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# Talking Turkey

Law School Dean Frederic White spreads the NEWS about his life, his philosophy and his new job

by Lauren Hauptman

**F**red White calls 'em like he sees 'em. The self-described “straight shooter” from Cleveland is a former municipal-bond lawyer and veteran law professor with a very strong sense of where he came from — and an even stronger sense of where he’s going. Luckily for Golden Gate University, the new dean is taking the School of Law with him.

**Lauren Hauptman:** You went to Columbia for both your undergraduate and law degrees. Why?

**Fred White:** What sealed the deal for me was a guy named Ernest Holsendolph who used to write for *Fortune* magazine. He was a Columbia alumnus who came to visit me at my home. I was expecting some kind of tall white guy. His name is Dutch, but he happened to be African-American, too, and was really convincing about why I ought to go to Columbia. Somebody coming to see me, little old me, about going to this big school in New York. I thought it was really kind of cool.

**LH:** What made you decide to continue and go to law school?

**FW:** I had a lot of fun in college. In '68, we were taking over buildings, and I was part of that. I'll never forget telling my father I was in jail. He said, “In jail for what?” Well, we wanted to build this gym in West Harlem. He said, “You're in jail about a gym?” Yeah, Dad.

But it was interesting because part of that was looking at the fervor of these guys — black and white lawyers — who didn't know anything about us, who were very good at working the system. I thought, “What a great job this could be.” That crisis abated, as crises tend to do, but that was when I thought it might not be a bad idea. So that's when I decided to go to law school.

**LH:** Did you like law school?

**FW:** I didn't enjoy law school that much. I didn't really care about it, frankly. But I wanted to be a lawyer. That was it for me. I just thought if you want to be a lawyer, you have to go to law school.

**LH:** Do you think GGU students feel the same way?

**FW:** I want them to have a better experience than I had. Columbia

was really kind of an aloof, elitist place. It produced great lawyers, but the law school was just kind of cold. Now, that doesn't mean I want Golden Gate to become a social-work school. But I want students to understand that every client story is important. It can't be, "Well, enough about me; let's talk about me." I think the importance is for them to know — whether the person has a shopping cart on the street and you're defending him for loitering or whether it's Ken Lay or somebody else — whoever it is, that person is owed a fiduciary duty. You are, in effect, a caretaker. What you're doing as a lawyer is you are dealing with people's lives.

**LH: You taught at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law for 26 years and were most recently associate dean. What's the best part about being an educator?**

**FW:** The best part is writing letters of recommendation for people. Here's an athletic metaphor: You get the baton, you give it to somebody else. You don't keep it. In my position, I'm able to get one baton and pass it out to 20 people. I tell people: When you get the job and you're sitting where I'm sitting, and somebody comes to you for a recommendation and you think they're worth it, write it. Don't sit there and say, "I'm too busy."

You're supposed to pass on the good things that have happened to you. That's what my aunts and my mother used to tell me. I really do believe that I'm a placeholder. There's going to be a new dean after I leave, and eventually they will say, "Fred who?" That's the way it is.

The bottom line is: If I'm a leader, which essentially I am here, part of what I'm doing is spreading appreciation to people. I think a good leader spreads appreciation and takes blame where necessary. That's been my philosophy, and that's going to be my philosophy here.

**LH: What's impressed you most about GGU?**

**FW:** We have a really dedicated staff on a lean budget. We've got a good team here. Top to bottom, I think most of the people are really dedicated. I'm getting a chance to meet a lot of students. I'm going to try to teach a class.

There are some bumps. Actually, somebody was talking to me about management the other day. They said, "Wouldn't it be great if there were no bumps?" I said, "It wouldn't be a lot of fun." I wouldn't want a job where nothing ever happened.

**LH: What are the biggest bumps you see facing you?**

**FW:** The biggest bump is getting the law-library renovation project done. It will mean better venues for study for our students, our alumni and our staff. That's going to be a good thing, and that's a bump. It's going to take time and money, but the board of trustees has blessed this process.

We have to do some things about the Bar pass rate. We're working on that on two levels. One is to be more selective, while maintaining our mission. The good thing about it is, as of yesterday, the Law School had more than 3,000 applications for about 250 seats, so people still want to come to Golden Gate.

The other thing is to do a better job of putting Golden Gate on the map. I'm looking at branding opportunities. The Law School has been around for 100 years, and it's produced some great lawyers, but we're not as well known as we should be.

The other thing is trying to maintain staff morale, so I'm thinking of different things to do that. It's amazing how little things matter. For two Thanksgivings in a row at Cleveland-Marshall, I had a

truck pull up in front of the law school. We gave out tickets [to the staff] saying, "Happy Thanksgiving from Phyllis and Frederic White," with a gold turkey on them. They went down to the truck and gave the guy their ticket, and everybody on the staff got a turkey. At my last graduation ceremony at Cleveland-Marshall, this year, I saw one of the janitors

who said, "Thanks for the turkey" — and this thing happened in '99. It really felt good. You can do things to make people feel better, and you can be sincere about it. When that happens, when people feel better about themselves, they'll do more.

**LH: What's the key thing you want to tell students?**

**FW:** One of the things I'm going to do this year at orientation is an acronym called NEWS. I did it at Cleveland, and I'm going to do it here. The acronym stands for: Be Nice, be Excellent, be Well and be Still. Start with nice: Be civil; you don't have a license to be uncivil because you are smart. I always let folks know IQ is the result of something you had nothing to do with. Now, *how* you use it is something else. You need to be nice, you need to be excellent, and you need to be the best you can be. You need to be well in the sense that you need to keep your mental health together. And you need to be still; you need to listen sometimes.

**LH: If GGU could be everything you want it to be, what will students experience?**

**FW:** My goal is that when students leave here on graduation day and when they practice law, or whatever they use their law degree for, they will think of the time at Golden Gate as a time well spent. That's what I'm looking for. A time well spent. Did they have good teachers? Did they have good mentors from our alumni and us? Were they treated with respect by the staff? I want them to think we made them better than what they already were. And they're pretty good to begin with. **ggg**