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OF DREAMS AND CATHEDRALS

RICHARD J. CONVISER*

*"Dream no small dreams, my friends.
Build yourselves a Cathedral!"*

*Commencement Address
Dean Lewis Collens¹*

Once upon a time, in the heart of Chicago, there stood a small, non-descript building. It housed a relatively meager, undistinguished collection of books and a small faculty of uneven quality, teaching a group of industrious students, also, however, of uneven quality. Put it all together, and you had the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago-Kent College of Law.

That was then, and this is now — sixteen years later to be exact. The law school, still situated in the heart of the city, is housed in a physical plant four times as large as its original home. And, as these words are being written, construction is underway on a new, far larger still, state-of-the-art law school facility. The library has more than kept pace, growing six-fold during this time, under the careful supervision of a highly competent professional staff. Best of all, the vastly improved quality of both those teaching and those being taught represents the greatest leap forward in terms of improvement. In short, IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law has become a first-rate law school. And it's getting better. The objective confirmation of this fact is its recent admission to membership in the Order of the Coif.²

I played a role, albeit a small one, in this dramatic change: Sixteen years ago, I cast my faculty vote for Lewis Collens as Dean.

I must confess, however, that the decision to vote for Lew was almost too easy for me. I had known him since our high school days. Over the years, we had become close personal friends and colleagues. Not only had we served on the Chicago-Kent faculty together, we had also cofounded and managed a business venture. Given that, it was obvious to

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1. During his tenure as Dean, Lewis Collens concluded his comments to the graduating classes with this challenge.

2. IIT Chicago-Kent was named one of the top five up and coming law schools in a recent *U.S. News and World Report* study. *America's Best Graduate and Professional Schools*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD RPT., Mar. 19, 1990, at 60.

me then, as it is now to the world, that Lew was the ideal choice. In fact, Lewis Collens' appointment would prove to be the perfect mating of person and position. When one looks at his background, particularly with the benefit of hindsight, it's clear that the clues were always there.

From the public school system on the north side of Chicago, Lew went to the University of Illinois, where he earned a degree in accounting. Immediately thereafter, he obtained a CPA license and went to work as controller for Champaign-Urbana's largest department store. For most young persons, a first job with that scope would have been more than enough to challenge them. Not so for Lew. He never did "just one thing at a time." Thus, during this time period, he earned a masters degree in philosophy.

This dual pursuit of scholarship and business reflected not only Lew's energy, but also the range and diversity of his interests; simultaneously, it developed his skills in both fields. The accounting background clearly would aid his future endeavor of running that business called a law school. The liberal arts orientation would help shape his ultimate vision for a law school committed to more than simply functional tasks. (Not to mention that the ability to think "à la Descartes" undoubtedly aided him in surviving many a faculty meeting!)

Law school at the University of Chicago was next for Lew. Again, the results were predictably first-rate — Law Review, Order of the Coif — what else is new? Armed with these credentials, it was easy for Lew to line up a premiere job. He did, joining a prestigious, old-line Chicago law firm.

And then he did it again — that "more than one thing at a time" routine. After all, don't first-year associates in large law firms have plenty of spare time? Apparently so, as he had enough time to cofound BAR/BRI Bar Review during this period. Although Lew's deanship record is a well-known and celebrated fact, not many people are aware of his major role in establishing one of the nation's largest legal educational companies. And it was a major role. Lew was instrumental in attracting and heading up a national faculty for BAR/BRI that included Grant Gilmore, Larry Tribe, Geoffrey Hazard, Owen Fiss, Stanley Johanson, Faust Rossi, and the like. If you could coddle, cajole, wheedle, and otherwise persuade that collection of professors, you could deal with anybody. Undoubtedly, this talent was to prove useful for the tasks to come. (In fact, most people would rate Lew's assembly of the current Kent faculty, with its first-rate academicians and teachers, as his finest achievement. All of the above verbs and then some were constantly necessary.)

Meanwhile, Lew had resigned from his law firm. Heaven forbid, however, that he should do only one thing at a time. So, while developing BAR/BRI, he became a law school professor, joining the IIT Chicago-Kent faculty. It soon became clear to Lew that academia was where he was deriving the most satisfaction. Having found his niche, he absolutely thrived on it. And so Lew decided that he was finally going to do just one thing at a time. To this end, he went off to Harvard University for a year as a Fellow in Law and the Humanities. He returned as Dean.

How lucky we were. But, of course, we did not realize this in full measure at that time. We certainly knew that Lew had the kind of experience and personality traits that might very well make him a good Dean — otherwise, we would not have voted for him — but who could have guessed that these traits were there in such abundance? Candidly, even I, who had the strongest convictions and for whom the vote was easiest, could not imagine that the school, under Lew's guidance, would scale the heights that it has.

How did he do it? I suspect that all of us who have worked with Lew over the years have our own answers to this question. And most likely these answers would vary. Still and all, there undoubtedly would be a consensus with regard to some basic conclusions: To start with, Lew has, and has always had, vision. In theory, anyone who takes the helm of an organization has a grand design as to the direction it should take. In reality, very few people really do have such vision. Lew, though, always knew exactly where he wanted the law school to go, and, unlike most, he could conceptualize his design in terms of long-range goals — as well as the necessary short-term measures to effectuate them.

To have goals is one thing, to execute them is an entirely different matter. Fortunately for us, Lew also possesses this ability in great measure. It comes packaged in two parts — both of equal importance: First, he may be the world's most tenacious son-of-a-gun. When he wants something, he goes after it. And goes after it. And goes after it.

Of course, tenacity alone is not enough. This is where the second part comes into play. It's the power to persuade. To say simply that Lew possesses this power is an understatement. He has it in legendary proportions. Last year, at a banquet commemorating his fifteenth anniversary as Dean, speaker after speaker took the podium to praise him. And speaker after speaker spoke primarily of just that trait. Lew is one of those people who, if he wanted to, could sell you high button boots in the middle of July and persuade you that this is *the* latest summer fashion. It's easy to explain why Lew is so persuasive: People trust him. He says what he

means. His motives are what they seem to be. And, equally important, people truly like him. He's a wonderfully warm, gentle person. All of this would not be complete without mentioning Marge, Lew's delightfully witty and charming wife of twenty-eight years. She has been there step by step as a major coparticipant and has clearly played a vital role in his achievements.

Put it all together and what you have is a man of vision with the ability to execute that vision. To find such a person as Dean requires some luck. To find one who stays for sixteen years to harvest the seeds he has sown requires incredible luck! And, perhaps best of all, our lucky streak is not yet over. We will be able to continue our relationship with Lew as friend, colleague, and mentor as he steps into his new role as President of the Illinois Institute of Technology. But now there will be no surprises. Everybody knows that the piece to be written years from now chronicling that tenure will read exactly like this one.

God speed, Lew — and thanks for the Cathedral.