It is hard to imagine the Law School without Lillian Zalta. I mean it literally. Let me remind you of what the Law School didn’t have in 2002, when Lillian joined us, very early in my deanship, following an already long and distinguished career at the University. (Lillian must have been hired as a baby or otherwise it’s not clear how she squeezed in so many years of service at NYU.)

There was no Furman Hall. The plans had been done but all there was at the site was a big hole in the ground.

There was no Wilf Hall. Or, rather, what is now Wilf Hall was a rental building showing the clear signs of deferred maintenance, with rents that barely covered the expenses, thus making a prize piece of real estate contiguous to Vanderbilt Hall practically worthless to the Law School.

There was no 22 Washington Square North. Or, rather, 22 Washington Square North was a University office building screaming “gut renovation” and a beloved faculty colleague with a grand vision, which raised certain challenges that Lillian handled with enormous grace.

And Vanderbilt Hall, which definitely existed, sported its pre-renovation look, with its linoleum floors, which reminded people of their middle school experiences, and with its thorough lack of technology suitable for the 21st century.
Each of these projects was enormously complicated. You’ll get a sense with just a couple of examples. The top to bottom renovation of Vanderbilt Hall needed to be done in the 13 weeks between graduation and orientation. The building had to be totally emptied. Faculty members had to be able to do their work over the summer. The books they needed for their summer research would have to end up with them; everything else would have to go to storage. The Law School administration would need to operate out of the 2d floor of D’Ag and our phones, computers, and other necessary equipment needed to end up there. And there was no plan B. If the building was not done in time, we didn’t have another place where we could begin our classes. Throughout this nerve wracking summer of 2004, Lillian was totally unflappable. She exuded such confidence that she eventually convinced even the most skeptical, which included various member of the Law School’s board of trustees, that everything would be OK.

Wilf Hall also had lots of challenges: how to deal with the Landmarks Commission, the Community Board, the Borough President’s task force on NYU buildings, how to preserve the theater façade, how to get our Leed Platinum certification (making it, at the time, only the fifth building in New York City with such a certification). Other challenges came up along the way, including, I am not kidding, how to deal with the ghosts that were said to inhabit the Provincetown Playhouse. (If you are interested, we can talk about that some more during the reception, over a glass of wine.)

A significant reason for why each of these projects was hugely successful is because of Lillian: her ambition and drive and the excellence that she demands from everyone. But these skills, however impressive they are, would not have gotten these jobs accomplished. Lillian succeeded in the fabulous way in which she did because of her personality. For example, for Wilf Hall to happen, the Law School needed to take care of the needs of the rent-controlled tenants who lived in the building. Lillian came to know each of them, and spent lots of time listening to their stories and their needs. They came to trust that Lillian would deliver what she had promised. In the end, every elderly tenant who lived in a fourth- and fifth-floor walk-up was moved to building with elevators, ensuring that the tenants would be able to occupy their homes for many
additional years and live in far more comfort. It was a textbook example of a win-win, as they say. During this time, it was hard to schedule meeting with Lillian because she was so often having tea with these residents. And I’m convinced that Lillian personally helped pack their belongings and get set up in their new apartments.

It was not all about large building projects. Sometimes smaller issues can involve just as much work and even more aggravation. For example, there was Abraham. Don’t look around trying to remember a colleague named Abraham with whom Lillian might have worked at the Law School. I mean the original Abraham, the Abraham from the Old Testament. It turns out that one the beloved colleague I mentioned earlier had somehow arranged for a 4-ton statue (or that’s what I remember about the weight) of Abraham to be made by a famous Slovenian sculptor and for the sculpture to be unveiled here at the Law School by the President of Slovenia, who was going to be here for a lecture. It turned out that little time had been allowed to get this piece out of customs at Kennedy Airport. And a further complication was that, while Abraham was going to reside at 22 Washington Square North, the Slovenian President would need to do the unveiling in D’Agostino Hall. And you can’t put a 4-ton statue on a moving cart. Everything worked out, as it always did with Lillian, although I must admit that some of us (including Lillian and me) aged a little during this saga.

When you put together enormous integrity, huge technical capacity, a remarkable work ethic, and an extraordinary personality, which radiates in every interaction how much she cares about people, you have Lillian. Lillian, it was such a joy to work closely with you for 11 years and to be your friend after that. I will always cherish the memories of our interactions, big and small, and will always marvel at what you accomplished in totally transforming NYU Law School and in enriching the lives of each of your colleagues.