

8-15-2011

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Recommended Citation

Moser, Kate, "Bernard Segal, 1930-2011" (2011). *Articles About Faculty*. Paper 8.
<http://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/aboutfaculty/8>

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The Recorder | August 15, 2011

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Bernard Segal, former Golden Gate University law professor
Image: Christine Jegan/The Recorder

SAN FRANCISCO — Bernard Segal, a professor and director of the litigation program at Golden Gate University School of Law, died Friday at his home in Tiburon. He was 81.

Segal mentored generations of students in his 39 years at Golden Gate.

"Legions of lawyers and lawyers who have become judges owe their abilities and their knowledge of the law to Bernie," said Segal's brother, R. Stephen Goldstein of San Francisco's Goldstein, Gellman, Melbostad, Harris & McSparran.

"He was warm, he was fun, he was wonderful, he was a joy to be with and full of delight and wisdom," Goldstein said.

Segal was born in Philadelphia in 1930 to Jewish immigrants from Poland and went on to become the first in his family to graduate from college. He worked as a public defender in Philadelphia and was active in the civil rights movement, volunteering for the ACLU in Pennsylvania and Mississippi.

Segal honed a career in legal education at Golden Gate University after he moved to California in 1972. There, he pioneered the litigation program to help students acquire the practical skills they'd need as practicing attorneys and he developed a nationally competitive mock trial program.

"It's all the rage now and what all the law students are talking about — practical legal education — but Bernie had this idea more than 30 years ago," said Wes Porter, co-director of Golden Gate's litigation center.

The law school has been planning a gala next month to honor Segal and rally support for the litigation center and moot court.

"He was a very charismatic guy," said Golden Gate Dean Drucilla Ramey. As a litigator, she said, Segal was a natural at "having a full command of the facts and the way they would be perceived, and figuring out how to make that perception most favorable to his clients' interest and the interest of justice."

Former students have been flocking to a **Facebook group**, "Bernie's Crew," to write about how Segal inspired and mentored them.

"Something I always appreciated about him as a student and watching him teach, he didn't tell war stories about how great he was as a lawyer," said Brian Soriano, a former student who more recently had been co-teaching courses with Segal. "I'm sure he had a million war stories, but you never heard him talking about how great things went down."

Segal was unfailingly generous and had a great sense of fun, Soriano said. To prevent a student from missing a plane en route to a mock trial competition, Segal once faked a heart attack so the airline wouldn't detach the gateway from the terminal.

"He was a wise guy like that," Soriano said.

Shahrad Milanfar, an attorney at Becherer Kannett & Schweitzer in Emeryville, recalled Segal's sense of humor, and how he could also be tough on students. Milanfar remembered once answering a judge's question while remaining seated during a mock trial — a no-no in Segal's book. From the back of the courtroom Milanfar heard Segal's voice boom: "Counselor, are your legs broken?"

"That decorum, the respect he had for the court and the judicial system, was what really came through," Milanfar said.

"Not only did he make us better lawyers and advocates in the courtroom, he also, by his example, showed us how to be better human beings."