WALTER BLUM

By Jack Joseph, ’52, and James Joseph, ’94

Jack Joseph: My memories of Walter Blum remain quite vivid, most likely because I came to feel that he was as close to an ideal law professor—and person—as one could come. The courses he taught—taxation and bankruptcy-and-reorganization—were in many respects the most technical and complex as any part of the curriculum; nevertheless, he always seemed to be in command not only of the myriad details but also of the philosophical rationale underlying the structure of the law. He was also exceptionally articulate, able to express in clear, plain language even the most erudite and complex notions accounting for the formulations in the governing statutes and the rationale of the governing case law. He was sympathetic towards his students, able to diagnose the reasons for difficulties they had in understanding the material, and adept at formulating the language with which to address those difficulties. He held students to high standards, applied objectively, which imparted a feeling of fairness; neither affection nor aversion for the personality of a student, for example, would interfere with awarding a given student the precise grade that the student deserved from an academic standpoint.

An occasion giving rise to a highly pleasant recollection was riding on the train with him from Chicago to Washington, DC, where I was headed in connection with litigation on behalf of Indian tribes that I was pursuing at the time, and he to consult with Treasury Department officials about taxation issues on which the officials sought his advice. (He was averse to airplanes.) He was characteristically cordial, good-humored, and informal, and at the same time he insightfully imparted wisdom in virtually everything he said, without ever giving the impression that he was being pompous, or displaying erudition or superiority, or talking down. My impression was that almost all students—even those who had little interest in the complex subject matters with which he dealt—were both fond of and respectful of him.

James Joseph: Though I attended the Law School more than forty years after my father (Jack Joseph, ’52), we did have one professor in common: Walter Blum. (We might have had Bernie Meltzer too, but that omission was my fault for stupidly failing to take Professor Meltzer’s class.) So to me Professor Blum was more than just a fine professor or even a revered icon of the institution; he was also a sort 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.