

## Memorial: John J. Banta (1932–2005)\*

¶1 Not all of us have the opportunity to have a great boss at some point in our respective working lives. Fortunately for the library staff at White & Case LLP in New York, it was blessed with a great boss and human being—John J. Banta—for the thirty years he was chief librarian there.

¶2 Born on May 24, 1932, in Astoria, Queens, New York, John lived his entire life in Queens, save for his service as a corporal in the United States Army. After his military service, he attended Pace University, subsequently taking a position as deputy librarian at the Association of the Bar of the City of New York library from 1959 to 1965. He earned AALL’s certified law librarian credential in 1961. In 1965, he moved to law firm librarianship, taking successive library director positions at Strasser, Spiegelberg, Fried & Frank (now Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP) to 1967; Hughes Hubbard & Reed from 1967 to 1969; and Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft from 1969 to 1975. He arrived at White & Case in 1975 and would stay there as chief librarian the rest of his life.

¶3 It’s hard to explain someone like John to people who never met him. His humanity and humor, along with his unparalleled sense of decency, were apparent from the moment I sat down to interview with him for a position at White & Case in 1990.

¶4 In the short year that I worked there, John quickly went from being not only my boss, but also my mentor and friend. To be sure, like any boss, he had high expectations of me. At the same time, he created an atmosphere that made people actually *want* to come to work, not dread it. Upon entering the door at 1155 Sixth Avenue on any given morning, I knew I would be greeted by him with a cheerful hello, possibly a joke told in that unforgettably rich Queens accent of his, and (of course) several things to do. This was a busy Wall Street firm, after all.

¶5 John was quite the raconteur.<sup>1</sup> He enjoyed reminiscing about events and personalities in the firms where he worked. We particularly enjoyed trading stories about a firm where we had both worked (but not at the same time).

¶6 While I was learning the White & Case firm culture, he’d warn me about the (very few) difficult-to-deal-with partners there and counsel me on how to deal with them. I appreciated the fact he would take a few minutes to brace me for this; as a result, I had a better day and the partner would get better service. Everybody wins.

¶7 White & Case was (and, so far as I know, still is) a very pleasant place to work. At the time, however, the firm had a strict policy against eating at one’s desk. Both John and I thought this rule was unduly restrictive, not to mention pointless.

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1. John would probably tease me about using such a fancy-schmancy word as “raconteur.”

Why should we waste time in the firm's cafeteria when we could eat and work at our desks? So, we'd both have the breakfast Danish, bagel, donut, or lunch sitting in the top drawer of our desks. We'd open the drawer, sneak a bite, hurry the offending item back into the drawer, and shut the drawer; this would be repeated every few minutes until the offending food product was consumed.

¶8 Perhaps John is best explained to those who never met him by what he did not do. He never belittled anyone. He never unleashed undeserved anger at anyone. He never made himself the center of attention. He never took advantage of his position over the rest of the library staff. At the same time, he was always available to his staff for personal as well as professional concerns. It dawned on me years later that he was servant leadership personified.

¶9 John celebrated his last birthday with a party at the White & Case library (food was permitted by then.) It was also his last day on the job. He died of melanoma on July 27, 2005. He was survived by his wife Joan and his children Linda, Billy, and Ed. John's funeral was held at the St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church in his birthplace of Astoria. He was interred at Maple Grove Cemetery in the Kew Gardens section of Queens.

¶10 I will remember my year with John at White & Case as one of the highlights in my career. I left to attend law school; had I not done so, chances are I still would be happily working there today, fifteen years on. I am grateful for the memories I have of John.—*Kevin P. Gray*<sup>2</sup>

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¶11 I worked with John Banta at White & Case for more than fourteen years. I was his assistant and friend. The library staff and I are still in disbelief at John's passing since he was so much a part of the library—he was the heart and soul of it.

¶12 I remember first being interviewed by John. He was warm and friendly, and he stressed how important it was to give the attorneys what they wanted and not create "waves." He had an incredible memory with an ability to recount events, places, and people; he could give the price of a book or loose-leaf service off the top of his head when queried by management.

¶13 John always said the library group was a family since we spent so much waking time together. He had time for all of us. His mantra was, "I always have time for you" and he made time to speak with any of us if there were a library issue that needed to be handled or someone had a personal problem. His door was always open.

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2. Associate Librarian and Head of Instructional Services, Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

¶14 When an older retired partner would return to the library and require assistance with materials that he had used years ago, John would quickly turn around and return with the item in no time flat. His sharp mind and memory took over.

¶15 On hectic days when I would either eat lunch much later or not at all and stay quite late, John would reprimand me in a warm and caring way. He would say, you need to eat, you need to take care of yourself. The work can wait until tomorrow.

¶16 When one of the White & Case partners first heard about John's passing, she e-mailed me that she was so distressed. She had worked with John for thirty years and thought so highly of him. She wrote that "he was a true gentleman and a scholar."

¶17 When John initially told me of his illness, he said he was going to fight it. He was so strong, optimistic, and courageous. He did not want to stay home and feel sorry for himself. He was a true fighter and truly "a gentleman and a scholar." He will be sorely missed.—*Gloria Goldberg*<sup>3</sup>

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¶18 My recollection of John Banta during my time at White & Case is as a mentor—just being close to him and learning from him made me feel empowered. I cannot say how much I learned from him, but I can say that he taught me a great deal. His perception and his knowledge about law and about being a law librarian was his life. He was always very helpful to the staff and to the attorneys. I feel very sad to have lost such a great man and a friend.—*Carmen Palacios*<sup>4</sup>

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3. Assistant Law Librarian/Tax Librarian, White & Case LLP, New York, New York.

4. Library Assistant, White & Case LLP, New York, New York.