Chuck Klein Memorial Service

December 4, 2019

Remarks of Richard Revesz

When I first met Chuck on February 4, 2003, over lunch at the Sky Club I had little inkling that he would become such a transformational figure in the life of NYU Law School. By the time I last had dinner with him, at his home in Kent, CT, on August 4, 2019, Chuck’s status as one of the Law School’s most significant leaders had been established for about a decade but by then I thought of him primarily as one of my closest friends. When I visited Chuck for the last time on August 27, in Danbury Hospital after his stroke and three days before he died, I got to tell him how much I admired his entrepreneurial approach to philanthropy and how much I loved him as a friend. In preparing for these remarks, I reread the 769 e-mails I got from Chuck over these 16 years, roughly one a week. Chuck probably did not think of himself as a gifted writer but in fact he was enormously eloquent. So, I will quote him liberally.

Philanthropy

Chuck had a distinctive perspective on philanthropy, which reflected his unassuming personality and his approach to business. From our early conversations and throughout my whole deanship, Chuck and I worked closely on the launch of what is now the Mitchell Jacobson Leadership Program on Law and Business. Chuck was the earliest and most vocal advocate of taking advantage of the synergies among the Law School, the Stern School of Business, and New York City’s status as a business and financial capital. Had it not been for Chuck, the program
wouldn’t have come close to succeeding in the way that it did. He gave the program—really the idea because there was no program yet—its initial major gift. I first came to understand how unusual Chuck was when we discussed how to structure the gift. Chuck departed from the norm in insisting that his gift not be endowed. Instead, he regarded it as venture capital to be spent as quickly as possible. He wanted to establish the proof of concept. He was confident that if we could quickly stand up a successful program, other funds would come.

Almost immediately, the e-mails in which Chuck told me all that he was doing to build out the substantive building blocks of the program started rolling in. Chuck was very focused on creating distinctive business job opportunities for the law and business students. So, he scoured his professional contacts and enlisted them in this venture. Reporting one of his conversations, Chuck told me: “A second friend of mine has agreed to consider our business/law students for internships next year. I will approach a third this week. So far no one has turned me down. My goal is to have, before school starts, at least ten commitments of fund managers and financial institutions that would like to interview our students for internships or jobs.”

Having succeeded at almost single-handedly putting together the building blocks of the program, Chuck proceeded to sell the idea to Mitchell Jacobson, his fellow Law School trustee who would eventually give the naming gift to endow the program. Instead of trying maximize the naming opportunity for his own gift, Chuck worked hard to make sure that the program would be named for someone else. This was far from typical behavior.
Chuck had the most sophisticated understanding of issues around naming opportunities of anyone I ever worked with. He was not an adherent of Maimonides’ views that philanthropy should be anonymous. Observing Chuck made me come to the conclusion that Maimonides, however well-intentioned he might have been, was just plain wrong on this issue. The fact that a person of Chuck’s stature believed in the program and was prepared to be associated with it is what gave others the confidence that a possible investment would be a good one. But, at the same time, Chuck understood that seeking too much credit would imperil the very venture that he so wanted to succeed. He repeatedly stressed this point. In one e-mail, Chuck said: “Would it be appropriate to mention the Jacobson and Petrie Foundation gifts? I would prefer to focus on what others have done rather than me.” Part of the reason for these missives was Chuck’s self-effacing personality. He once wrote to me: “As a child my fantasy was to be the eminence grise, never the cardinal”—a slightly strange fantasy for a Jewish kid. But a lot more than modesty was going on here. Chuck had internalized the adage that “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.” In fact, he had taken it one step further affirmatively preferring that others get credit if more could thereby be accomplished.

Chuck also understood unusually well the limits beyond which an engaged philanthropist should not push an institution and the distinction between the role of a board member and that of the institution’s management. He saw himself as an idea generator but not as the decisionmaker. He was prepared to do hard work to accomplish something the institution was committed to. But he didn’t see his role as being to push the institution in a direction the institution didn’t want to go. For example, Chuck firmly believed in the merits of a three-year JD/MBA program. Every time some other institution adopted such a program, Chuck would let me know. I always
thanked him but we never moved to make it happen because, for better or worse, I didn’t think it was a good idea. He never complained and never pressured me. Chuck once told me: “I can be a pain in pursuit of projects I am passionate about.” But he was wrong about that. Chuck was persistent but gentle, steadfast but supportive.

**Friendship**

My relationship with Chuck started out as a professional one. But before too long, this relationship took on an additional dimension, and a deep friendship developed. And, Chuck’s friendship extended to my family, not only to Vicki but also to my children, Joshua and Sarah.

Vicki and I have really fond memories of trips with Chuck and Jane, and sometimes with Andy, Libby, and Dave, sometimes with Joshua and Sarah: in Buenos Aires, Florence, Tennessee, the Adirondacks, and our many times together in Kent and Salisbury, CT. We had plans for other such trips and it’s really sad to think that Chuck will then be with us only in spirit.

