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Tribute to Professor Jonathan G. Rohr

Michael Higdon

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Tribute to Professor Jonathan G. Rohr

Michael J Higdon



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TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR JONATHAN G. ROHR

The unexpected passing of Professor Jonathan Rohr on July 13, 2018, was as much painful as it was shocking. Those of us who were fortunate enough to know Professor Rohr can only try our best to process the loss of our beloved colleague. As we do so, what is particularly difficult to comprehend is the fact that Professor Rohr was only with us for one school year, 2017 to 2018. After all, one would expect that a professor who had inspired the devotion of so many students, had crafted so many rich friendships with colleagues, and had been involved in so many aspects of the College of Law, would instead be someone who had given years of service. Sadly, Professor Rohr did not have that opportunity, and that is no small loss to both the current law school community and also the future inhabitants of the College of Law—individuals who will never fully know his intellect, his kindness, and his devotion to our institution. Despite that loss, the tremendous impact of his time with us is made even more impressive by just how brief it was and serves as a rich testament to the outstanding teacher, scholar, and friend that was Jonathan Rohr.

Jonathan was born on October 20, 1982, and graduated from high school not that far from Knoxville in Hickory, North Carolina. A gifted musician, Jonathan would go on to attend the University of North Carolina, where he graduated High Honors with a Bachelors in Music, and then the prestigious Eastman School of Music in New York, where he received a Masters in Music. Jonathan, however, was a man who heard many calls. And, along with music, there was the law. Jonathan enrolled in the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York City, where he graduated valedictorian in 2009. Jonathan then went to work at Sullivan & Cromwell in New York, where he flourished as an attorney specializing in corporate and commercial litigation. Unable to put legal education behind him, however, Professor Rohr returned to Cardozo in 2015 to serve as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Law, and it was in that position that he first came to the attention of the University of Tennessee.

When the hiring committee from the College of Law first met Jonathan, we were immediately struck by not only his intellect but his energy and charm. As the chair of that year's hiring committee, I can report that we immediately had a strong feeling that we had found our newest colleague. We first met him in an interview suite in Washington D.C., where I'll never forget how he bounded into the room eager to learn all he could about our institution. So strong was

the impression he made on the committee that we promptly invited him to campus to meet the full faculty, who all agreed with us that he would make an excellent addition. And, indeed he did. In his short time here at the College of Law, he served the institution in a number of ways, volunteering to sit on the Student Conduct Board, representing the faculty on the hiring committee for the Assistant Director of Admissions, and coaching the Baseball Salary Arbitration Team. In addition, he would somehow find time to write three scholarly articles during the year, publishing them in the *Hastings Law Journal*,¹ the *Cleveland State Law Review*,² and our own *Transactions: The Tennessee Journal of Business Law*.³

Perhaps his most enduring legacy, however, lies with his students. In his two semesters here, he taught only three courses; yet, when the students met at the beginning of 2018 to select the professor of the year, Professor Jonathan Rohr was one of the names that made the shortlist. Of course, when you talk to Professor Rohr's students, you quickly understand how he became so beloved so quickly. As Charlotte Houser put it: "Professor Rohr was enthusiastic about everything he did and he always gave one hundred percent to his students, his door never shut and his calendar never too full." Beyond being an outstanding teacher and mentor, Professor Rohr was also an inspiration. When speaking at the memorial that was held for Professor Rohr at the College of Law, Hayden Short remarked, "We were both small town boys who had to face the same type of stereotypes and . . . [h]e was the first person in this law school who showed me that even someone like me could succeed at the highest levels in this profession." Most notably, however, Professor Rohr inspired students to not only succeed as lawyers but to become quality human beings. In that respect, the words of Eli Lovingfoss capture the true legacy of Professor Rohr's short tenure at the College of Law:

There was never any doubt after you left a meeting with Professor Rohr that he not only cared about whether you learned the material but that he cared about you as a person.

1. Jonathan G. Rohr & Aaron Wright, *Blockchain-Based Token Sales, Initial Coin Offerings, and the Democratization of Public Capital Markets*, 70 HASTINGS L.J. (forthcoming).

2. Jonathan G. Rohr, *Smart Contracts as Legal Contracts, or: The Law of the Vending Machine*, CLEVELAND ST. L. REV. (forthcoming).

3. Jonathan G. Rohr, *Mutual Fund Proxy Voting and the Importance of Fiduciary Flexibility*, 19 TENN. J. BUS. L. 205 (2017).

This quality, to make clear that he cared, made him a wonderful person to seek out as a mentor. It made him incredibly easy to look up to and respect, but also easy to talk to. I could look at Professor Rohr and see a role model that I wanted to emulate—that I still want to emulate.

Professor Rohr was indeed an inspiration—to students, to colleagues and, as we have learned in the months following his death, to so many others who knew him. Thus, when I think of Jonathan and all that he gave in his short time at the College of Law, I find some comfort in the words of Albert Einstein: “Our death is not an end if we can live on in our children and the younger generation. For they are us, our bodies are only wilted leaves on the tree of life.”⁴

Jonathan, although your time with us was brief, your influence and your legacy will be anything but. Rest in peace, dear friend.

PROFESSOR MICHAEL J. HIGDON
Professor of Law
The University of Tennessee College of Law

4. ALICE CALAPRICE, *THE ULTIMATE QUOTABLE EINSTEIN* 91 (2013).

Professor Rohr was an amazing teacher, mentor, and friend. The passion and excitement that he brought into the classroom was unparalleled, and this enthusiasm never went unnoticed or unappreciated by his students. Every student who ever spoke of Professor Rohr only talked about how much they loved his class and the energy he brought into the classroom. Personally, I have never seen someone teach with such a genuine smile on their face as Professor Rohr did when talking about cryptocurrencies during a securities regulation lecture.

Professor Rohr had so many endearing qualities, but one quality that I will never forget was his sincere kindness. During a particularly busy time of the year, I stopped by Professor Rohr's office to casually chat about a topic of personal interest relating to securities fraud. This type of fraud was not being tested on the bar or the exam for his class and was not of necessity to my law school education generally. But that did not matter to Professor Rohr. He spent over an hour with me, painstakingly pouring over statute books until he was satisfied that I understood the origination and operation of this particular type of fraud. And of course, he did it all with a cheerful grin despite having many other pressing matters demanding his time. Professor Rohr's undying kindness and generosity is something that will undoubtedly live on through each and every student that he impacted during his short time with us.

It is never easy to lose friends or loved ones, but it is especially difficult to lose them at an early age. Even with my limited knowledge of the law as a second-year law student, I could see that Professor Rohr still had so much to contribute not only to the College of Law and his students but also to the legal profession as a whole. In such a short time, Professor Rohr's contributions as a teacher, a mentor, and a friend impacted me and my classmates, impacted this school, and impacted our community so profoundly that he will never be forgotten.

SARAH E. GUTHRIE
Acquisitions Editor, 2018–2019
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