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Roger D. Groot: A Dedication

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Matt Engle*

It is more than a little daunting to attempt a tribute to Roger Groot, realizing first that it provides only a short opportunity to convey a great deal of gratitude and admiration and second that the subject will likely be reading it with his dreaded red pen in hand, ready to seize upon any stray punctuation mark or misspelling. Working for Professor Groot was like that. His encyclopedic knowledge of Virginia criminal law and his unparalleled drive and dedication were inspiring, but also intimidating. I have done shoddy academic work in my life, but I never had any doubt that Professor Groot could smell complacency a mile away, and I could never stand the thought of disappointing him. Perhaps the greatest testament I can offer him as a teacher is that the work of which I am most proud was done under his tutelage.

There is much to admire about Professor Groot, but what has always stood out to me is his eagerness to take his ideas out of the classroom and into the courtroom. It takes vast knowledge and a tremendous intellect to consult in dozens of capital cases every year, but it takes something more to walk into court and do it yourself. In his professional life outside the classroom and the Clinic, Professor Groot exemplifies the courage that is required to defend capital murder cases. I believe it is precisely because he has experienced first-hand the pressures of capital litigation that Professor Groot is such a tireless advocate on behalf of the defense bar. Nobody is more protective of, and loyal to, the Virginia defense bar than Roger Groot.

I like to think that I share Professor Groot's profound respect for lawyers who try capital cases. One VC3 experience in particular has fostered that respect. While in the Clinic, I was privileged to participate in jury selection in one of Professor Groot's capital cases. I will always remember meeting with him the morning before trial and being struck by how obviously nervous he was. Now that I am in practice as a habeas corpus litigator, it is easy to become frustrated by the mistakes that are made in capital murder trials. When this happens, I think back to that morning in Wise County and remind myself that trying a capital case is hard enough to make even the giants of the profession tremble a bit. With this lesson in mind, I try to approach every postconviction case not only with an eye toward any potential errors, but also with an

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appreciation for the true dedication and incredible strength that it takes to defend capital cases.

Professor Groot's influence on his VC3 students extended well beyond the finer points of Virginia's death penalty jurisprudence. Of course he taught us the law and helped us develop the analytical skills that we would need as attorneys, but he also gave us something more important. He insisted upon the utmost professionalism, integrity, and courtesy from his students. Without ever quite saying so, he taught us that character is as important to the practice of law as knowledge. Those of us who were fortunate enough to serve in VC3 under Professor Groot's direction emerged from the Clinic as fully-trained lawyers, but perhaps more importantly as better citizens and people for the experience.

Having heard Professor Groot's orientation lecture and taken his first-year criminal procedure class, I knew entering VC3 that he would accept nothing less than my best and most professional work. What I did not know about Professor Groot was how deeply he cares about his students. I did not know, for example, that he made it a point to find out if his students were staying in Lexington over the holidays so that he could invite them to join his family if they had no plans. I did not know that he would take almost as much interest in securing employment for his students as we ourselves would take. I did not know that he would later officiate the wedding of two of his former students. I did not know what an incorrigible (and fun) gossip he is. In short, I knew entering the Clinic that I would find a brilliant and inspiring teacher; I did not realize that I would also gain a colleague and friend.

Today, as I practice law, Professor Groot's lessons are always with me. When I interview a witness, talk to a client, or appear in court, I am conscious of comporting myself in a way that reflects well upon him, upon VC3, and upon Washington and Lee University. When I review a case for the first time, I recall his admonition to read the indictment carefully, because the Commonwealth never seems to get them right. When writing, I remember that he is a stickler for punctuation. On that final note, let me close with a moderately embarrassing confession: Before working with Professor Groot, I was unable to recognize an infinitive reliably, despite two years of high school and six years of college (don't ask). Now, thanks to him, not only do I recognize infinitives every time, but I know to never, ever, split them. Thank you, Professor Groot.