Chuck was so devoted to his family during all the years I knew him, that he made it easy for me to prioritize my family as well. Reading through the e-mails, I was mildly horrified to see how many weekend plans with Chuck I canceled because my kids unexpectedly came home from college for the weekend or because of some other change in family plans. I don’t think I would have done that to the same extent with any other Law School leader. But I knew that Chuck would invariably send an e-mail saying “You are doing the right thing,” or something along these lines and “we are big on rain checks.” I knew that his response was always genuine.
I was particularly touched with how concerned Chuck was about what I would do after I stepped down as dean. He wanted me to be professionally fulfilled and, despite my repeated reassurances, worried that I wouldn’t be. And years later, he remembered these worries and told me how happy he was that I was engaged in a set of activities that worked so well for me.

Overt expressions of the meaning of friendship are uncommon, particularly in men of Chuck’s generation. Yet back in 2007, Chuck first signed-off an e-mail saying “with admiration and affection.” And that phrase sometimes reappeared in subsequent e-mails, infrequently enough to reveal that it wasn’t a throwaway line stored in the memory of his computer. A year later, he said: “I have worked with dozens of CEOs over 30 years. Ours is one of the two where special affection has developed.”

Following a visit to our Connecticut house, Chuck wrote: “Usually when Jane and I go out our custom is to spend a few minutes while preparing to go to bed talking about the just completed event. Last night we turned the lights off about 2 AM! It took that long to revisit the afternoon and dinner. If those minutes are a measure of enjoyment our record was broken Thursday. We are touched by how easily accessible (and in love) you both are and felt immediately at home with your family. It is thrilling to find good friends close by with whom we share so many interests.” We felt the same way, though I worry that we conveyed our feelings less beautifully than Chuck had.
Another time, remarking on our friendship, Chuck told me: “You and Vicki are in a special category. Jane and I hope and expect the two of you will be there for a very long time.” And we so hoped that Chuck would be there for a very long time with us and are so sad that now he is not.

**Gratitude and Optimism in the Face of Adversity**

The summer of 2008 was bittersweet for Chuck. He wrote to me as Jane and he were hiking in the Pyrenees: “Last week our guide led us to a pass on the border and then down into the other province. The route followed an ancient cobble stone lane through a natural tunnel to a huge mountain top pasture filled with horses and cows. There we were serenaded by hundreds of bells. Despite a light rain it was a mystical experience. At moments like that I get a hint of why some people believe in God.”

But, unfortunately, a month later he sent me a far less uplifting e-mail: “As you know I returned home from Spain weak and wobbly. Consequently I have now seen a squad of doctors. Last night on a second round of MRIs the radiologist found cervical spinal stenosis. We are scheduled to meet the surgeons Thursday morning and expect to have an operation to relieve the pressure on a nerve in my neck next Monday.” It turned out, very unfortunately, that, despite Chuck’s access to the very best medical care in the world, the doctors never really figured out the precise nature of the problem nor what could be done to deal with Chuck’s debilitating symptoms. The quest for answers to these questions was a big part of Chuck’s life for the next 11 years, all the way until his death.
During these years, it was obvious that Chuck was in great pain. His mobility was definitely impaired. But in many ways little else changed. E-mails kept coming with invitations for tennis, hiking, and bike-riding in Kent. It was clear that Chuck would not be joining these activities, but it was equally clear that he would enjoy knowing that the activities were going on in his proximity and that Jane (or Andy and Libby) were participating. He continued to travel extensively and to enjoy the trips. And the essence of his personality was unchanged.

In fact, two of Chuck’s defining traits—gratitude and optimism about life—were deepened by the adversity. When a doctor discovered that Chuck’s particularly excruciating back pain at the time came not from a physical condition but from a broken metal rod in his back, Chuck didn’t express anger at all the missed diagnoses (or threaten litigation). Instead, he said: “I am trying to think of this as discovery and an opportunity.” Really, few other people would think of it that way.

In 2011, three years into the ordeal, Chuck said: “My illness caused my universe to contract. It is now slowly expanding. Each trip away from our farm is an adventure on a new path. Our dinner with you was enormously encouraging.”

In 2016, he wrote to me: “Over the last eight years my friends have been very helpful. By that I mean that despite the physical changes they like you and Vicki accept me for who I am. My fear was they would not. In a strange way that makes me feel better about myself.”
And the expressions of gratitude for his family, for our friendship, for the Law School’s recognition of his accomplishments kept coming at a steady clip. It is customary for institutions to take every opportunity to express their gratitude to their significant supporters. But it is less customary for these individuals to express gratitude to the institution in the deep, heartfelt, and consistent way in which Chuck did. When I wrote to him about his selection to receive the Vanderbilt Medal (which, together with the Weinfeld Award is the Law School’s most significant recognition to one of its graduates), Chuck said: “I am very indebted to your institution; it is not the other way around. I have gotten much more than I have given and most importantly a terrific group of new dear friends.” On another occasion, he added: “My life has been enriched by the intellect of your community, given meaning by working on the Law and Business programs and enhanced by getting to know your family.”

I am convinced that this astonishing combination of optimism and gratitude in the face of physical adversity sustained Chuck during the last 11 years and allowed him to live a life with much fulfillment, meaning, and happiness. We should all learn from his example.

Conclusion:

With Chuck’s passing, the Law School lost one of its giants and Vicki and I lost a very close friend. I will always remember him and in my nightly prayers I will continue to ask God to bless his memory.