10 Things I Never Imagined Doing As Dean—and What I Learned from Them

Almost 10 years ago, I began my deanship with ambitious aspirations for the Law School’s growth and development, primarily with respect to faculty enhancement, facilities expansion and renewal, and curricular reform. While I had a general sense of how to accomplish these objectives, I had very little understanding of how the journey would actually unfold. While in the main the journey proceeded in fairly predictable fashion (many faculty meetings; many more with alumni), there were a number of twists and turns along the way that I never could have predicted. And in many ways, it is these meanderings—some exhilarating, others humiliating—that I recall best as I look back on my tenure.

• The road not taken: I frequently tell Michigan Law students and alumni that the School will open wonderful and sometimes surprising doors for professional advancement, if only they’re ready to seize the opportunity. I rue the day when I failed to practice what I preach. President Obama was the University’s commencement speaker in May 2010, just after Justice John Paul Stevens announced he would soon retire from the Court. After a photo-op with all of the campus deans, President Obama asked the group, “Which one of you is the Law School dean?” After I identified myself, he continued, “Soon there will be a new opening on the Supreme Court, and I’ll need to come up with some good candidates; perhaps I should speak with you about that.” I hesitated awkwardly, and then replied something namby-pamby like “Sure, I’d be happy to do so.” I will always regret failing to respond with the words that were screaming through my brain: “Thank you, Mr. President, I accept.”

• Michigan Law and boyhood dreams: I grew up near Los Angeles as a Dodgers fan, with Sandy Koufax’s famous Yom Kippur/World Series story being told around the dinner table, and with Sandy adorning the first-ever sports poster in my room (only to be largely obscured some years later by Farah Fawcett, but c’mon, who can blame me?). But it was Michigan Law that eventually introduced me to my boyhood idol. I first met Sandy at a dinner hosted by his high school teammate and close friend Fred Wilpon, U-M ’58, at his Mets’ brand-new CitiField, while we celebrated the establishment of a Collegiate Professorship (to which Fred generously contributed) in honor of Branch Rickey, ’11, and his breaking of baseball’s color line by signing Jackie Robinson.

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• Slick moves in fundraising: My very first official day on the job, adjunct professor Tim Dickinson, ’79, entered my office and said he wanted to be the first person to give me a discretionary gift to support my wish list. I thanked Tim effusively, and watched him take out his checkbook. He asked me to whom the check should be made out, and I said (and I quote): “Uh, mmm, ahh, hmmm, that’s a good question… I have a gut feeling it should not be me; can you maybe come back tomorrow?”

This awkward moment was perhaps surpassed by the time I was in the middle of a $1 million pitch to an octogenarian alumnus and was doing a pretty damn good job of it too…until I realized that the sound of the air conditioner was actually the alumnus softly snoring.

Here’s one that wasn’t my doing. President Mary Sue Coleman hosted a fundraising dinner for me and the medical school dean at an alumnus’ home in Florida. She gave an impassioned speech about the importance of private philanthropy for the Law School’s building project and for the new Mott Children’s Hospital. And then she inadvertently summed up her pitch: “So please give generously to our Law and Medical schools; you can either help to educate lawyers or help to save the lives of babies.” I don’t think the lion’s share of the gifts that evening came our way.

We were joined at the dinner table by Branch’s grandson Branch III and Jackie’s widow, Rachel, and I listened carefully to cull Sandy’s secret to success from his riveting stories. I met Sandy again while hosting him in Ann Arbor along with Attorney General Eric Holder, prior to the AG’s delivery of a stirring commencement address at which Sandy’s grand-niece walked to receive her degree. It is perhaps my greatest honor to now hold the Branch Rickey Collegiate Chair; through it I feel an emotional connection to one of the great and underappreciated pioneers of racial integration, who also happened to sign my boyhood idol to his first baseball contract.

(Above left) With other U-M deans and President Obama at the University’s 2010 Commencement. (Above) With boyhood idol Sandy Koufax. (Right) With Chief Justice Roberts at the 2009 U-M–Notre Dame game.
• Comparative law and medicine: The first time I visited Beijing as dean, I was supposed to stay for two days. I ended up staying more than a week. Who knew you can self-diagnose appendicitis on the internet? Fortunately, my colleague Prof. Nico Howson, being our resident China expert, knew exactly where to take me…to the general practice floor in a maternity hospital, the Beijing United Family Hospital. Actually, it was a wonderful experience, if one has to have one’s stomach cut open. My friend and Assistant Dean for International Affairs Virginia Gordan was also with me, and she and Nico took turns nursing me back to health and purchasing surprisingly cheap first-run American movie DVDs for the big-screen TV in my private room. They even threw me a birthday party, complete with a cake I couldn’t eat and two adorable little Chinese girls just the same age as my own, who Nico claimed were family friends. All in all, it was better than the previous time I tried to visit Beijing, when I found out at the airport in Los Angeles that I had forgotten my passport and had to ask Professor Mark West to re-route his own flight to Asia so he could bring it to me (why do you think I voted for him to succeed me as dean?).

• Cruising to…Qatar?: Given the breadth of our alumni base, I expected (and greatly enjoyed) many trips to the corners of Europe and Asia, and wish I could also have visited our alumni in many other continents around the globe. But I never would have predicted a decade ago that I’d take a field trip to explore Doha and consider the possibility of a collaborative educational program with the Qatari government in their Education City. To be clear, the persistent rumor that I tried to move the entire Law School to Qatar just to secure cheaper building costs was somewhat exaggerated. I recall wonderful visits with foreign dignitaries who shared the laudable aspiration of improving their citizenry through higher education. And I also recall sand. Lots and lots of sand. Which, in the end, is what the Qatari proposal was built on.

