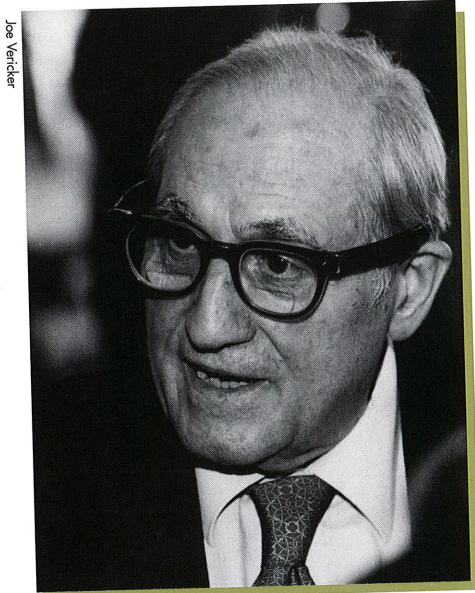


50 Years of Teaching Celebrated

Professor Joseph Crea '47 shares recollections from half a century of teaching – and learning – at Brooklyn Law School

by Dina Hampton and Linda Harvey



Joe Venicker

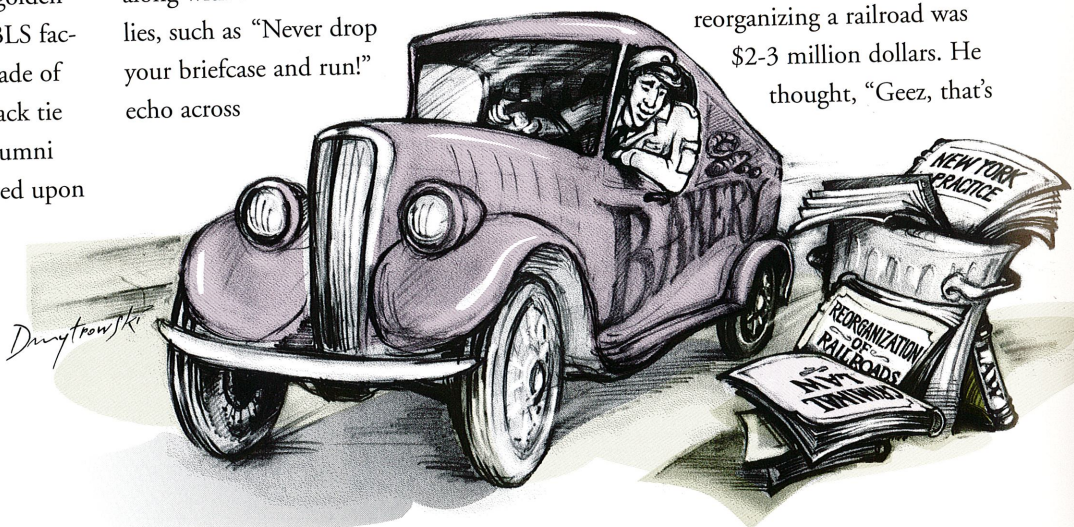
This is Joe Crea's year. His golden anniversary as a member of the BLS faculty has been celebrated by a parade of tributes, awards, parties and a black tie gala. Accolades from students, alumni and colleagues have been showered upon him in the form of "Creagrams." Professor Crea has basked in the attention, but has managed to keep it all in perspective. For him, the past half-century has been about his love for teaching,

his students, and the institution he has served for most of his adult life.

When he graduated from BLS in 1947 he had no idea that he would make a career as a law professor. He wanted to become a practicing lawyer – "to change the world," he says. But fate conspired to keep him here, pursuing what seems so clear in retrospect to be his true calling: teaching. For five decades, Professor Crea has used his intelligence, his wit, his remarkable capacity for ceaseless hard work, and his dogged determination and unquenchable spirit to inspire his students. His rallying cry, "Survive! Survive! Survive!" along with more tart homilies, such as "Never drop your briefcase and run!" echo across

generations of BLS students.

Many who know him are familiar with the tale of a young Joe Crea finding abandoned law books by the side of the road, but the story is worth recounting here. One day in the late 1930s, while making his rounds delivering bread to the farmers in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn, he came across a pile of law books, soaked and stuck together. He took them to his family's Gravesend home and dried them on top of the oven. One title particularly caught his eye: *Reorganization of Railroad Corporations*. What he discovered when he read the book was that even during the Depression, the legal fees for reorganizing a railroad was \$2-3 million dollars. He thought, "Geez, that's



what I would like to do,” and for the first time began to consider law as a possible career.

First, however, he faced the task of getting through high school. After several false starts, first at Stuyvesant High School, then at a succession of vocational schools where he discovered that he had no aptitude for metal work, printing, or bookkeeping, he enrolled in Bay Ridge Evening High School. Beginning a pattern that he would repeat through college and law school, he studied on an accelerated schedule, taking classes out of sequence in order to graduate early. He finished six years of high school in four, graduating second in his class.

