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## Remembering Dennis Belcher: A Trusted Advisor and Friend

*Tina Portuondo\**

I was privileged to get to know and work with Dennis Belcher both as the Director of the University of Miami School of Law's Heckling Institute on Estate Planning and in my work as a volunteer for the Real Property, Trust and Estate Law Section of the American Bar Association. He was a valuable advisor, a talented speaker, and a friend.

Dennis was one of the Institute's most beloved and popular speakers. He was invited to deliver his first podium lecture at the Institute by my predecessor, Professor John Gaubatz. I am not certain how Dennis came to John's attention as a potential speaker, but do know from the audience ratings of that first presentation in 1988 that it was quite a success. Dennis's topic that January involved planning for the closely-held business, a topic he spoke on frequently over the years and the one that I first heard him present at a continuing education program in Boston shortly after I took over from John as the Institute Director in 1995. Although I was a practicing estate planner before joining the University of Miami, and had in fact attended the Institute, I was not as familiar as I needed to be with many of the leading and best known speakers in the field. In order to get up to speed, I attended other programs around the country, both to get to know the regular "celebrity" speakers, and in hopes of identifying some new, up-and-coming talent. I would guess that at the time I first heard Dennis lecture, he was already well on the road to celebrity status. He was undoubtedly a well-known and popular speaker by that time, and was elected to ACTEC later that same year. It was very clear to me from that first encounter in Boston that Dennis had what it took to become a favorite with the Institute's attendees. He obviously had the depth of knowledge and command of the subject matter they would expect but, perhaps more importantly, he delivered his message with an unassuming, easygoing, and often humorous style. As a result of that first encounter, I invited Dennis to return to the Institute for his follow-up appearance on the podium in January of 1996. That lecture also received top ratings from the audience, and resulted in regu-

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lar podium lecture and panel appearances by Dennis at the Institute from that time on.

While all of his lecture presentations at the Institute were top-rated by the audience, Dennis really found his Institute niche in 2002 when he first served as the chair and moderator of the annual opening Recent Developments panel. Initially Dennis served as the chair and moderator of the panel every other year, often delivering a podium lecture or serving on an afternoon panel in the years in between. Based upon his overwhelming popularity in that role with the Institute's attendees, however, it soon became clear that he was without a doubt simply the best chair and moderator of the opening panel that I could find anywhere in the country. As a result, and despite my general inclination to avoid using the same speaker in any capacity two years in a row, Dennis assumed the annual responsibility of chairing and moderating the Recent Developments panel. In that role, he was instrumental in shaping not only the content of the presentations but also in seeking out the best of the best to join him on the panel. All of those who attended the Institute benefited from and appreciated his substantive expertise, and his practical, down-to-earth take on what the year's developments meant to their clients and their practice. The audience valued his opinion and counted on him to present all sides of any controversial issue. Dennis's openness, warmth and humor made them feel as if they got to know him personally as they relied on him year after year to provide solid, practical guidance on the most important planning issues of the day.

Dennis was also a longtime member of the Institute's Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee is responsible for identifying topics and speakers for the program, and for providing me, as the Institute's Director, with advice on trends and significant developments in the practice area. Dennis never missed one of our annual meetings, even though they were regularly scheduled on the Monday of Institute week just before he was due to chair the three-hour Recent Developments panel. While his participation in those meetings was valuable, his willingness to share his opinions at other times during the year was even more important. I consulted with Dennis regularly, and he became one of my principal advisors on matters ranging from topics, to speakers, to the Institute's role within the estate planning community. He was always willing to schedule a call or answer emails, and I could count on receiving an honest and helpful response. Over the years, his sound advice and creative thinking were the spark that led to many successful programs and contributed in a significant way to the success of the Institute.

Dennis's influence on my own professional career went beyond his involvement with the Heckerling Institute. He supported and mentored

me early on in my work with the Real Property, Trust and Estate Law Section of the American Bar Association. I became active in the Section a few years after joining the University of Miami and, with the support of Dennis and others, served first as the Chair of the Section's Continuing Education Committee and eventually as the Chair of the Section. Dennis was on the leadership ladder by the time that I became active in the ABA, and I credit him with supporting my involvement and advancement in the Section despite my somewhat unique professional status. I was after all no longer a practicing attorney, nor was I a traditional academic. Dennis nonetheless encouraged and supported my involvement and advancement within the Section and contributed to my success as a Section leader. His support within the estate planning community continues to benefit me today, both professionally and personally. My involvement in the Section and subsequently with ACTEC has introduced me to estate planning professionals from around the country who are not only valuable professional contacts, but in many cases personal friends. I attribute much of that to Dennis's support and encouragement over the years.

Dennis was a leader within the Institute both as a speaker and as a trusted advisor. His leadership on the Advisory Committee and as the Chair of the Recent Developments panel contributed to the content, tone and successful development of the Institute over the years in innumerable ways. He encouraged me, and I am sure countless others, to develop their leadership skills and to contribute to our professional community. I will miss his advice, his friendship, his candor, and his good natured sense of humor. Opening the Institute will never be the same without Dennis.

