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Dedication to Sydney Lewis

Sydney and Frances Lewis are perhaps the greatest benefactors in the one hundred and fifty year history of the Washington and Lee School of Law. Their contributions to the life of the School are several, most prominent among them the single donation that gave us Lewis Hall, the home of the School, as well as the endowment of the Frances Lewis Law Center, founded for the encouragement and facilitation of new thinking and new directions in the law. In March of this past year, we lost one half of this remarkable team when Mr Lewis passed away at the age of 79. In his Law School Commencement Address in 1986, Sydney Lewis said: "[I]f you have absorbed, during your times here, something of the independence of mind, the love of free inquiry, and the openness to the many-spined nature of experience that this School of Law embodies, then I will rejoice." Today, as students of the Washington and Lee School of Law and the direct beneficiaries of Sydney Lewis's wonderful legacy, we rejoice. This issue of the Washington and Lee Law Review is dedicated to his memory, with appreciation for the generosity of his spirit, in recognition of his own commitment to intellectual growth and vitality, and in celebration of a truly remarkable life.

John D. Wilson*

The gift was off the chart: a new, handsomely appointed building; an endowment fund to support legal scholarship; generous financial support for worthy students; and, not least, arresting paintings from the Lewis collection to enhance the new building and to enlarge life's possibilities for everyone who came there to work or to study. It all added up to the largest and most significant gift in the history of Washington and Lee University.

And it was a transforming gift. It made possible the dramatic elevation of the Law School in enrollment, program, and reputation. And yet, the elevation of the Law School was only the first consequence of the Lewis gift, for it also made possible a whole series of constructive changes up and down the Colonnade. Suddenly, anything and everything was possible.

What Sydney and Frances Lewis did for the University may not have been fully intended. How could they have known that, in the years ahead, their generosity would stimulate others to make similar sacrifices? How could they have guessed that their respect for the life of the mind, their zest and high spirits, their joy in helping others grow in mind and in character would somehow come to be incorporated into the fabric of the University they loved? Who can say with certainty what they did or did not anticipate? What is so very clear today is the love of the place that prompted everything that followed.

Sydney Lewis was an innately generous man. He took special pleasure in finding ways to help others. Sometimes this generosity took the form of pure philanthropy. Equally often, it found expression in gifts of time and talent and judgment. Sydney took delight in helping along any good cause . . . and a good cause for him was any effort to improve the quality of life in our society. He had confidence in the notion that to foster freedom of thought and expression, to enlarge educational opportunities for young people, or to encourage trained intelligence and artistic verve would strengthen America in ways beyond simple calculation. He was right about this and about so many other things.

Sydney Lewis taught us all what it means to be human. His empathic sense was never failing. He listened carefully to the friends (and strangers too) who gathered around him, and he always responded with a telling mix of judgment and caring. He loved to look upon the forms created by human imagination. Color, line, movement, sound entranced him, made him smile. But, then, most things made him smile. He loved the good company of good people.

The English language likes small, monosyllabic words. It often asks them to carry the most weighty meanings. It is so of the adjective "kind" . . .

* President, Washington and Lee University, 1983-1995.

as in Sydney Lewis was a *kind* man. We can discover this by looking at the etymology in the OED or Webster's, or we can look upon Sydney's life and find it there. In Sydney's character, "kind" admits a torrent of synonyms . . . goodness, gentleness, benevolent, loving, affectionate, benign, generous, compassionate, obliging, friendly. Sydney Lewis was a kind man for he was all of these things and more. We would do no better than to copy him down for all to see and admire and emulate. He was what, at our best moments, we should all hope to be.

Robert E.R. Huntley*

Sydney Lewis was among the most unselfishly generous persons I have ever known. He and Frances together have made a team that Virginians will never forget. The impact of their business and community leadership and the effects of their generosity on countless causes and institutions will be lasting well beyond our time.

There has been a special quality to their giving, even beyond its magnitude, which sets it and them apart. Their giving always had a selfless edge. When it came to giving, they decided on the objects of their philanthropy based on their good instincts and intellects. Having selected, they then drove an easy bargain. They sought no recognition, though they accepted it graciously when it could not be avoided. They extracted no commitments in return. They never sought to use their giving as a basis for power or control. I believe the act of giving and seeing the fruits of their giving has truly been for them a source of joy – and would have been equally joyful for them if no one else had ever known of it.

Many places could, with justification, think of the Lewises as theirs. But we at W&L may well argue we have a special claim. Briefly, I want to make that case.

Not long after I became president of Washington & Lee in 1968, we began to try to locate those persons – alumni and others – who might be willing to help provide the financial help the school would need to continue to be successful. The needs were going to be quite large in comparison to anything in our school's past, and we were fumbling our way along, trying to imagine how to get momentum going in the right direction.

