In the academic world, the line between “professor” and “teacher” can be an unclear one. Discussions of professorial quality can take into account any number of things: scholarly work, fame and renown, influence on policy, citation counts … . But ask alumni to talk about their professors, and what they’ll tell you is somewhat different. They’ll tell you about teaching. About memories of humor (and sometimes fear) in the classroom. About sharing a beer with a professor at Wine Mess, or visiting a faculty member’s home. Most of all, they will tell you how the time spent with that professor is deeply memorable years, and often decades, later.

As part of this issue’s celebration of teaching, we asked a few alumni to share those memories here. If you would like to share your own to be added to the Law School’s website and archives, please send them to Marsha Ferziger Nagorsky at m-ferziger@uchicago.edu.
David Currie
By Peter Altabef, ’83

David P. Currie, Edward H. Levi Distinguished Service Professor of Law (1936–2007), was a legal scholar of the first order, who wrote nineteen books and hundreds of articles. He was also an accomplished actor, singer, and director and was a member of Chicago’s Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Company for more than 40 years. During the time I attended the Law School (1980–83), Prof. Currie taught a series of constitutional law courses, which under his direction became educational theater.

He started with a notable entrance—before it was cool to do so, he rode a bicycle to school. He was gracious, articulate, and witty and would frequently have a twinkle in his eye—sometimes kindly, sometimes mischievous. In our constitutional law classes the Socratic method evolved into a form of mystery dinner theater, where the students were a participatory audience, the court case of the day became our plot, and the appropriate ending was never known in advance—because even though we were expected to have read the case before the start of class, the conceit was that Professor Currie would have us wondering earnestly by the end of class whether in fact the case had been correctly decided. He could do this even with what seemed, going into the class, to be a relatively straightforward decision. There was never any applause after class, but on several occasions I remember just sitting in my chair, thinking to myself, “did I just witness this?” and wondering whether I would ever be able to bring to a situation even a little bit of Professor Currie’s analytical methods and insight.

A few years ago I began to collect Prof. Currie’s later writings on constitutional law, including a series of seven books written after I left the Law School; a primer, The Constitution of the United States, a two-volume set on The Constitution in the Supreme Court, and a four-volume set on The Constitution in Congress, a chronological series of both the executive and legislative branches’ views and actions relating to the Constitution. The Congress set ends in 1861, but Prof. Currie had not intended to finish it there. Declining health prevented the publication of a fifth volume, but the bulk of that work can be found in two extensive law review articles, one on the Confederate Congress (published in the University of Virginia Law Review) and the other on the Union Congress (published in the University of Chicago Law Review). Taken individually or together, the series is simply brilliant. To close the dramatic circle, shortly before he passed away Prof. Currie recorded a reading of the US Constitution as a gift to the Law School. It is available online.

I don’t think Prof. Currie ever knew anything about me, and barely knew of me, but most actors and directors don’t know individual audience members. Our conversations were rare, short, and limited to the text at hand. But I believe he cared deeply about imparting to my co-students and me a profound interest in the subject matter and in developing our critical thinking abilities beyond what we would have imagined to be our natural limits. For that, I will forever be grateful.
of time machine, a window into both my personal history and that of the Law School. There was always a moment, maybe a few seconds, maybe scattered minutes, when—during some arcana of tax theory that Professor Blum would bounce around in, like a puppy in a field of fresh snow—I would be transported back in time to a black-and-white postwar world, where my then-kid of a father and his slick-haired classmates would eagerly absorb the friendly wisdom of an also-kid Professor Blum. (He was only in his early thirties then, well younger than I am now.) It was during moments like that when my appreciation for both Professor Blum and the Law School itself crystallized into deep and genuine affection.

Speaking of bounciness, that’s the image I most associate with Professor Blum. He didn’t just walk up stairs; he took them two at a time. He didn’t just chat with people at Wine Mess or other social events; he frolicked, and after just the right length of conversation, caromed like a human ping-pong ball over to the next group of people, so that after every gathering he had visited with everyone. Even his famous ties were bouncy and lifted the spirits of grumps and bores before they had a chance to be boring or grumpy.

