

IN MEMORIAM

IN MEMORY OF PROFESSOR JANET R.
SPRAGENS

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Professor Janet R. Spragens died much too young, before she had time to express all the laughter, love, happiness, and contribution to public service she had within her. Rather than dwell on what might have been, though, I choose to celebrate her life—her wonderful, vibrant, and unique qualities and the gifts she bestowed not only on her friends and family but on countless others who never knew her.

Professor Spragens—Janet or Jan to her friends and family—was blessed with many extraordinary qualities. From them, she reaped the dividends of accomplishment, success, professional esteem, and, most important, the love and loyalty of family and devoted friends. Her sparkling intellect, warmth of manner, and love of laughter made her a born teacher.

Jan was a teacher as far back as I can remember. When I was a baby and Jan was seven years old, our family moved to Cleveland Park in the District of Columbia. My bedroom had a large blackboard attached to the wall. Jan gravitated to that blackboard like a young Michael Jordan to the basketball hoop in the backyard.

After school, Jan would corral Robert and me, her two younger siblings, sit us in front of the blackboard, and teach us what she had just learned at school. It was there, when she was at Alice Deal Junior High School studying French, and I was a five year-old, that she taught me French phrases I remember to this day. I was the only one

* Nancy J. Altman is Professor Spragens's sister. The essay in memoriam is based on a eulogy Ms. Altman delivered at Professor Spragens's funeral on February 23, 2006.

in my preschool class who could jitterbug, thanks to Jan's penchant for teaching.

At Wellesley College, Jan debated whether to become a teacher or a lawyer. She chose teaching and, upon graduating, enrolled in a Master's program in education at Northwestern University. Among the high school students Jan taught that year was a senior named Hillary Rodham. Hillary's conservative family wanted her to remain close to home for college, and Hillary dutifully planned to comply with their desire. But Jan saw a spark and potential in Hillary and wanted her to strive for more. She spoke to Hillary about Wellesley and the community of gifted and strong women Hillary would find there. In Senator Clinton's 2004 memoir, she credits Jan by name with opening her eyes to the larger world, convincing her to go to Wellesley, and changing her life. Jan's desire to mentor and inspire others to reach their full potential may have changed the course of history: if not for Jan, Hillary would have married some unknown guy from the Midwest—and he would have been president in the 1990s.

Jan went to law school after her year at Northwestern, but the urge to teach remained in her soul. After a few years of tax practice for the United States—an intense and focused walk in her father's footsteps—she joined the American University law faculty, as its only woman, and remained there for the rest of her life.

Whether Jan was a twelve year-old teaching younger siblings, a student teacher of high schoolers, or a distinguished professor of law, she was always popular—engaging, thought-provoking, entertaining, rigorous, insightful, and challenging. As part of her natural ability, she had one tiny but useful edge over virtually every other teacher in the world. She was ambidextrous, and loved to dazzle her students and hold their riveted attention by standing in the middle of the blackboard, starting with chalk in her left hand, then seamlessly switching to her right hand to finish writing.

Generations of law students feel deep gratitude to her. Every member of my family has a story or two of meeting a stranger who, upon learning that we were related to Jan, tells us that Jan was the best teacher he or she had ever had.

Well beyond the campus of American University, Jan has inspired younger lawyers. Les Book, a professor of law at Villanova University, established his own federal tax clinic modeled after Jan's. He has called her a mentor for him and many other members of the bar. The numerous tax clinics that Jan's work has inspired will promote greater tax justice well into the future. That is a remarkable legacy.

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In addition to being an extraordinarily popular teacher and the author of a treatise, a best-selling book on tax, and numerous articles, Jan was visionary. She recognized that low-income taxpayers have tax problems that require good lawyers, and she was concerned about their plight. Imagine, she would ask, if you received a deficiency notice from the IRS, but instead of being affluent and well educated, you barely spoke English, had never attended college, and had no money.

