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## **Earning His Second Pair of Wings: The Inspiring Life of Mike Lewis**

JOANNE C. BRANT\*

Mike Lewis came to ONU Law in 2006. We had not met before his arrival. That year the Supreme Court decided a major enemy combatant case, *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*. The court ruled that the statute creating military commissions to try Gitmo detainees was fatally flawed. At the opening University faculty meeting, Mike sat beside me, jiggling a restless foot, and reading a printout of that long and complex opinion. It was instant catnip. I began whispering comments. He scribbled back questions and replies in the margins. Neither of us left that opening University meeting any wiser as to University business, but we kept talking about that decision for days. It was, in many ways, a microcosm of our friendship. We were fascinated by many of the same issues. The fact that we saw those issues very differently was no barrier to our long and happy conversations. Mike had no need—then or ever—to be obnoxious in debate. He was proudly conservative, and fiercely competitive, but what he really loved was an intellectual challenge. He was always scrupulously fair, and willing to credit another’s good point. He adored the give and take of courteous, respectful, well-reasoned debate—this was his favorite pastime—in the academy and in the world, and he was transparently happy when engaged in a verbal fencing match with a capable adversary.

Mike sought out many kinds of honorable duels in his too-short life. He pursued Top Gun status with the same intensity and determination that he would later bring to the debate arena. His squadron handle was LULU, but he never traded on the glamour of that history, just as he never invoked his Harvard law degree. Instead, he would tell you that his squadron mates loved to make him “unspool,” and lose his famous self-control. He was deeply ambivalent about offering “watch Topgun with a Topgun” in the law school’s public interest auction, and had to be coaxed and persuaded that this would be a huge hit, was not unseemly, and would be one of the auction’s most profitable items. As, of course, it was.

In the classroom, Mike’s steady, even-keeled demeanor, and ability to clearly distill complex issues made him beloved by students, and earned him the law schools’ Outstanding Classroom Teacher Award. Colleagues who attended his classes, as he rose through the ranks to be tenured, learned

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that he met all praise with a simple question: “How can I make it better?” His students quickly learned how kind he was, and how much he loved sports, especially his Liverpool soccer team, and those tragic Washington Redskins that he never abandoned, no matter how sorely they disappointed him. Others bonded over cartoons, or video games, or hockey. He was a good friend to his students, ready to dish sports, attend a wedding, deliver a heartfelt eulogy, and be an awesome mentor. And he could do call and response for every damn line of *The Princess Bride*.

As a colleague, Mike was simply the gold standard. Always helpful, cheerful, ready to pitch in wherever needed, stay late, and show up as needed, wearing ONU orange and black. He generously read and commented on colleague’s articles in progress. He took on the toughest, thankless tasks of law school self-governance: strategic planning, self-study drafting, and never needed special credit or acknowledgment. Everything he did as a law professor—from teaching, to scholarship, to debates across the country, to judging moot court, advising students—he did eagerly and superbly well. He loved this job, and he brought his A game to every task, to every challenge.

I doubt anyone but his family knew all of Mike’s talents, because he kept most of them dark. It was not until he came bouncing down the corridor, excited about a law student who was a nationally ranked bridge player that we learned he was one as well. He had a near eidetic memory, and was a crazy fast study. But he was just as eager to hear about books he hadn’t read, to listen to music he didn’t know, or to be a guinea pig for a new recipe.

It was only after Mike showed up at my son’s track meets, and tutored Geoff’s running style, that we learned about the marathons he had run. Once again, self-deprecation was the hallmark of the narrative. Mike ran the Boston Marathon with a blind man and—he recounted this with an abashed countenance—he repeatedly lied to the blind guy about how close they were to the finish line in order to keep him going. He finished that story saying: “I know if I don’t get to heaven, it’ll be for that.”

All those who knew Mike saw his devotion to his family. His daughter Sarah was a baby in a carrier when he arrived at ONU. We all saw her grow up, shared children’s books (he was especially delighted to borrow children’s versions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) and we saw Mike’s deep involvement in Sarah’s milestones and achievements. When she was three, he couldn’t wait to show off her use—and correct pronunciation of—the word *metamorphosis* in a sentence. When she took up soccer, he coached her team. When she turned to gymnastics, he was always there, knew exactly what moves she was working on, and was completely invested in her happiness. He was determined to be active and have fun with her—to

chase her around as he put it—so that she wouldn't feel that having an older dad meant he was no fun. Sarah knows better than any of us how much fun he was—from that crazy Australian shark voice to the wrestling tips—and how much he loved her—more than life itself—and she will carry that knowledge in her heart forever.

As for Danya, everyone who saw them knew that they were made for each other. Danya was Mike's intellectual equal, his devoted partner in parenting and in life. She was generous enough to feed Mike's peripatetic soul—by enabling him to travel to many law schools every year for the debates he loved and that made his name. She followed him to Japan during his military service and married him there, and they saw each other through the challenges of both law school and medical school. They were partners in every sense of the word, and his unswerving loyalty to her was one of his very best qualities.

Before he became ill, Mike had shared with some of us his desire to be Dean. He felt he was too junior, too recently tenured to put his name forward, but he hoped to do so down the road. I think many of us would have happily crowned him. He inspired trust and confidence in all who worked with him. He would have been a wonderful leader. But Mike's bottom line was excellence—and he brought that quality wherever he was, to any setting.

So, in the first of what I am sure will be many one-sided conversations: Mr. Mike, I trust that St. Peter has already made clear that you lying to that blind guy is not a problem. Also, I have to tell you that your abrupt departure has backed me into this coping strategy that I'm pretty sure is lousy theology and as lame a piece of Pollyanna-ness as you've ever seen from me. But maybe, one last time, I can amuse you. I'm imagining a heavenly debate squad—you see, I know you're laughing already. But perhaps C.S. Lewis had it right, and the angels really do have a persuasion squad, pulling each of us toward our better selves. At any rate, it appears that this debate squad couldn't get by without you. So, I'm envisioning a room full of such folks, sitting and chatting amongst themselves. And a chair, empty, as you approach. Perhaps the seat beside you holds a squadron buddy—one of the friends you lost during your service. Perhaps it's no one you know, yet. I hope they look up as you approach, and smile, and are so keen to kibitz and start making you feel at home that you miss at least some of the opening remarks from the Welcome Committee.

It was a privilege to be your friend, your colleague, your student. Go with God, buddy. But—break a rule once or twice. Because now, you can.