

Justice Thomas Guest Lectures AT GW LAW

SUPREME COURT JUSTICE CLARENCE THOMAS ALSO TO SERVE
AS AN ADJUNCT PROFESSOR AT GW IN THE FALL.

~ ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY CLAIRE DUGGAN ~

Professor Gregory Maggs' Contracts II students got a surprise on a Friday morning this past March when their guest lecturer turned out to be U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

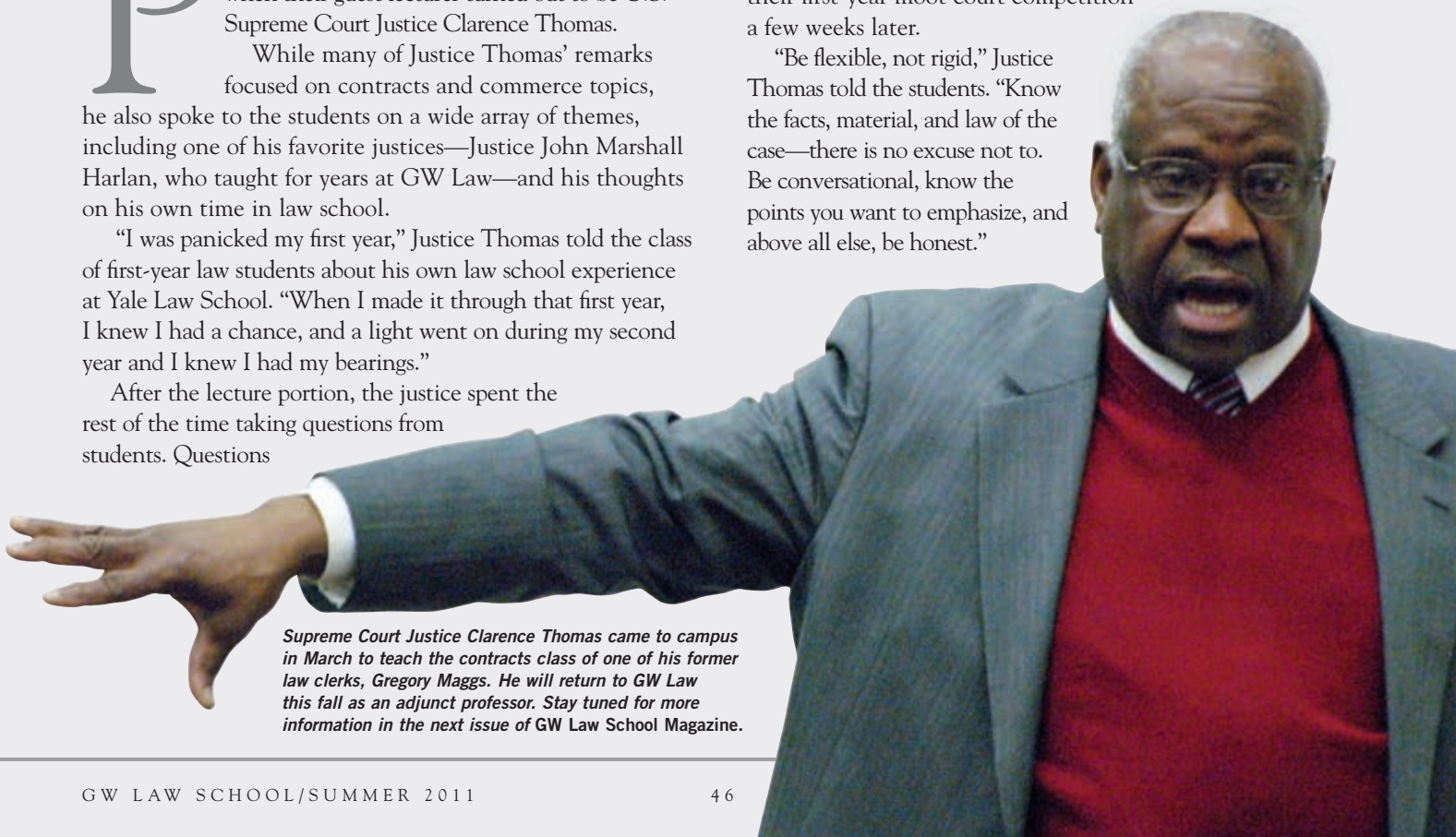
While many of Justice Thomas' remarks focused on contracts and commerce topics, he also spoke to the students on a wide array of themes, including one of his favorite justices—Justice John Marshall Harlan, who taught for years at GW Law—and his thoughts on his own time in law school.

