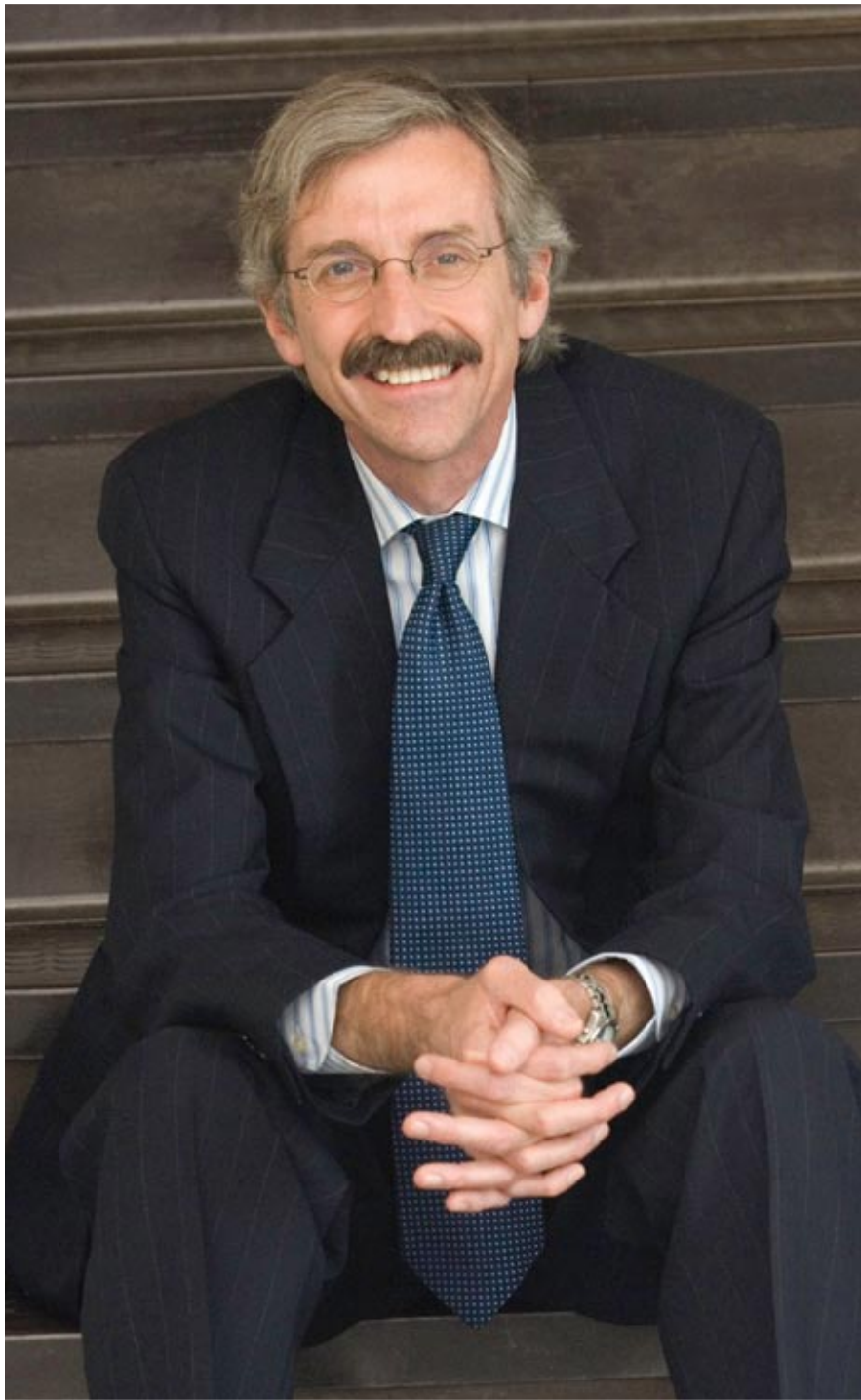


STEVE GEY

Popular Constitutional Law Professor is a Busy Man, But His Law Students Always Come First

BY JULIE S. BETTINGER



Florida State law professor Steven Gey was opening a First Amendment class with one of his signature warm ups: a commentary. The U.S. Supreme Court had just delivered an opportunity for him to talk about his favorite subject – free speech – with the “Bong Hits 4 Jesus” case. In the six minutes that followed, Gey’s students were given a combination news brief and historical review of legal cases likely to be cited (going back to the 1960s).

They also received expectations of each side’s arguments from one of the most sought-out authorities on the topic—Gey, himself.

By the end of his introduction, the professor had captured the attention of nearly all 55 students. Their eyes had turned away from their icon-cluttered laptops and were fixed on the bespeckled, mustached Gey.

Here or there

According to those who know him well, instead of lecturing to a room full of future attorneys, the David and Deborah Fonvielle and Donald and Janet Hinkle Professor of Law could just as easily be a celebrity lawyer representing high-profile cases before the Supreme Court.

After 20 years in the classroom, some also marvel that the talented Gey chose to stay in Tallahassee, considering his metropolitan roots. He received his J.D. from Columbia University and spent his first few years out of law school as an associate for the New York-based Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison law firm. And yet by choosing to remain at FSU, he has parlayed his position into an impressive career that has included numerous television appearances and articles in some of the most prestigious journals in the country.

