

On April 19, 2023, at the invitation of Professor Miriah Kelly and Dean Bruce Kalk, Neil delivered the following thoughts on why he created the Scholar and Civic Fund in Law and Social Justice in 2019. President Smith thought its wider dissemination would be of special value to the faculty and staff, and through you, to students.

Neil Thomas Proto
Introductory Remarks
SCSU April 19, 2023.
Law and Social Justice Program.

Introduction

Thank you, Dean Kalk for your introduction, and Professor Kelly for your invitation. I'm looking forward to tonight's guest speaker, Zoha Shawoo ; and what is on her mind about the matter central to our global identity, and a challenge to our character and purpose for being in this nation, and on this earth.

It also is a clash — a battle of values. As have many of the subjects this program has examined. I think you'll see that my own brief observations are not unrelated.

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“The Neil Thomas Proto Scholar and Civic Fund in Law and Social Justice” was agreed upon and entered into in March 2019. It is a page or so in length and, if it is not already, it is fine with me that it be available to students who may want to interpret and act on the forms available for attaining its purpose, including in art, music, and theatre.

I'm going to describe, briefly, not what I hoped for — But, Why did I do it?

In doing that, I want you to keep two imperatives in mind, because they are always in my mind and heart.

1. Foremost, I am the son of an immigrant, my mother, who came to New Haven in steerage — below the water line— at 6 years old, from a country hostile to her family's life and her future, and into one that was discriminatory from the moment she entered a public grammar school operated by the Catholic Church. And in a city discriminatory in other, much uglier ways that she only learned about in time. As I did; and

2. Second, I am the product of the public schools in New Haven, operated by publicly appointed and dedicated teachers, especially at this University, then a college.

Its faculty and its deans provided me and others with a solid foundation in inquisitiveness, imagination, moral and ethical values, the value of caring, a form of empathy, and the importance to have aspirations—without constraint— and to find the means to attain them, if not always in a straight line.

These two imperatives —in family and in education—made me acutely aware of the unfair, the discriminatory, of the conduct by people and forces around me that were just not right. And how to think about what I learned and witnessed, and.... what to do about it.

The Fund

There are a number of threads to the “Scholar and Civic Fund in Law and Social Justice.” I’m going to read just one of them.

“Civic” is defined as follows:

“‘Civic’ means the public duty of the private person in the conduct of citizenship in community, neighborhood, and national and international settings.”

The “public duty of the private person.”

You cannot learn the fullness of what civic duty means— in the most practical terms possible— early enough. Many of you in this room have long ago begun it, though you may not have given it a name. And you are still learning the practical elements — that is, the reasons it is often a battle, and the forces in play that resist it. And what you need to know and learn to do battle. Especially about yourself. And, at times, the meaning of moral courage.

This Fund is intended to affirm that value, the imperative of the public duty of the private life, the conduct of responsible citizenship, in new or different or better informed directions. Perhaps, too, as inspiration for your own choices. Your own persistence. Your own aspirations. And those of others.

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Lastly, there is one element of that civic conduct I especially admire. Informed Irreverence.

I had my moments of informed irreverence while I was a student here; in my battles with President Hilton Buley, who came to appreciate and rely on it when, at his request, myself and the President of the senior class went to Hartford to testify successfully for the inclusion of funds for the bridge crossing Fitch Street and the needed student center, what you now call Connecticut Hall. And, with the president of the University of Connecticut, Homer Babbidge, who came to regret it after he referred to the state colleges as “mediocre” and not worthy of funds that should go to his school and with the other student body presidents at the state colleges publicly challenged him and forced an apology. That history is among the papers I’ve donated to your archives.

That irreverence was never a substitute for my insistence, later in life, to be the best lawyer in the room, the most informed person in the room, knowing that the three melded together—that values, skill, and irreverence mattered. I brought them to bear frequently in my life time — in battles of choice, now deeply-held in memory:

- as a law student, with others, against the corporate power and money of the nation’s railroads and their elite law firms;

- as a lawyer against the state of South Dakota and a bigoted judge on behalf of Native Americans,

- against the United States Navy in support of the land and cultural rights of Native Hawaiians;

- as a teacher about the horror of corporate exploitation in Appalachia;

- And in what I’ve chosen to write about, especially—in this city of New Haven—the brutal and enduring ethnic and racial harm of urban renewal;

- and the support in law—at and by Yale and in Connecticut when is dean, Wilbur Cross, was Governor— of the institutionalization and sterilization especially of Southern and Eastern European immigrants —those considered “unfit.”

The civic duty of the private life. The duty of responsible citizenship.

It was those experiences that underpin my imperative to form this “Scholar and Civic Fund in Law and Social Justice.” At this University. My Alma Mater.

Thank you again for inviting me.

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