I did not know Sydney Lewis then; a mutual friend and a member of our Board of Trustees, Dr. John Newton Thomas of Richmond, suggested to me

* President, Washington and Lee University, 1968-1983.

that Sydney was a devoted alumnus of the undergraduate and law schools and might be considering a significant gift to W&L. I talked to Sydney and his wife, Frances, about the University's needs and later wrote asking that they consider a gift. Specifically, I suggested a gift (a rather modest one, as I recall) to the fine arts program, because I knew of their interest in the arts. Sydney responded by asking that I tell them more about plans for the law school. Dean Roy Steinheimer and I did so, pointing out that we aspire to construct a new law building which would cost several millions. (In our preliminary planning, we had been told that the number might in fact exceed seven million. But that figure seemed so out of reach that I was hesitant to accept it or to voice it.)

A few days later, I had a telephone call from the Lewis's attorney, with whom I was acquainted. He said, "Bob, I should tell you that the Lewises are thinking about a gift large enough to fund construction of the new law school building." I was literally dumbfounded, unable to respond for several seconds. Then I thought I'd better tell him that the total could be as much as seven million. Without hesitation, he said that might not be out of reach – and I was struck dumb again. As it turned out the Lewises made an initial gift to W&L equal to the amount required to build and equip the building, nine million dollars. Since then, they have made a number of other gifts to W&L, for the law school and for other purposes, totaling many additional millions. And they both went on to become effective and courageous trustees of the University. A special bonus was their sense of humor. Once when coeducation was being debated on campus, I was handed a telegram from Frances: "No more gifts unless W&L becomes coed." A moment later, I was handed one from Sydney: "No more gifts if it does."

The Lewis gift commitment in the early seventies had a special meaning well beyond even its large dollar value. Washington and Lee was struggling to find a way to communicate to its supporters and potential supporters the magnitude of our financial need. Our endowment was less than twenty million dollars, not yielding enough to figure prominently in our pinched annual budget. Salary needs had to be addressed, and physical plant requirements were daunting. We had no tradition of seeking financial help of the size we then faced, and not many ears were attuned to hear about it. Sydney's and Frances's huge commitment at that stage, unexpected and largely unsolicited, gave us the heart to attack all our requirements with hope and optimism. It also gave us the credibility to speak to our constituencies with assurance and without apology.

Over all our college's long history, there have come along at times of stress and crisis extraordinary events and special people who kept the institution alive and on course. Some were teachers and deans, some were administrators, some were trustees and benefactors, some were alumni and some

were near strangers who saw this college and loved it. From my perspective, and with the full advantage of twenty-five years of hindsight, the Lewis commitment to W&L represented the same kind of infusion of strength as Washington's gift and Lee's presidency.

Farris P. Hotchkiss*

In thinking about Sydney, it is difficult to separate thinking of him *alone* as I have had the privilege and pleasure of thinking about Sydney *and* Frances for so many years as if they were one. In my life, I have never known two so completely together people who drew strength and love from each other twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. And so I find that what I know and admired in Sydney, I find the same in Frances.

Sydney Lewis had a level of commitment, an intensity, a passion for life, for his family and for others that was unmatched in my experience.

His commitment to the creation of a new form of business that spread across the entire United States produced financial and philanthropic results that will live long after our present lives.

He was committed to the education of the young at Virginia Union, Eastern Virginia Medical School, Hebrew Union University and at his alma mater, Washington and Lee University, among others. And at each, his and Frances' involvement was not only in the form of philanthropy, but also in the form of hard work and true leadership. Sydney had an uncommon willingness to *do* in addition to a willingness to *give*.

We know full well of his commitment to the arts, to music and especially to the young people emerging in those fields. We Virginians have the heritage of his and Frances' great involvement in the Virginia Museum, the West Wing, and the gift of their great collection.

But most of all, I am reminded of a phrase one hears in the school business: "In loco parentis." In other words, loosely translated, "in the place of parents." To me, Sydney stood as another father to whom I and so many went repeatedly for advice and counsel. Sydney had an incredible way of listening to you and making you feel that whatever else was on his mind, you were the only person in the world in whom – at that moment – he was interested. The comfort of that characteristic for those who sought his help simply cannot be overstated. All of us need that kind of comfort and help from time to time. Sydney seemed always willing to supply it.

* Senior Assistant to the President, 1999-present; Vice-President of University Relations, 1972-1999; Secretary of the Board of Trustees, 1987-1999.

When I think of Sydney, I think of Washington and Lee's campaign, the "Shoulders of Giants." I think of Sydney as a giant, a loving and committed giant for all who came within his embrace.

In a world that so desperately needs human examples of the very best kind, Sydney Lewis's example will always be available to us.

To what can we aspire? Think of Sydney Lewis.

ARTICLES