He then attended Brooklyn College at night for four years. One year short of obtaining his degree, his studies were sidelined by an offer to become chief clerk and trouble shooter at one of the selective service agencies being formed in Brooklyn in anticipation of America's entry into World War II. Professor Crea was recruited for the job because he was well known in the neighborhood where he was nicknamed “Gabriel,” because of his practice of standing on street corners holding forth on politics and the issues of the day.

In short order, he too, enlisted in the Army, and was commissioned as a

Second Lieutenant. From 1941 through 1944 he was stationed in the South, where he taught new troops how to protect themselves and survive under fire. By this time he had married Regina Vigilante, and his young bride followed him from post to post.

When he finished his tour of duty in 1944, he was determined to enter law school. He applied to BLS – and was rejected not on academic grounds, but because he could only attend the night program four nights a week instead of the customary five. Never one to quickly accept rejection, he appealed his case to Dean Jerome Prince. “I begged him,” Professor Crea recalls. “I told him what I did in high school, I told him what I did in college, I said: ‘I’ll do it here too, Just give me a chance.’” Dean Prince, impressed by the young man’s determination, relented.

Professor Crea once again embarked upon an unusual course of study, taking Conflict of Laws and other advanced courses in his first year and introductory courses such as Torts in his third. Some of his courses didn’t fit into his schedule at all and he was permitted to read the textbooks in lieu of attending class. Despite this unorthodox and difficult approach, he excelled.

“I loved law school,” says Professor Crea. “The best part was doing my work.

AN ANTHOLOGY OF CREA-ISMS:

**Do a mitzvah every day –
but don’t get caught at it!
(No good deed
goes unpunished)**

**What goes around,
comes around!**

Deduct! Disallow!

**Never trust your mother!
(keep family and friends
at arms length in
business dealings)**

**Never drop your
briefcase and run!**

Survive, Survive, Survive!

Let the marbles roll!

**Let’s take the show
on the road!**

50
years

DEDUCT! DISALLOW!

Joe Crea learns from his students

One Tax Law class stands out in my mind. It was in the 1950s and the class was filled with older people. They were not veterans, but were accountants and treasury agents returning to school. A recent ruling came down from the Court of Appeals in Matter of Bercu, 299 N.Y. 728 (1949) which forced these professionals to enter law school in order to obtain contingency lawyers fees. This ruling brought in treasury agents and CPAs to the school.

I walked into the classroom and put my name on the blackboard: Crea. Then I erased it and wrote H-E-L-P! After class, the students came up to me. One said, "Professor, I'm Sid Solomon, Assistant Chief of the Audit Division, Internal Revenue Service. Don't worry, don't worry, we'll help you." Another guy came up to me and said, "I'm Joe Colman, I'm Jackie Gleason's accountant. I'll give you the other side."

And we devised a system in the business expenses section of the course. I would preside over the class while they would fight each other. Colman would say, "We're deducting that." And Solomon would counter, "Disallowed." Deduct and disallow. They taught me.

But I had to do find something to teach them – something that was my own. I found a recently reported case: Matter of Fisher, 230 F. 2d 79 (1956). I'll never forget it. When I walked into the class, I threw out the facts, and I said "Colman, what do you think?" He said, "Deduct it." I turned to Solomon and asked, "What do you say?" He replied "I have to allow the deduction."

I said, "Both of you are wrong! It's disallowed. It's disallowed."

In Matter of Fisher the court held that an itinerant musician who has no domicile cannot deduct traveling expenses while away from home. He's got to have a base. This was a case of an itinerant musician who lived with his mother-in-law, and didn't have a domicile of his own. He traveled around on weekly stints.

Soloman said, "I want to see that case." "I got it right here Sid." And sure enough Sid looked at the case and said, "You got us. You learned! You learned!" And so I did.

