confident they fought a just and righteous war. Words like “honor,” “pride,” “dedication,” and “discipline” meant a great deal to him, and they were the key to the values he brought to his career at The University of Michigan.

Few faculty members served on as many University-wide committees as did Hart, or contributed their talents to so many constructive causes. But for all that, it was the Law School which was the center-piece of Hart’s love for the academic world. He could never accept mediocrity, therefore his goal was always excellence. If his standards for judging prospective faculty members were high, if he was demanding of his students and critical of their efforts, if he sometimes pressed his arguments beyond his ability to convince his colleagues, it was always because his pride in the Law School was so great.

Great universities are characterized by faculty members who are unwilling to settle for less than excellence. Hart was such a faculty member. The Law School and the University will be forever indebted to him.

Robben W. Fleming is a professor in the Law School. He has served as president of The University of Michigan and of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. He is currently the chairman of the National Institute for Dispute Resolution. He delivered these affecting reminiscences of his colleague and friend at a memorial service for Professor Wright which was held in Lawyers Club on April 14, 1983.