Remembering Walker Blakey:

Comments from Judith Wegner for 11/10/11 Memorial Service

I regret that I am on my way to a long-scheduled meeting in California and am not able to be here in person to pay tribute to Walker Blakey. I greatly appreciate the Dean’s willingness to share these comments with you during today’s Memorial Service.

I had the privilege of knowing and working with Walker for nearly 30 years. He was “a character” as well as a “man of character.”

When I say Walker was “a character,” I mean that he was in many ways larger than life.

- Walker knew how to hold a stage, perhaps as the result of his skill as a debater. He could have played Falstaff. I wish I’d seen it!
I was recently reminiscing about Walker with wonderful Judge Pat DeVine, one of Walker’s former students who graduated from UNC Law in the early 1980’s. She remembered a particular moment in one of his classes and described it as follows:

- One of my fondest memories of dear Walker is the sight of him -- all of him -- walking up and down the aisle while teaching something or other; then he turns around, still teaching, not missing a beat, going up onto the platform where the desk was, CLIMBING ON TOP OF THE DESK and sitting Buddha style, legs curled under him, STILL LECTURING. Totally unselfconscious . . .

That was Walker. A “Happy Buddha” at his best.

Walker prided himself on being a contrarian.

I could not then (and surely cannot now) count the number of times Walker spoke up in faculty meetings when I was dean
Walker was always one to have his hand up to speak…. Early, and often, as Mayor Dailey used to say about how Democrats should vote.

- Walker would often give tribute by paraphrasing the comments of prior speakers… but then he would say (in these very terms): “… but I am a contrarian and I must say ….” He would then make any number of interesting points, probably knowing full well that he was influencing few colleagues’ views or votes. I think he spoke in this way because he enjoyed the dynamics of dialogue and the delight of debate… but also because he wanted to keep his colleagues honest and force us to reflect on differing views. The discussion, not the outcome, was the thing.

- Walker’s “contrarian” streak was not limited to faculty meetings. I remember his commitment to organizing CLE programming on important evidence topics. He always preferred panels, and sought out differing opinions. That was his way, even among colleagues. I remember that for some
reason I needed to understand something profound about
“hearsay” (a topic that I remember Walker viewed as
especially profound). I went and asked Walker to explain it
to me. He did. I was not quite convinced. I then talked with
the extraordinary Ken Broun, who had a different view.
Again, for Walker, I think that the point was to push the
envelope, to force everyone concerned to show their mettle…
their strength, their vigor, their best ideas. He carried that
torch in all ways on all days. We should be grateful for his
commitment and his capacity… as a role model… to force all
of us to rise to the heights of his intellectual quests.

- Walker was also had the character of a deep and abiding a river,
  perhaps reflecting his roots in Beattyville, Kentucky at the
  headwaters of the Kentucky River. He, like most rivers, had a
  complex character, marked by pools and eddies, white water rapids
  and cascades, quiet times and a passionate roars.
o He loved his Kentucky roots, and the family he cherished.

   When I think of profound sons of Kentucky, I think of Justice Louis Brandeis… and Walker Blakey.

o Walker loved Ohio State University, and brought with him to UNC a passion for public higher education. That love of, understanding of, and commitment to the special role of public higher educational missions was clearly part of Walker’s DNA… as it is of many of us left to carry on.

o Walker loved justice and sought after justice. He understood the justice system’s human failings but persisted in seeking after its potential nonetheless.

o Walker loved to stand up for the underdog, no matter the merits, no matter the toll. Perhaps that’s why he was such a committed Democrat. Walker, send your blessings our way.

   We need your help in these days to carry on….

   As I say, then, Walker was without doubt a “character.”
But Walker was also a “man of character,” and that is something else, again.

- Walker gave of himself for the greater good, unstintingly, knowing full well that doing so would lead to little worldly treasure or even much “thanks.”
  - Walker was a passionate moot court adviser who gave his time unstintingly to generations of students. He had very practical insights, which amounted to “wisdom” in my book.
    - He would preach to students that they need to have at least three versions of their arguments: a one minute version, and 10 minute version, and a 30 minute version (depending on whether they drew a “hot” or “cold” bench.
    - He would also tell students that they should practice their oral arguments over and over again before sitting down to write a brief. If they could not make cogent points looking in the mirror for five minutes, they
should stay away from the typewriter (or the computer/word processing program) until they knew what mattered… and could articulate it… at the end of the day.

- I share Walker’s insights on these points with students several times a year, and think of him and credit him…and his practical wisdom and powerful vision with deep admiration and affection.

- Walker was equally unstinting in his efforts to introduce first-year students to the basics of alternative (or “appropriate”) dispute resolution.
  - He decided that it was important to augment traditional courses on related topics and invited colleagues to ask their students to participate in his spring semester weekend introductory offerings.
  - Walker would be there late (on Fridays) and early (on Saturdays) often with his dear friend Elliot Silverstein,
and 20-30 long-time colleagues and friends from around the state. He took the weight of this enterprise on his shoulders because he thought it was important—no matter the personal time and trouble involved. I remember one year when I thought he had pneumonia… but he carried on with his efforts without fear or favor.

- **At the end of the day, Walker’s most memorable “character” and “characteristics” relate to his enormous heart and deep and abiding love for his family and the extended family he developed over the years.**
  - **Walker cared deeply for his mother and his brothers.** I was deeply moved by his brother Jay’s comments about Walker at Walker’s funeral.
  - **Walker cared deeply for his long-time friend Ann Matthesen** who he admired without reserve.
Walker touched the lives of many students and practicing lawyers. Not superficially, not casually, not when it was easy… but when it mattered a great deal and when it took a lot to do what needed to be done.

Let me share again a reminiscence from Judge Patricia DeVine, who said of Walker:

- I remember his sweetness, his dearness; [there was] not a mean or sharp or unkind word coming out of his mouth at anyone else's expense. . .

And then there was Michael…. Who Walker loved and cared for profoundly, unstintingly.

- I will always remember Walker’s beatific smile when he was with Michael.

  - Walker’s heart was clearly near to bursting.
  - Walker and Michael felt a bond of trust and shared admiration that few of us can appreciate.
  - I have rarely seen such kindness and hope or felt love as tangible and transcendent.
Michael (and Walker) were truly lucky and blessed souls.

**Let me conclude by mentioning one of my favorite books of all time:**

“A River Runs Through It” by Norman McLean (an author I met through my husband Warren, the bookseller).

- McLean wrote this novel while in his 70’s, and a Professor at the University of Chicago. Would that those of us of advancing age were so talented.

- The book tells the story of a young man (Norman) coming of age in Missoula, Montana, and his relationship with his father and brother. All had human failings, all were wonderfully committed to the life of the river and trout fishing.

- McLean’s wonderful novella concludes with these words:

  Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the
rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words,
and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.

- I will be haunted by… and will remember… Walker Blakey until my dying day. He was a wonderful colleague. He taught me much. He stood up for justice. We were lucky to have him in our midst.

- Let me close by citing a powerful Biblical verse and study of Southern tradition during the Depression that I believe Walker would have valued. The book (the subject of my college honors thesis) is titled “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.” It was a study of poverty in the South during the Depression and was co-authored by James Agee and Walker Evans. The book’s title was taken from the Bible, in particular, the Wisdom of Sirach that begins, “Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.”

- I say… and join me…
Let us now praise famous men, including Walker Blakey… who took a challenging path to seek after justice… at UNC Law and beyond.

--Judith Wegner