Jan felt compassion for the working poor against whom the power of the federal government was aimed, and she decided to develop a way to help. This same quality of compassion permeated every aspect of Jan's life. And her compassion was always accompanied by action. She didn't just listen with concern when friends or family had troubles; she understood what they needed, and took steps to help. When my daughter Jennifer fractured her arm and needed surgery, Jan was sitting next to us at two o'clock in the morning in the emergency room at Children's Hospital. My mother also broke her arm once when, while golfing, her cleats caught and she fell. Jan immediately went to the department store and bought her a half dozen skirts with elasticized waists that my mother could step into one-handed. Jan was action oriented and always found ways to help.

Jan loved to laugh, and to make others laugh. She knew all the latest jokes making the rounds in Washington, and she regaled family and friends with stories and punch lines that kept the room chuckling.

She loved the beach. She would travel to Rehoboth Beach in all seasons, checking out antiques and fresh produce on her travels to and from the ocean. Her long walks on the wide mid-Atlantic shore would soothe and revitalize her, and bring her home ready to do more for the friends and family whom she loved so dearly.

Because she gave so much and cared so much, no one inspired devotion from friends and family the way that Jan did. Jan loved to entertain her friends and family, and she did it with elegance, grace, and style. She organized Passover Seders, Chanukah parties, and other festive occasions, which she treasured, and to which we all eagerly looked forward.

All that giving, compassion, and caring that Jan showered on the world was reciprocated by the fierce loyalty and love of those who knew her. Over the years, many, many people confided in me that Jan was their best friend. Professor Jane Edmisten, a friend who has become family, spent the last year of Jan's life close to her side. Jane accompanied Jan to doctor's appointments, brought her food, spent

hours talking to her, and towards the end, stayed with her constantly. Jane meant the world to Jan. I will always be grateful for all Jane gave.

But it wasn't just her family and friends that felt such strong loyalty. Consuelo Aspinazu worked for Jan when her children, Robin and Lee, were young. When Consuelo learned that Jan was ill, she came back to help. She would not leave Jan's side, spending her nights sitting in a chair or lying on a couch just outside Jan's room, listening to make sure Jan was okay. The rest of us, over and over again, told Consuelo, now in her eighties, to go home and rest, but she stubbornly refused. Everyone who loved Jan will be eternally grateful to Consuelo.

Jan lived less than a mile from her mother, Sophie Altman. They talked virtually every day of Jan's life. Both of them beamed with pride at the accomplishments of one another and the rest of the family. And they had fun together. No one could make my mother laugh harder than Jan. Jan admired my mother's career, and loved that her own daughter Lee started her career in television as a high school intern on *It's Academic*, the award-winning high school quiz show that Sophie created and produces. Reciprocally, my mother admired all of Jan's many accomplishments and awards. Jan was delighted when Sophie asked if she could audit her personal income tax course—though Jan did give her a hard time when Sophie decided that lugging the bulky Internal Revenue Code and Regulations, on top of the assigned case book was just too much, and failed to bring them to class one day.

I believe that Jan's close and loving relationship with our mother, and the extraordinary and enduring role model that Sophie provided, inspired Jan's own mothering. No one on the planet mattered more to Jan than her beautiful and talented daughters, Robin and Lee. She guided them, taught them, encouraged them, glowed with pride at their accomplishments, suffered at their heartaches—in short, she loved them as much as any parent can love a child. Robin and Lee absorbed and felt all of that love, and it is obvious to anyone who knows either of them that their mother's love has shaped and enriched their own ways of being in the world. No one could ask for more devoted, energetic, intelligent, thoughtful caregivers as they were to Jan when she became ill. They consulted doctors in medical centers around the country, researched clinical test trials and various drug regimens, gave Jan foot rubs, prepared her food, talked with her endlessly, comforted her, slept by her side, and loved her as much as any child can love a parent. They embody Jan's

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best qualities: her beauty, her compassion, her elegance, her sparkling wit and intellect, her giving heart, and her love. Janet's extraordinary spirit will endure in her daughters, in her students and colleagues at Washington College of Law, in those who benefit from the tax clinics she founded and inspired, and in so many others whose smiles she provoked, and whose lives she touched and made better.