I’m glad he was a tax professor, both for my sake and for the image of tax professors everywhere. Taxation is a heavy subject and it benefited from his lightness. I should think that after teaching the same subject for fifty or sixty years, one’s enthusiasm for the day’s lesson might need a little inflation, and one’s patience with the ignorance of novices might be a little thin. But this could never be said about Professor Blum, whose bubbly fondness for both his students and the academic study of his life kept him forever young and his field of study forever fresh. Sitting in his classroom, I thought he seemed as clear and energetic in his teaching as I imagined him to be when he began teaching so many decades before, and he elevated an otherwise intimidating subject into something that almost might be thought of as—dare I say it?—fun.
During the mid-1960s, the Law School faculty was unmatched anywhere in the Western world. Among that group, Soia Mentschikoff etched the most indelible impressions. She was a person of considerable stature—physically, scholastically, and experientially. When Soia entered a room, everyone knew immediately of her presence. When she spoke, I wanted to hear everything she had to say. She taught secured transactions with the authority of one who had written the UCC section. She could be stern, to be sure, but her smile exposed the big-hearted woman that she in fact was.

Soia taught Elements during those years after her husband passed away. I felt so privileged to be instructed by the longtime wife and associate of the man who wrote The Bramble Bush. If Karl Llewellyn was now gone from us, aren’t we lucky to have Soia with us? I thought. What a gift! Right off the bat, first class as an entering student, we are introduced to this giant of a person who is going to insist that we take this calling seriously.

She impressed upon us that we were about to become trustees of our society and that we would graduate not just with opportunity but with obligations that would stay with us a lifetime.

Soia met with the spouses of students, warning them of their lives ahead married to a law student and later a practicing attorney. The law, she said, was a very jealous mistress. She wanted her students to be free to be the best.

Soia Mentschikoff, more than any other faculty member, instilled in me the ability to speak and advocate with the confidence of one fully knowledgeable and grounded in my craft. That gift has carried me safely through the briar patch of life’s many challenges in the law, business, community, and politics. Thank you, ma’am.
And, much like the Law School itself, Professor Levmore appeals only to a select group of people. One of Professor Levmore’s most endearing traits is that he has no desire to be universally beloved; in fact, he would hate that. He enjoys few things more than pinning students down into an intellectual corner, forcing them to rethink and twist and wiggle their way out. He loves asking the difficult questions, the more personally challenging the better. At the same time, I have not met many people who have a bigger heart or who are more invested in their students. He pushes because he cares, though it may take some people years of study, reflection, and/or therapy to figure that out.

I was fortunate to be able to take a class with Professor Levmore (with the most inventive final I can remember), but it was by sheer luck, and perhaps courtesy of a few moments of snark-fueled banter in the Green Lounge, that I had an opportunity to work as his research assistant. Though the focus of my employment was to research tort cases and perform the occasional Maroon-booking, the truly lasting lessons I took away from my time with Professor Levmore came from our conversations. Every day, we would discuss a range of topics, and I found myself often having to reevaluate a previously held opinion or stance. He seemed to relish the challenge of turning my arguments on their heads; I had a blast.

Professor Levmore’s wit, wisdom, compassion, energy, and especially his smirk, are legendary. However, it’s his way of constantly questioning that makes him unforgettable. As I wrote this piece, I wondered if there would come a point when I would feel comfortable referring to him as Saul, as he has asked me to do on a number of occasions. Then I realized why I can’t bring myself to do it: I cannot imagine a time when I will not learn from, or be challenged by, Professor Levmore. I hope I am lucky enough to be his student for many years to come.
The start of law school can be nerve racking and uncomfortable for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which is an introduction to the Socratic method. Few can honestly claim that they relished the opportunity in those first uncertain weeks to fumble their way towards the fundamental truths of the law under the steady inquisition of the country's brightest legal minds. The presence of ninety-plus recent strangers transcribing what little they could glean of the dialectic between pregnant pauses and halting half sentences only added to the misery.