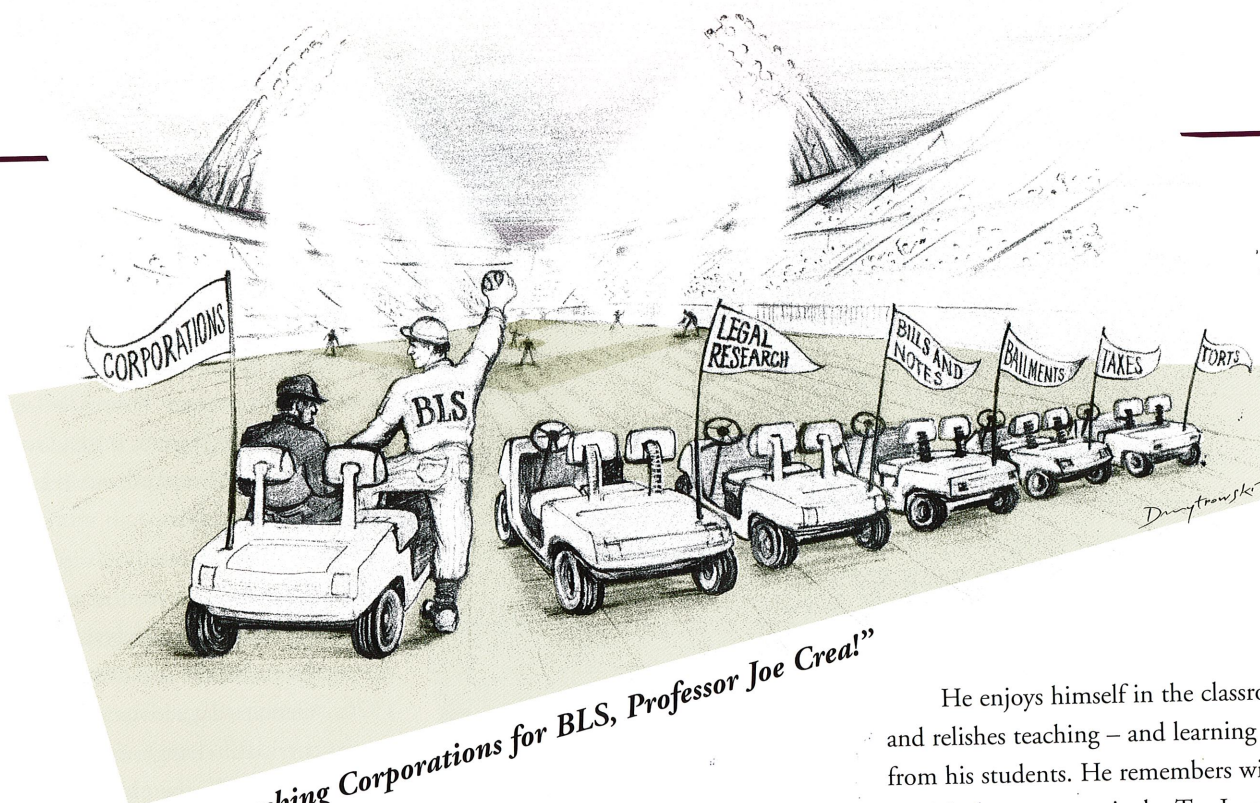
That was one of my most enjoyable classes.

Second to that was having a few inspiring teachers." Not a man to sit on the sidelines, he was active in numerous pursuits during law school. He worked full-time at the draft board, formed an American Legion post, and, on the homefront, helped raise two young daughters (eventually the family grew to include four girls).

In his senior year, Professor Crea was invited to join the law review. While working on an article one day, he asked Dean Prince a question about an evidence issue that the article addressed. Dean Prince urged him to figure it out himself...and he did. His deft handling of the issue did not go unnoticed by Dean Prince – he offered Professor Crea a temporary position at the law school as a librarian. "I didn't want to be a librarian, I wanted to be a lawyer," says Professor Crea. "But I took the job anyway, and it paid something like



"Never drop your briefcase and run!"



"Now teaching Corporations for BLS, Professor Joe Crea!"

\$2,400 a year." When the school finally hired a full-time librarian, Dean Prince asked Professor Crea to consider accepting an instructor's position.

And so it was that in 1948 he began his career at BLS. He initially taught Torts, Legal Research, and Bailments. Professor Crea recalls his early years with a mix of frustration and pleasure. "The work was intense and the pay low."

In the 1950's the BLS faculty numbered fewer than 25, and the faculty/student ratio was about 100 to one. Professor Crea referred to himself as the "bullpen teacher," as he was called upon to teach as many as 22 different courses depending on the school's needs. Often he would receive a phone

call late in August asking him to help out by adding yet another course to his already overburdened schedule. During one semester, he taught five sections of Bills and Notes, the precursor to his famed Commercial Paper course.

To support his growing family, he augmented his salary by taking on outside legal work: title closings for \$25 apiece, filling out tax returns for \$2 each, and drafting wills for \$15. Teaching, however, was always his joy. He especially loved instructing WWII veterans, fresh out of the service. "A lot of these people talked army style. We communicated. Since I had been a Second Lieutenant, I knew how to issue commands."

Early on in his career, Professor Crea developed his own unique style of teaching. He broke with the tradition of using older, rather dry cases to teach case method. Instead, he selected vivid and relevant factual cases to drive home his lessons, citing, for example, a risque matrimonial case in a Domestic Relations course.

