

A Celebration of the Life of Ron Thorpe

Remarks by James A. Kelly

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We gather today to celebrate the life of a remarkable man, a close and dear friend of mine, and one of the finest human beings I have ever known. We share a sense of great loss, knowing that a wonderful friend and inspiring leader is no longer with us. But today, we also remind each other of the privilege it was to know him well, and the uplifting joy it was to walk with him along the paths of our lives.

We extend our deepest sympathy to Ron's family, especially to his amazing and deeply loved life partner Margaret, his daughter Katie, and all the members of his family.

Ron was Ron, not a carbon copy of anyone else, not even like anyone else. He was just himself. He knew who he was, what he valued, what he enjoyed, what he stood for. He knew how to laugh and he knew how to cry. He and I laughed a lot over the years, and shared tears during his final illness. Yes, he was a charismatic educational leader, but he was also a loving and caring person. He deeply appreciated the talent and commitment of his board, his staff - especially the outstanding senior team with whom he worked so closely.

A gentleman from the old school, he was modern and progressive in his thinking. Keenly intelligent, he attended public schools and was a classics graduate of Harvard University. He loved words, and wrote beautifully clear English prose – and poetry. Throughout his career in

education, philanthropy and the media, he championed better education for ordinary people and equal opportunity for all.

At Harvard, his mentor was the late Ted Sizer, himself a passionate advocate for the efficacy of teachers and teaching. Ted and Ron both knew that to improve student learning, *only* teachers could actually make it happen. Ron knew that to do this, teachers had to be professionally and fundamentally engaged both in shaping their own teaching, and in career-long professional growth and improvement.

That is why, four years ago, Ron Thorpe eagerly accepted the invitation to become President and CEO of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. With true Thorpian gusto, he immediately threw himself into the necessary task of rebuilding the organization itself. A student of how the medical profession, over several decades, built itself into a *real* profession, Ron set forth a transformative vision for the future of the teaching profession and the central role the National Board should play in realizing the vision: *“All teachers should seek National Board Certification, and most should achieve it”*. He proudly cited National Research Council findings that the students of National Board Certified Teachers learned more than students in other classrooms. He tirelessly asserted that the entire pipeline of preparation and professional work must be substantively aligned with high professional standards of performance.

Ron went further. He spelled out major policy and institutional changes that are needed in *all* the moving parts of the infrastructure of teaching – recruitment, preparation, residencies, licensing, induction, performance evaluation, Board assessments, teacher leadership, and compensation.

Thus, *his* agenda – a vision for the future, and the real-world changes needed to achieve the vision – is now *our* agenda. In his final months, Ron asked me several times: “Do they get it?” Yes, Ron, we do, indeed, *get it*.

With a heavy heart, I am slowly coming to realize that Ron is gone. But Ron was not ours to own or to keep. We all stand humbly before the uncertainties of our own lives. Today we say farewell to Ron, but he lives on the lives of each of us, and in the minds and hearts of thousands of others touched by his grace.

There are words from George Bernard Shaw that I believe Ron would like us to embrace today:

“My life belongs to the whole community. As long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me; it is a splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

Rest in peace, Ron Thorpe, surrounded by the angels of virtue, holding you gently, forever, in the palms of their hands.

July 26, 2015