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FROM MUDD TO THE STARS

This issue of Washington University Law Magazine looks both respectfully and irreverently at the “Mudd Hall years”—the period 1971–97 when the law school inhabited Seeley G. Mudd Hall, a few dozen yards east of our present location.

One of the unique experiences of becoming law dean at Washington University is that you hear a lot about Mudd Hall, most of it less than enthusiastic. In my first year here in 2006, one alumnus nearly pinned me to a hotel lobby wall at a reception and became quite eloquent describing Mudd as “the architecture of alienation.” The angular concrete building had long narrow classrooms, multiple roofs, and, according to an uncountable number of alumni, “lots of leaks and lots of ashtrays unintentionally drilled into the concrete walls.”

After hearing this more than a few times, I asked to see pictures of Mudd Hall so that I could understand our history. They turned out to be difficult to find. The building rarely figured in promotional materials, and what pictures I found seemed to be taken either from several hundred yards away or from very unlikely angles. I was ultimately told to visit Eliot Hall, which is a fraternal twin to Mudd and still stands next to the Olin Business School’s Knight Center (Eliot is slated for demolition soon, so those reading this issue who want a physical appreciation of the stories here should visit us before summer).

Amid all the lamenting about Mudd Hall, though, I have gradually come to appreciate one quite common thread in the narrative from many alumni, faculty, and staff. Mudd Hall may have been far from perfect. But the Mudd Hall era was far from uniformly brutal, sterile, or a wasteland, and there is a genuine fondness for particular people, experiences, and yes, even spaces that uniquely come from the era.

This issue tries to capture, in words and reminiscences and pictures, both the warts and the blessings of Mudd Hall and its era, with humor and fondness, and, finally, with respect for what that time and place meant to this institution. Whatever else can be said about our facilities from 1971 to 1997, the era was a key part of the foundation for the building of a great school, and much of the teaching, writing, and service that occurred in Mudd Hall is hard for any school to surpass.

There is a funny scene in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird in which the pompous town playwright and historian introduces a pageant of local history by shouting out “Maycomb County: Per Aspera Ad Astra,” which she loosely translates in the book as “from the mud to the stars” (although it literally means “through adversities/difficulties to the stars.”) I would never want our school’s narrative to pretend that all that came before Anheuser-Busch Hall was mud. Instead, I hope we continue to celebrate the school today as a legacy of many people—accomplished students, beloved faculty members, and dedicated staff—and several buildings, including January Hall, and, yes, “The Pit” and Mudd Hall. So here’s to Mudd Hall, gone but never forgotten, and to the students, faculty, and staff who lived and worked in it—and who brought this school to a future even greater than its proud past.