He enjoys himself in the classroom and relishes teaching – and learning – from his students. He remembers with special pleasure a particular Tax Law class in the 1950s. On the first day of class, he found himself confronted with a room full of accountants, trust officers and treasury agents. A recent ruling by the Court of Appeals had made it impossible for accountants to receive contingent fees unless they also had a law degree. "I walked into that tax class, and I put my name up on the blackboard," he says. "Then I erased it, and I wrote H-E-L-P!" He devised a special system for that class, presiding over the accountants and the I.R.S. agents as they did battle over pertinent tax cases. He would pose a hypothetical and students would respond, frequently dividing on experiential lines, by crying Deduct! Disallow!

In addition to his teaching, Professor Crea has been a guiding force at BLS, influencing policy and serving as an extraordinarily effective diplomat on behalf of the administration, students, and the faculty. Over the last half century, his advice has been sought by a half a dozen deans, and he is the first to admit

SURVIVE! SURVIVE! SURVIVE!

Joe Crea's words of advice have long lasting impact

I remember one alumni gathering, it was soon after my wife had died. A woman came up to me and started hugging me.

I said, "I don't know you, you're not a student here at the law school."

"I'll introduce you to my husband and you may understand." I recognized her husband as a former student. "I know him," I said. "In his first year of law school, he and I had a little discussion one time – the topic was how to survive as a night student."

I told him, "Take the keys to your car and bring them to your wife, and recite something along these lines: 'Here are the keys to the car, take the kids to the zoo, to the park, to your mother, – Saturday and Sunday I have to work!'"

After offering these words of advice, her husband came to me a few days later and said "I gave my wife the keys and she said no way." "Well let's try tack number two," I said.

"Go back to your wife, and tell her, do you want your husband to be a "shoe salesman" or a lawyer? If you want a lawyer, here's the keys."

The woman from the party said, "I took the keys."

"Why was taking those keys so important?" I asked her.

"I've got to tell you a secret now," she said. "I'm a lawyer. When my husband came to me with the keys and said do you want me to be a shoe salesman or a lawyer, I asked myself, "do I want to be a secretary or a lawyer? I went to law school and became a lawyer."

"Now my husband and I are lawyers. That's why I love you."

I never dreamed my advice would go around that way.

that he hasn't always waited to be asked for his counsel. Dean Wexler recently described him as a "shadow dean," who has always put the best interests of the school first.

Professor Crea used his diplomatic skills as a liaison between the students and the administration to good effect during the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s. Vietnam-era activist students sought curricular changes from a resistant administration. "In the old days you had no choice at all," he recalls. "You were given a schedule, a seat, and an instructor. It was a highly structured system." Under pressure from Professor Crea and several other faculty members, as well as the guidance of Dean Raymond Lisle, the curriculum became more nationally focused, and elective courses were instituted.

The 1970s also saw a tremendous expansion of the school faculty, and its reputation grew as many distinguished professors joined its ranks. During this time, he was an effective advocate for better pay for the entire faculty. "BLS had to continue to draw highly respected professors, and this could only be achieved with higher faculty salaries," he noted. His efforts as "shop steward" are legendary around BLS, and today he remains involved in many issues of concern to both faculty and students.

Though a half century has passed since his first year of teaching, Professor Crea's enthusiasm and passion for the school and his students remain undimmed. In fact, he says that walking into the classroom on the first day of school still provides him with the same rush of adrenaline as it did five decades ago. The connections he makes with his students are strong and enduring. Part parent, part mentor, these personal relationships are what make him such a special teacher. He genuinely cares, and his students know this. A class with Professor Crea is always a memorable

experience – entertaining as well as highly instructive.

He demands two things from his students: attendance and participation.

He warns students that if they do not plan to attend his class, they should not bother taking it at all. "No work, no pay," he tells them. He

also expects his students to help one another. He remembers one Tax Law class in which the accountants and I.R.S.

agents outnumbered the inexperienced students. He asked the professionals to stand and offered them this piece of advice: "Pay careful attention to the people sitting down...if any one of them should fail, I will fail one accountant and one treasury agent." The message was taken seriously, and everyone passed the course.

Professor Crea sincerely believes that he has learned more from his students than they have learned from him. Former students, however, would dispute that claim. He has always been a giver, and has expected little in return. When his beloved wife Regina passed away in 1983, he established the Regina Crea Memorial Scholarship, and the Regina Crea Memorial Prize, which, fittingly, is given to a member of the graduating class who has rendered the most devoted and loyal service to the Law School.

He is overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection and gratitude he has received on this anniversary year. "It's unbelievable," he says. "Some of these people have written that their lives were shaped by my help." The tributes from so many of the thousands of students he has taught over the years bear witness to the impact he has had on their lives.

When it comes to students, "you are their father, their mother, their confessor," he says. "You must teach them the ways, you must teach them the angles. Most importantly, you teach them to survive."

