

**REMEMBERING ERIC J. SCHMERTZ  
(1925-2010)  
A CELEBRATION OF HIS LIFE AND WORK  
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*Joanne F. Goldstein\**

Speaking today gives me the opportunity to reflect on just how special and incredible Eric Schmertz was. I started my legal journey as a member of the second class at Hofstra Law School, with a passion for social justice and a strong interest in practicing labor law. Professor Schmertz became instantly and fully committed to helping me obtain a labor law position in Boston, where I intended to return. And he did it; I became the first woman to practice union-side labor law in Boston and at the then-premier labor firm.

This happened solely because of his relationship with the firm and his insistence that I was the *only* person for the job. I look back and marvel. My credentials, although strong, were not first in the class, the law school, although spectacular, was still in its infancy, and the Boston legal community considers New York an inferior, other country. Yet, I was the one who was hired.

One interesting aside: after my interview, I was waiting to hear if I had the position. But, as a poor law student, I couldn't wait for my interview expense reimbursement check, so I asked that the check be sent when ready. When I got the check, I knew I had the job, because the memo line said "girl to be hired." I was ready to decline, but Eric convinced me to overlook the gender bias and take the job. I was glad that I did. And it served me well during future such incidents, especially early in my career.

Eric and I saw each other regularly, as he was often an arbitrator on labor disputes. Mindful of ethic requirements, he always disclosed that he had been my professor. One stenographer identified the school as Harvard, not Hofstra, in the transcript. Eric immediately called me and

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\* Secretary, Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

in his voice and with the inflection you all would recognize, he said, “Joanne,” and then posed the dilemma: his pride in Hofstra suggested we should correct the record, but his zeal in having me accepted and respected in the labor community in Boston suggested that we keep the Harvard myth going.

Fast forward two decades, he again recommended me when I was being considered to become the general counsel of a national union, and was quick to tell all that he could pick winners and so they should take me. And again they listened to him, and my career advanced further. He did remind me that I would no longer be doing arbitrations, so I should be sure to pass along his name to all of the local practitioners I would encounter.

Several years later when I won an award for labor-management excellence, he surprised me and flew to Boston just for the dinner and then flew home. When I profusely thanked him, he told me he would not have missed it, and seeing his students get honored was like receiving the honor himself.

I still have on my cell phone the congratulatory voice mail he left a year ago January, when Governor Patrick appointed me to his cabinet as the Secretary of Labor. It was so meaningful that I cannot erase it and relish hearing it each time I replay my messages. His pride, excitement, and enthusiasm were palpable. We tried to arrange a time to celebrate together but were not able to do so. So, Dean Schmertz, I will consider this our celebration, with gratitude and appreciation for all that you did for me and the countless other students you launched into successful labor careers. You have left the labor-management community infinitely richer, deeper, and better for your service, and we are all grateful to you for doing so. So to you—Ldor vdor—from generation to generation, we will honor and carry forward with your legacy.