This may explain why Professor David Strauss quickly became a favorite of the Class of 2005. Sure there was the Office of Legal Counsel pedigree, the editorship of the prestigious *Supreme Court Review*, and even (let’s admit) the uncanny good looks of a man of a certain age. Yet as the instructor for Elements of the Law during fall quarter of our 1L year, Strauss could also credit his forgiving brand of the Socratic for his widespread acclaim. Make no mistake, Strauss certainly put his young charges through their paces like any other professor. But when we signaled how far out of our depths we were with a particularly useless answer, Strauss would rescue us from our deserved public humiliation by thanking us for the rambling, readdressing the class, and moving on with, “So what I think [insert: name of grateful student] is trying to say is [insert: correct answer that resembles our hopelessly muddled response by no more than an overlapping word or two].”

That phrase, repeated so frequently with little variation during those early days, was a gracious reprieve, a tacit acknowledgement of our ignorance and its simultaneous forgiveness. It was also exactly what some of us needed to stop being so nervous. A gentle course correction when we had lost our way. And as the year progressed, in Elements of the Law and elsewhere across the 1L curriculum, we all settled in, started thinking like lawyers, and stopped needing to hear Strauss’ reassuring absolution quite so often.

We would not have another class with Strauss until the spring when he taught Civil Procedure II. That same term, Justice Scalia came to judge the moot court competition. Perhaps acquainted with our professor over the course of a string of Supreme Court arguments or simply nostalgic for his own days as a distinguished member of the faculty, the Justice wandered into Strauss’ classroom, ascertained the topic (personal jurisdiction, if I recall, though I’ll confess to being unreliable on this point) and quickly took over. While we were sharper than we had been at the very beginning of law school, as a collective, we were not yet members of the Supreme Court Bar. The Justice seemed genuinely disappointed in us. And the more questions he asked, the fewer answers we could muster. The old nervousness crept back in; eight months into law school and we still didn’t get it. In those first weeks with only our peers as witnesses to our Socratic missteps, we suspected our hopelessness but there seemed a possibility that we could grow out of it. Now no less eminent a source than the high court (where some of us hoped to practice one day) was writing us off. The Justice’s hard Socratic dissolved into a jeremiad of the ways in which we were failing to uphold the proud traditions of the school. Strauss did not interrupt our esteemed guest as he gave voice to all of the insecurities that we had felt at one time or another during the year.

But when the Justice had finished and we were duly chastised, Strauss thanked him, readressed us, and began, “So what I think Justice Scalia is trying to say is . . .” I don’t know if Professor Strauss intended that as a joke or a transition, but whatever was meant to come next was drowned out by laughter. The Justice left. And when I saw him again seven years later as a litigant at the U.S. Supreme Court, I had long since forgotten the particulars of *International Shoe*, but I had Professor Strauss to thank for being just a little less nervous.
I was fortunate enough while a student at the Law School to have had (then Mr.) Posner for a number of courses. The first was Torts, during which he eventually introduced the class to the concept of “due care.” One morning upon entering the classroom he found each student wearing a big grin and a custom-made t-shirt emblazoned with Learned Hand’s “B<PL” formula. Somewhat taken aback, he seemed nevertheless pleased. And pleased all the more when we then presented him with a t-shirt of his own. Which he donned immediately, and wore during the remainder of that day’s session. The guy has a sense of humor. 

Cut to 30 years later: rummaging through some little-used drawers, I come across my old B<PL shirt. So I mail it to (by then Judge) Posner … and am happy to say receive back from him in short order a very nice personal note. The guy has manners, too. I hope, for him, the shirt brought back fond memories of his teaching days at the Law School. It sure did for me.
Through it all, Professor Baird imparted lessons that I continue to find useful in the practice of law. More than that, he exemplified the best of The Law School—dedicated to ideas, rigorous in inquiry, tolerant of divergent views, and, most of all, respectful of one’s colleagues.