"I was panicked my first year," Justice Thomas told the class of first-year law students about his own law school experience at Yale Law School. "When I made it through that first year, I knew I had a chance, and a light went on during my second year and I knew I had my bearings."

After the lecture portion, the justice spent the rest of the time taking questions from students. Questions

ranged from his opinion on recent Supreme Court decisions to tips on oral advocacy, as many students were preparing for their first-year moot court competition a few weeks later.

"Be flexible, not rigid," Justice Thomas told the students. "Know the facts, material, and law of the case—there is no excuse not to. Be conversational, know the points you want to emphasize, and above all else, be honest."



Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas came to campus in March to teach the contracts class of one of his former law clerks, Gregory Maggs. He will return to GW Law this fall as an adjunct professor. Stay tuned for more information in the next issue of GW Law School Magazine.



1L Joseph Yarbough (left) and his classmates laugh with Justice Thomas after the lecture.

One student asked if it was frustrating to sometimes be the lone dissenter in cases.

“No,” he said. “Comfort is knowing you live up to the oath you took” to return the decision you believe is the right one.

Justice Thomas gave the students an inside look into how he comes to a decision in a case and the process he employs in his chambers.

“I sit down with my clerks, and I give my personal reaction to the case, and I say, ‘Let’s not include this in the opinion,’ because you want to wall off your personal views,” he said. Justice Thomas said he always wants his law clerks’ opinions on everything, explaining that this roundtable discussion is the time to share ideas and ask questions. “If you can’t give me your opinion, you are of no help to me.”

It has now been almost two decades that Justice Thomas has presided on the high court, and the students got a glimpse into his time and experiences during the past 20 years.

Justice Thomas explained how he has worked in all three branches of the federal government and that he found the Supreme Court to be “the most civil branch—it lives up to what the Founders wanted.”

He said his colleagues are engaged and civil and he has never once experienced a raised voice in their discussions.

“Every Supreme Court member I’ve met without exception has been incredibly capable and likable,” Justice Thomas said. “You don’t have to agree with someone to admire them.”

Justice Thomas ended his lecture by telling the students he wished he had met more and different kinds of people during law school and recommended to this 1L class to make efforts to meet new people.

“People are very complicated and very interesting if you give them a try,” he said.

“Also, make sure to learn as much as you can.”

When the class ended, Justice Thomas took more than 15 minutes to meet with students and answer more questions.

“It was really moving to hear Justice Thomas speak about his life, his experiences, and his

work on the Supreme Court,” said 1L Joseph Yarbough. “It was inspiring to see how he came from such meager beginnings to overcome the odds and have an amazingly successful legal career by relying on willpower and his grandfather’s moral code.”

Afterward, Justice Thomas stayed for a lunch at the Law School with former law clerks Professor Maggs and Professorial Lecturer in Law Jennifer Mascott, JD ’06, student body leaders, and faculty members Associate Dean Scott Pagel, Associate



Incoming SBA President Nicholas Nikić, Provost Steve Lerman, Justice Clarence Thomas, President Steven Knapp, and outgoing SBA President Theresa Bowman before the luncheon

Dean Lisa Schenck, Professor Renée Lettow Lerner, and Professor Robert Cottrol.

“I felt honored to be asked to attend the luncheon with Justice Thomas but was pleasantly surprised at how comfortable it all felt,” said incoming SBA President Nick Nikić. “In the days leading up to the event, I was worried about how to act, how to address the justice, and most of all, whether he’d grill me on con law. As it turned out, I was put immediately at ease by his charm, warmth, and great sense of humor. The event was marked by constant conversation and an interesting mix of personal histories, shop talk, and jokes—I even managed to crack a few myself. It was yet another reminder of how blessed I feel to be part of the GW Law community.”

Justice Thomas has strong ties to the GW Law community. Three of Justice Thomas’ former clerks are teaching at GW Law this semester: Professor Maggs, Professor Mascott, who is teaching administrative law, and Professorial Lecturer in Law Kate Todd, who is teaching federal courts. Alumna Chantel Febus, JD ’02, also clerked for Justice Thomas.

“We are all very grateful to Justice Thomas,” Dean Maggs said. “He was tremendously generous in coming to visit us. I was very impressed with the sophistication of the class’s questions and found Justice Thomas’ answers to be extremely candid and interesting.”

Before he left, Justice Thomas said he would make it a point to come back to GW soon. **GW**