It hasn't been at the expense of students, either, colleagues say. Jay LaVia, shareholder with Young van Assenderp, PA, says although Gey generously answers calls beyond the classroom for his time, the students get top priority.

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educational experience, whether it be with a young student or older lawyer."

Tallahassee attorney Don Hinkle agrees. "He is so smart – scary smart," he says of Gey. "He makes me want to go back and be a law student just to take his course."

When asked what's kept him in the classroom for more than 20 years and turning down other opportunities, Gey shrugs, "Teaching is fun."

Watch him teach and you'll know his answer is sincere. His interaction with the

He talks about his illness in sobering terms, like he tackles a legal case—sticking to the facts; what is known about the disease.

"Eventually, I won't be able to swallow, breathe or talk," he says. "I probably have about another year's work, and I'll be dead in three years."

Though following a course of treatment that has been known to help some ALS patients, he doesn't even pretend to be optimistic.

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LaVia, who has remained friends with his former professor since graduating in 1990 and has referred legal work his way, points to evidence of Gey's popularity: He's been named Professor of the Year by the Student Bar Association several times and is a sought-out advisor for Moot Court.

Barbara Leach, who is on her fifth class with the professor, confirms Gey's commitment.

"He's a busy man—a popular man—beyond the law school, really in national and international circles. But you still get the sense that the students always come first."

"Student," it seems, has a much broader application around Gey. Virtually any listener becomes a student in his company.

"Steve has always been, first and foremost, someone who appreciates the discourse of ideas," observes Chris Kise, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist's senior legal and policy advisor. "He's someone who never misses an opportunity to provide an

students communicates genuine interest – Steve Gey is clearly having a blast.

Sidetracked

A recent change in his health has Gey and others pondering where his life's work has taken him. This past January, he announced that he had been diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

It started with what seemed to be a shoulder injury in the spring of 2006. Gey sought treatment a few months later for new symptoms that appeared to be orthopedic related. He eventually saw a neurologist and was diagnosed with suspected ALS in November. Gey sought a specialist in the disease from Emory University, and the diagnosis was confirmed in December.

At the time of this writing, Gey had lost fine motor control and his legs were weakening, but he was still able to walk and drive.

"I'll just keep doing what I can do," he says, recognizing that he is powerless over the progressing symptoms.

Despite fatigue and the physical limitations he's experiencing, Gey is still teaching, writing and even traveling for guest lectures.

The law school is providing adaptive technologies that have, at times, been a source of humor. The electric door opener to his office, he notes, seems to have a mind of its own—opening at the press of a button, but closing without warning. He's also working with voice recognition software that, with patience, will extend his writing and electronic communication abilities.

Gey's lack of self-pity allows him to look beyond the prognosis and see some positives. "The good thing about this disease is that I've heard from just about everybody I ever taught," he says. As news about his health travels, he receives e-mails and cards. Although he hasn't been able to reply to all

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correspondence, he appreciates it.

The return on Gey's investment in students over the years has provided another unexpected benefit. Recognizing his failing motor skills, students have been taking turns carrying his materials to class for him. "That's how I know it's time for class," he says, "someone shows up at the door to carry my books."

In the news

Although widely known and respected within law circles for years, Gey's profile was elevated into the public arena during the election debacle of 2000, Bush v. Gore. As television reporters were scrambling to get expert opinions to fill air space, many news organizations ended up at the Florida State College of Law.

"Very few people had read the statutes and knew the general lay of the land of Florida's election laws," Gey explains. He guessed there were maybe five people in the state who were up-to-date on the topic, including him, which had set off a media feeding frenzy.

Standing outside of the dean's office one day, Gey says an ABC news correspondent who heard him scheduling an interview with a competitor approached him. The man said, "If we put you on staff and paid you to do an exclusive, would you tell them (the competitor) no?" Gey said sure. The TV reporter dialed a number on his cell phone, talked to his boss, then handed the phone to the professor.

"I had a five-minute job interview standing in the hall on the phone," Gey says. He got the job.

For the next few months, Gey became a regular on ABC news as a legal advisor and consultant often appearing with the late Peter Jennings on World News Tonight.

Being thrust into the spotlight and appearing on TV screens worldwide would cause many to seek fame and fortune. Not Gey. To him, it was just another teaching moment. He turned the news event into an opportunity to launch a constitutional law laboratory in the backyard of the law school.

It was the ideal learning environment, he says. "The issue became integrated with the whole educational experience – the students were at the vortex; we had the whole world's attention on us at that point."

Gey's imprint

In spite of the grim prognosis for his health, Gey remains upbeat. His only regret, he says, is a future cut short.

"You know when you hit 50, you've finally got things figured out," he says. "It's a shame to lose that 15 years."

Still, friends say the Florida State College of Law will be forever touched by Gey's legacy.

"He was part of a transition group when he got there (in 1985)," says LaVia. "You had all the old guard hired in the beginning, but Steve has sort of injected this youth. When I was in school, he wasn't



much older than us. So part of that legacy is injecting that youth into the law school."

Hinkle agrees. "He's been the leader of the new breed. I think what he's done is elevate the school academically and intellectually to the next level."

Law School Dean Don Weidner says Gey has been and continues to be a "superstar."

"He's as good as they get; he's the total package."

"He's also a perpetual skeptic," Weidner adds, with a slight smile, "and we love him for it." *