

Thursday Afternoons

GREG TRAVALIO*

My Thursday afternoons are not the same. For well over a decade, up until days before he passed away, Phil Sorensen and I would meet on Thursday for a beer or two at a local pub. I always looked forward to those times, and regretted when some other obligation interfered. Our discussions ranged from collegiate and professional sports to our respective philosophies of life, and everything in between. We would often agree, but also disagree with some frequency, and I would always leave feeling like I had learned something. It was only when our discussions ended that I appreciated how much they meant to me.

Actually, our visits to local pubs began much earlier, when I was still a young faculty member at the College of Law. After work, we would occasionally go across the street to a somewhat dingy local bar (this was before the Campus Partners renovation of the area), have a beer, and play video games. These video games were classic games like Atari's "Asteroids," which bear absolutely no resemblance to the super-sophisticated, hi-res graphic games of today. But they were great fun nonetheless. It was here that Phil became a real friend.

It was also here that I began to understand what a truly exceptional human being Phil Sorensen was. To begin with, Phil was extraordinarily smart—easily one of the most intelligent people I have met, both in and out of academia. I realized early on that if I had to defend a position to Phil, I had better be at the top of my intellectual game. If his opinion of the ability of an Ohio State point guard differed from mine, I had better be able to defend my view; the same was true with politics or anything else. Phil was generally better informed on current affairs than I—which was a topic we often discussed—so I would frequently make sure that I read the Thursday edition of the *New York Times* before we met for our beer later that afternoon.

Next to athletics, our discussions were most frequently about politics. I consider myself a "middle-of-the-road" Republican, and Phil was a life-long and committed Democrat, so there was plenty of room for disagreement. Despite our different perspectives, our discussions were civil discourse at its very best. Regardless of our different viewpoints on a multitude of topics, Phil always listened with respect and was willing to try to understand where I was coming from and why. It never became personal. I hope that I did the same. Sometimes, we would even change the others mind, at least a little bit. We would always try to see if compromise positions made sense, and there would be a great deal of satisfaction on both sides when this occurred. We would even talk about religion, and although our theological views were very different, we exchanged our philosophies with respect and curiosity.

* Professor Emeritus, The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law.

But Phil was so much more than simply a friend with whom to have great conversation over a beer. After he retired from the law school, Phil took up sculpting, and became an exceptional artist. His pieces were uniformly beautiful, and ranged from pieces that possessed the sense of humor that Phil embodied to ones that overflowed with depth and love. Phil never wanted to market his pieces—they were enjoyed largely by him and his wife, Jan, and the rest of his family—but I am sure he could easily have become a recognized and successful sculptor.

Speaking of Phil's sense of humor, it was very "Midwestern" and often dry and ingenious. The story that has now become a Moritz classic is when Phil, on the first day of teaching tax to a brand new group of first-year students, brought in a guest lecturer. The guest lecturer was actually our faculty colleague, John Quigley, who spoke fluent Russian. John began to conduct the class in Russian, to the puzzlement and consternation of the students. Phil let this continue just long enough for the students to actually begin to believe that it was for real before disclosing the joke. It was classic Phil. His laugh was hearty, sincere, and infectious. It is a bittersweet memory that much of our time together was spent laughing, and I will never hear him laugh again.

Phil was also an exceptional athlete. When we were both much younger, we used to run a five-mile race in Worthington every May. Despite being thirteen years younger than Phil, and generally being a more frequent runner, it was always a task keeping up with him. More importantly, Phil became a nationally recognized senior tennis player in his later years, competing at the highest levels of the sport. I tried playing with him a few times a long time ago, and while I would huff and puff around the court, he would beat me six-to-nothing in every set without even breaking a sweat. Nonetheless, I enjoyed it and Phil always made me feel like he appreciated the opportunity to play with me despite the lack of competition.

As many people who will read this already know, before Phil's career moved in a different direction, he was the Lieutenant Governor of Nebraska, and came close to being its Governor, losing a close election. Although a Democrat in a Republican state, Phil's sincerity, his sense of humor, his willingness to listen, and his ability to compromise without sacrificing principle, all must have come across to the electorate. I always loved listening to his stories about politics—he was a great storyteller and had many stories to tell.

Despite his many accomplishments, and those of his family, Phil was immensely humble. He never boasted of his many triumphs, neither athletic nor otherwise. In fact, he seemed to enjoy talking about the times he stumbled, rather than when he won. I remember vividly his description of being outplayed in a national seniors tournament, a story which had me in stitches. The closest Phil ever came to bragging was to expound about the accomplishments of his children and grandchildren, never about himself. And even then, he never overdid it.

Over the past decade or more, Phil faced his health challenges with courage and humor. Phil had Hodgkin's disease, which was often debilitating. He went

through a series of setbacks as he battled the disease, but he never became sullen or discouraged. In fact, he would often talk about his various travails with much laughter. He never gave up. In my last telephone conversation with Phil, after he had decided, along with his family and doctors, to enter hospice care, he talked about how good it would be to have a beer without having to worry about whether his chemo would be affected. We made plans to meet the following Thursday—but I never saw him again.

The word, however, that best sums up Phil Sorensen is “integrity.” Phil had more personal integrity than almost anyone I have ever met. It was simply not in Phil’s nature to do anything but the right thing. He would—and did—sometimes act at great personal discomfort and sacrifice to do what he thought was right and to avoid compromising principle. Never once, in all the years that I knew him, did Phil attempt to mislead anyone. We would often talk about how difficult it was sometimes to identify the morally correct path, but Phil’s moral compass was unswerving. I remember Phil telling me a story about a very difficult decision he made as a young lawyer, which could have cost him his professional career; but once he had decided that his integrity was at stake, he did what he had to do without excuse or rationalization. To Phil, there was no other way. At the same time, he conveyed this integrity without a sense of moral superiority or pomposity; Phil was not a judgmental person. To the contrary, he had a deep and abiding sense of justice, and of concern for those who stumbled along the way or who faced challenges of poverty or abuse and had made bad decisions as a result.

So much more could be said about Phil Sorensen. He was an accomplished teacher and scholar. He was a connoisseur of opera, classical music, and movies. He had a passion for Nebraska athletics. He had four wonderful children who recognized him for the extraordinary person that he was. He had a wife, Jan, who he obviously adored. And on and on

I admired him immensely and I miss him terribly.

