

2000

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Recommended Citation

John Eastman, *Justice Thomas Visits Chapman University School of Law*, 3 CHAP. L. REV. 1 (2000).

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/chapman-law-review/vol3/iss1/1>

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Justice Thomas Visits Chapman University School of Law

By Professor John Eastman

To the world, October 20, 1999 was a day not unlike many others in southern California. Sunny and warm. Some minor accidents on the freeways. Concerns about pending Y2K disruptions were beginning to take on some urgency. But nothing really of historical moment.

Except here, at Chapman Law School. For on that day, the Honorable Clarence Thomas, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, came to dedicate the new Donald P. Kennedy Law School building, which houses the four-year-old Chapman University School of Law. He did more than dedicate, of course, as anyone who has been fortunate enough to have the Justice visit their law school undoubtedly knows. He graced us with his presence, he honored us with his good will and humor, and, in effect, he consecrated this law school's mission of graduating ethical lawyers of distinction — lawyers truly committed to the higher aspirations of the law.

His dedication remarks are reprinted in the pages of this issue, as a reminder for those who were in attendance and an inspiration for future generations of law students who will embark upon their studies and legal career here at this law school. But the formal remarks do not begin to convey the full measure of the impact made by Justice Thomas during his visit. Earlier in the day, the Justice participated in an open forum with about 100 law students, during which he fielded a wide range of questions about the law and his career. Afterwards, many of the students — including several whom I suspect do not always agree with the positions taken by the Justice — commented to me about how personable he was, and how willing to engage the students.

During the dedication ceremony itself, Justice Thomas went out of his way to acknowledge the founding faculty of the law school, a group of people who really had shouldered a heavy burden in getting this law school established on a solid foundation. As Professor Judy Fischer, one of the founding members of the faculty, later remarked to me, that unexpected recognition brought tears to her eyes.

After the dedication ceremony, the Justice headed upstairs to the Dean's suite to catch his breath and get a glass of water. Before the water glass was empty, though, he was back on his feet, ready to meet with the students who had assembled in the hallway. For more than two hours, he visited individually with students, signed autographs, and had pictures taken. More than once I offered him the opportunity to leave, but he declined, stating that he just wanted to meet with the few students who were patiently waiting. Problem was that word of the impromptu chats had gotten out, and every couple of minutes another elevator full of students arrived to join those who were "patiently waiting" their turn. The Justice stayed until he had visited with each one.

And as we finally left, he turned to the crew who had been replenishing the hors d'oeuvres on a table near where he was standing, addressed them by name (having

learned their names earlier in the day when, upon his arrival at the law school, he walked over to the loading dock and introduced himself to the catering crew), and thanked them for all the work they had done that day, just as the evening before he had thanked the University trustees for the role they had played in establishing this law school. It was a fitting reminder of the fundamental equality of all mankind upon which this nation's legal institutions rest.

A more noble beginning to this law school's enterprise would be hard to script. I was fortunate to have served as a law clerk to Justice Thomas at the Supreme Court, and I am honored to have been among those to welcome him to our law school and delighted that the Chapman University community was able to witness first hand the Justice's warmth and depth of character. Let us commit ourselves to live up to the high moral purpose exemplified by Justice Thomas during his visit and described by him in the dedicatory address that follows.