



Joe Ferrell Retires After Wonderful Career

Author : Mike Smith

Categories : [Uncategorized](#)

Date : January 27, 2016



Joe Ferrell came to the Institute of Government in 1964 and is retiring at the end of this academic year—a wonderful career of more than 50 years. He has served as Secretary of the Faculty since retiring from our faculty ten years ago.

Joe is one of those legendary faculty members who really helped to shape the School's reputation for excellence. There are many new people at the School today who don't know Joe, and that is a



shame.

I first got to know Joe because I worked for him as a summer law clerk at the Institute of Government in 1977. In those days the law clerks had no input into their assignments, and my hope was that I would be given a criminal law project. I remember sitting at a long table with the other summer clerks as the Director's secretary handed out our assignments. The clerks on either side of me received criminal law projects. I still remember her words as she handed me a paper with my assignment: "You will be working for Professor Ferrell on the property tax." I was not excited about either property law or tax law, and I cringed at the thought of combining them into a summer-long project.

It turned out that I was the lucky one. I went up to Joe's office and it was obvious after a short conversation that not only was he smart—he also was what a friend of mine calls "scary smart." He gave me a stack of research on jurisdiction to tax tangible personal property (whatever that might mean) from an earlier law clerk. Joe told me that the person had not been able to produce anything useful from the research and to see if I could do anything with it. Okay, that was a stressful moment.

Luckily, I figured out that the project really involved a constitutional question having to do with the Commerce Clause. The best part of the experience was working with Joe. He was challenging yet supportive in conversations about the work. His knowledge was deep and broad, and he also demonstrated a lively curiosity that was infectious and exciting to me. Joe was a terrific role model. I learned how to think about legal issues, how to approach research, and how to write. We even ended up co-authoring a law review article on the subject. More importantly for me, and before I ever imagined joining the faculty, Joe helped me to understand what it meant to be a professional.



Joe Ferrell



I won't try to summarize Joe's wonderful career at the Institute and the School. He had a great impact in so many different areas—including local government law (especially counties), property tax law, the state constitution, and the legislative institution. Those of us who toiled in the cubicles of the Legislative Reporting Service were grateful for the many ways in which he upgraded that operation when served as Editor. Joe was a colleague who many of us consulted with regularly for advice because of his knowledge of the law, North Carolina history and politics, and the University. You could always depend on Joe to offer insightful analysis and good judgment, usually delivered with his trademark dry wit.

[There was a nice feature about Joe in a recent Daily Tar Heel](#), though I want to correct one error in the story. It stated that Joe overslept after a booze-filled night, missed the MCAT, and instead took the LSAT. Joe says that he overslept because he had been up 36 hours straight and was exhausted. The rest of the story is true. It was our enormous good fortune that Joe decided to become a lawyer instead of a doctor, and that he chose to spend his career with us.