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**A TRIBUTE TO ROBERT (“BOB”) G. BURDICK:  
A MAN OF VISION AND LIGHT**

**CONSTANCE A. BROWNE\***

One of Bob’s former students said it best: “Bob was the lawyer I wanted to be. He was the person I wanted to be.”<sup>1</sup> Bob was *also* the mentor, teacher, and innovator I aspired to be. For many marginalized clients, Bob brought the change they needed; the change justice required. He embodied hope—he saw the light and strove to enable others to share in its glow.

I first met Bob in 1984 when I spoke to him about the civil clinical program that he had directed since 1977.<sup>2</sup> Four years later, I began my clinical teaching career. I had the privilege of working thirty-two years with Bob, until his death on June 18, 2020. Bob’s death was, of course, a tragedy for his family, a huge loss for me personally, and a deprivation for the clinical program and for the law school community as a whole. He is irreplaceable.

Bob’s legal advocacy brought landmark changes in how the law protects the rights of tenants, young adults with special education needs, and persons living with mental illness. He found his calling early on. Just one year after graduating from Boston University School of Law in 1972, as cocounsel in a class action lawsuit heard by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court,<sup>3</sup> Bob argued for the right of tenants to safe and sanitary apartments. Just two years later, Bob was plaintiffs’ cocounsel in a case in the federal district court of Massachusetts, advocating on behalf of patients of Boston State Hospital who had been, or might in the future be, secluded or forcibly treated.<sup>4</sup> Still today, Massachusetts advocates and courts use this case to ensure the rights of persons living with mental illness. In 1987, continuing his pursuit of justice for persons with disabilities, Bob, along with others, brought suit in federal district court on behalf of a twenty-six-year-old man with profound hearing loss and speech deficiencies.<sup>5</sup> The action sought and obtained compensatory relief for the state’s

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<sup>1</sup> The speaker was Nancy S. Shilepsky, a 1978 alumna of BU Law and current partner in Sherin and Lodgen, LLP’s Employment Department.

<sup>2</sup> Burdick served as Acting Director of the civil clinic from 1977 to 1979 and Director from 1979 to 2020.

<sup>3</sup> *W. Broadway Task Force v. Dep’t of Cmty. Affs.*, 297 N.E.2d 505 (Mass. 1973).

<sup>4</sup> *Rogers v. Okin*, 478 F. Supp. 1342 (D. Mass. 1979), *aff’d in part, rev’d in part*, 634 F.2d 650 (1st Cir. 1980), *vacated sub nom. Mills v. Rogers*, 457 U.S. 291 (1982), *remanded sub nom. to Rogers v. Okin*, 738 F.2d 1 (1st Cir. 1984).

<sup>5</sup> *Pihl v. Mass. Dep’t of Educ.*, 9 F.3d 184 (1st Cir. 1993).

failure to provide appropriate education for the plaintiff.<sup>6</sup> Bob continued this campaign for those with unmet needs throughout his career, collaborating with the legal services community and the clinical law students whom he taught, mentored, and inspired.

Bob's passion for learning and teaching matched his passion for justice, and all were contagious. After a long night working at the clinic, one student posted on Bob's door a large picture of a blue-jeaned Bob Dylan walking down a road. Bob Burdick's face was pasted over Bob Dylan's, and one could almost hear these iconic lyrics:

The line it is drawn  
The curse it is cast  
The slow one now will  
Later be fast.  
As the present now  
Will later be past  
The order is rapidly fadin'  
And the first one now  
Will later be last  
For the times they are a-changin'.<sup>7</sup>

Not content to be merely a witness to change, Bob Burdick sought to be an agent of change. He brought about change not by diminishing others but by helping all to rise, not by fostering division but by helping people to see the common humanity in us all. He taught his students not only what the law *is* but also what the law *might be*. In the Professional Responsibility course that he taught for many years, students read Bob's paper entitled "Inside the Fence," which challenged them to think about their power and its potential for good or ill when exercising their ethical discretion.

Bob was a voracious reader and writer and a tireless innovator. He was a pioneer in clinical pedagogy and inspired his colleagues to develop teaching models for all aspects of civil practice. Under his leadership, the civil clinical program produced a practice manual as well as litigation packets in housing, family, employment, and disability law. These materials were road maps for representing clients at the highest level—strategically, ethically, and effectively.

Lastly, Bob was a beautiful person. He put others first, treated all with respect, and was loyal to the law school and its students. His loyalty is shown by two phone calls made while he was in the hospital. Shortly after being admitted, Bob called to remind us of an important client appointment. In telling me about the appointment, Bob emphasized that he was concerned not for himself but for his students. The next day, still hospitalized, Bob asked his wife, Jane Burdick, to alert us about student admission files in need of review—a task he expertly

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> BOB DYLAN, *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, on THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' (Columbia Records 1964).

performed but had not yet finished. His reviews helped build our JD classes and enriched the law school in myriad ways.

Bob's guiding principles are best summed up in these concluding lines from Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb":

For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it.<sup>8</sup>

May Bob's memory continue to be a source of bravery and of light.

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Liu, *Read the Full Text of Amanda Gorman's Inaugural Poem, 'The Hill We Climb,'* CNBC (Jan. 20, 2021, 3:25 PM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/20/amanda-gormans-inaugural-poem-the-hill-we-climb-full-text.html> [<https://perma.cc/DDW2-GT4E>].