

The Rockbridge



ADVOCATE

“INDEPENDENT AS A HOG ON ICE”

*a letter
from the editor:*

Roger Groot: 1942 - 2005

Roger Groot was a straight-shooting, tobacco-chewing, pick-up truck driving ex-Marine. He was the only living person around here whose image, replete with suspenders and coffee cup, was ever turned into a bobble-head.

He was one of the most amazing law professors in the country. First-year law students at W&L were terrified of the man. He was a stickler for detail. He had no tolerance for sloppiness. He expected his students to work hard and he set an example that was hard to follow.

He knew what he was talking about when it came to criminal law. He literally wrote the book on it in Virginia, and once was a bit mortified when a judge used that book to shoot down an argument Roger was making in court.

It was one of the few times he ever lost a court battle, and it was not a capital murder case. Capital murder cases were his courtroom specialty. And not one of his capital murder clients, including one who shot up a law school, was sent to the gallows. When people asked him if he could help beat a traffic ticket, he'd joke, "I can get you life."

The W&L website said that Professor Roger Groot was available for interviews about criminal law, criminal procedure, the death penalty, juries, and criminal trials.

It could just as easily have listed him as an expert on hunting, the Viet Nam War, Buena Vista politics, the British legal system in 1200, growing up in a small town in Texas, tail-twisting in the Lion's club, how to start a bluegrass festival, federal deportation hearings, and fundraising for Ducks Unlimited. The list could go on.

But saying that Roger Groot was available for media interviews was a bit of an overstatement. Not long ago, when he was working to keep one of the Washington D.C. snipers out of the electric chair, nearly every big TV talk show in the country tried to lure him into the studio.

He declined all of the offers but one, and accepted that only with the understanding that he could talk about the work of his students. He didn't see much use in getting into an argument over the death penalty with bullies who control the microphone, media stars or bubble-heads.

It's too bad, in a way. No one could speak more coherently and convincingly about the death penalty in America — "death by zip code," he called it. And there were few experts on the subject who could speak with such moral authority.

That authority came from a combination of a razor-sharp mind, an astonishing breadth of knowledge about

criminal law, and deeply held religious beliefs.

Roger Groot didn't wear his religion on his sleeve. He didn't wear his heart or his brain on his sleeve either. He really didn't need to do that. He knew who he was, and didn't seem to see any reason to go out of his way to impress anyone unless there was a good reason — like keeping a client's neck out away from the gallows.

He was good at that. He was good at it because of all the qualities that made him who he was.

It's hard to imagine a better friend to have when your life was on the line than Roger. In a foxhole, or on the Appalachian Trail (which he hiked once, and planned to hike again), or way out in the woods on a hunt or on death row, he was someone who kept his wits about him and would do anything he could to help a fellow human being.

And throughout his life, he did what he could to help make his world — his town and his church and his school and his country — a better place.

He didn't do anything half-heartedly. When he ran for Buena Vista City Council in the 1980s, he knocked on literally every door in town, and once elected, worked tirelessly to help secure federal funding for the giant floodwall. When a warden wouldn't allow a prisoner some paper to write on, Roger first tried reason, then went to court with a barrage of motions until the paper was provided.

He was well-mannered and respectful and funny and pugnacious. He could see the humor in most things, and had an incredible sense of humanity — his own and that of the species in general. "There is nothing you can imagine someone possibly doing that someone isn't either doing or planning to do right now," he used to say in class.

He was good company, and was good with words. Often, his words would give listeners cause to think. "The hallmark of a tyranny, be it of the left or the right," he used to say, "is the ability of the executive to detain citizens without a warrant."

He enjoyed the heck out of obscure British legal phrases that still are used in court. "A servant on a frolic of his own," was one of his favorites.

And he loved country music — the tear-in-your-beer kind, and old country sayings, like the one he ended one of his classes with every year. "It's time to piss on the fire and call home the dogs."

Roger Groot died of a massive heart attack last month. His body was found on a path near one of his favorite hunting stands on a Sunday morning after he didn't show up at his church, Christ Episcopal, for a bluegrass mass he had organized.

A nine-point deer came to watch as his body was being carried out of the woods.

More than five-hundred people filed into Lee Chapel for a memorial service. More watched it from classrooms at the law school. The Governor of Virginia sent his condolences. Memories and stories about Roger poured into a website set up in his honor.

One of his former students said, "When Professor Groot teaches you something, you stay taught." His students respected him for the same reason that everyone who knew him respected him. He was exactly who he was: Roger D. Groot.