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PERSPECTIVE

One clerk's view of a life well-lived

By Julian W. Poon

This past weekend, we lost a great justice, American and individual. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was a towering figure in the law — a brilliant jurist who called them like he saw them and challenged us to return to first principles in interpreting the Constitution adopted by the founding generation of Americans and amended at key points in our history, including after the Civil War.

Justice Scalia applied his approach to the law in a principled, rigorous way, even if it led to outcomes he might not have favored as a voter, such as expanding the rights of criminal defendants based on the original understanding of the right to a jury trial, to give just one example. He also re-focused our attention on the plain meaning of the actual words voted on and enacted by the representatives of and for the people, instead of placing undue reliance

on tomes of legislative history largely written by and for lobbyists and legislative staff.

Antonin Scalia was a jurisprudential giant, recognized as such across the political and legal spectrum, even by those who have disagreed strongly with his opinions and rulings — he was one of the greatest justices, at least since the Greatest Generation, to have served on our nation's highest court.

But he was so much more. Others closer to him would be in a better position to say, but having served as one of his four law clerks for one year (out of dozens to have served over the course of his 35 years on the bench), I can tell you that Justice Scalia was also a kind and extraordinary individual who lived life to its fullest, winning over those around him not only with his quick wit and intellect, but also his warmth and integrity. I saw this firsthand. The care he took in going over each case cited in each of his

opinions, poring over one bound volume of the United States Reports after another with us to confirm that what was recited to be the holding of a case was the actual holding of that case, rather than just words on a page written by a judge, was also reflected in the care he showed those of us who worked for him. That was evident, not just in the sometimes-spirited exchange of views he entertained in the conferences we had with him in chambers about pending cases, but also in the lunchtime banter we had with him at a since-closed Italian eatery in northeast D.C., as well as the time we otherwise spent with him over the course of that unforgettable year.

I caught further glimpses of the human side of the justice, and saw how fortunate his family must have been to have had such a caring husband, father and grandfather; I remember, to give one other example, an impromptu conversation we heard him hav-

ing over the phone, gently helping out one of his children, while we were over at his house for dinner, 15 years ago.

His was a life well-lived, devoted to serving a cause greater than his own, and our country and the law are that much better for it.

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