• Highest court in the land at the Big House: I’ve been fortunate to spend time with many Supreme Court Justices in their beautiful Courthouse. South Hall’s groundbreaking and dedication gave me the opportunity to host two on even more hallowed turf. Both Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr. and Associate Justice Elena Kagan began their respective games rooting for our opponents—Roberts for Notre Dame because he grew up a Fighting Irish fan in Indiana, and Kagan for the Air Force Academy because, as she put it, “the same person signs our paychecks.” I never did get the Chief to sing “The Victors” or don his ceremonial, winged construction helmet, though he was an exuberant sports fan until the last 11 seconds of the game. I did, however, enjoy roaming the Michigan sidelines for half a quarter with Justice Kagan, whom I had to restrain from running onto the field to overturn a holding call.

• Will the real unicorn please whinny?: For years I heard competing groups of alumni from different years at the School claim credit for sneaking a unicorn into Dean Stason’s courtyard to advertise the Crease Ball. And for years I chalked the conflicting stories up to a combination of faulty memories and the natural human tendency to believe “I was there.” But when we did research for the 150-Year history of the Law School sesquicentennial commemorative, we discovered that there actually were two different unicorn stories, the first involving a sorry-looking horse and the second an even sorrier-looking donkey. I guess history really does repeat itself (though I still say, a donkey? Really?).

• Can’t we all just get along? Yes, actually: Starting the deanship just after the Grutter decision meant I was immediately thrust into an impassioned policy and legal debate that divided our student and alumni body just as much as the national polity. Given the Court’s decision, I generally fielded questions and challenges from those on the political right, and I hope I helped people find some common ground sufficient to recognize the difficulty of the issue and the reasonableness and good faith of those on both sides. I would not then have predicted that the rest of the protests I would face as dean would come from the political left, from students and alumni disappointed with certain of my Commencement speaker invitations. I tried to turn each of these concerns and protests into teachable moments, convening town halls and smaller meetings in an effort to enhance appreciation for the value of reasoned discourse even on some of the most contested issues of the day. Wherever members of the Michigan Law community stand on the political spectrum in general and these issues in particular, I hope we can all stand together to support the notion, central to the ethos of higher education in a democracy, that collegial conversation is the best way forward.

• Beams and bricks and mortar, oh my: As dean I knew I’d be responsible for directing the efforts to design and build a new building and commons and renovate much of the rest of campus. I had no clue that I’d end up becoming an expert on the difference between split- and seam-faced granite, or on the color and warmth of reading lights, or on bi-level acoustical properties. I also had no clue that I would end up inadvertently creating a hidden wall cavity in which I could, if I wanted, hide a body or two (and no, I’m not telling you where it is). Of course, using the space thusly would probably hurt the rankings.
Emails I never imagined sending: I think this one speaks for itself:

Date: Thu, 12 Aug 2010 17:23:54 -0400
To: lawall@umich.edu
From: Evan Caminker <caminker@umich.edu>
Subject: strong candidate for “strangest thing I have ever had to request as dean”

We’ve had a couple of incidences this week where some occupants—and I am reasonably confident it was two different people—sitting in the western-facing bank of offices in the Stacks Building have emptied leftover coffee from their cups by pouring it out their office windows. Perhaps one could engage in reasoned debate over the propriety of that means of liquid disposal anytime between 1958 and 2010. Perhaps.

But of course now there are construction workers milling about underneath those windows, and there are some fairly obvious reasons to want to keep them whistling while they work, and yet several of them are a bit disgruntled about their recent exposure to raining coffee. There is also new and as-of-yesterday-unstained stonework under many of those windows, and one day soon there will be a beautiful glass roof. I understand old habits die hard. But for those of you who currently inhabit those offices—and let me add those of you who later this month will be re-inhabiting those offices, and those of you who might one day in the future inhabit those offices, and those of you who might at any time visit those offices—let’s please refrain from tossing coffee, or anything heavier than a lofty idea or the occasional invective, out the Stacks windows.

Best, Evan

While I remain pleased and proud of the School’s many tangible accomplishments over the past decade—from facilities renewal to faculty development to reformed curricular strategies—it is the more quirky recollections such as these, sublime and truly ridiculous, that populate my reflections. Perhaps that’s the Michigan Difference—we are serious, without taking ourselves too seriously. Our community is quirky, in a good way—how else does one characterize a Lawyers Club gargoyle carrying a football? And our community is all the more lovable for being so.

And in hindsight, these and other stories constitute more than a list of stray recollections. Each in its own right generates or reflects an important lesson about leadership, or life—including, for example, an invaluable lesson I learned from Sandy Koufax. When I asked him who was the most important batter for him to get out during a game, he gave an answer I didn’t expect: the hitter who went to the plate right before Hank Aaron. Most other pitchers focused on the big guys, trying to strike out the likes of Aaron, Willie Mays, and Mickey Mantle. What Koufax knew was that keeping the lesser batters from reaching base was vital; against the mighty Aaron he would win some and lose some, but dammit if he’d lose to Aaron with any runners on base.

I thought I was asking him a question about baseball strategy, but I heard his response in the form of a life lesson. By sitting out the Yom Kippur game when I was a child, he taught me that you should stand up for your beliefs. This more recent lesson is more instrumental, but equally compelling: Think strategically; take your time, and don’t let your ego or a spur-of-the-moment impulse dictate how you play the game. Try to improve your weaknesses, but play to your strengths. When you lose, try to lose small; when you win, win big. And remember that baseball—like the pursuit of a degree, a career as a lawyer, or life itself—is a long season.

As my own career as dean approaches its end, I wish all of you—and this outstanding Law School—many wonderful seasons to come.

Sincerely,

Evan Caminker
Dean and Branch Rickey Collegiate Professor of Law