On Campus

Lehecka Honored at Retirement for His Three Decades of Multi-hatted Service

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Roger Lehecka ’67CC, ’74GSAS retired earlier this year after more than 30 years at Columbia. He served as a dean of the College for two decades, headed the two most recent presidential search committees, and served as executive director of the Columbia 250 celebration. Lehecka was also a founder of the Double Discovery Center, an organization that helps at-risk New York City youths. Among the countless students deeply influenced by Lehecka is United States District Court Judge Joseph Greenaway ’78CC, who spoke at Lehecka’s retirement party at Low Library. Below are excerpts from Greenaway’s remarks.

I knew Roger back when he had long hair and I had what I like to refer to as my Angela Davis haircut — a big, big Afro. I was a kid from the Bronx and I had dreams of becoming a lawyer. Roger was my adviser, and he was great about saying, “Relax, the world isn’t going to end, it’s not time to go crazy.” When I was waiting to hear back from law schools, I worried about whether I was going to get in and where I was going to get in. I got rejected from George Washington University and I thought, “I’m never going to get in anywhere.” Roger said, “Just wait.” When I got into Harvard I went to see Roger and I hugged him. “Good,” he said. “Maybe Yale will come around.” That didn’t happen, but things worked out and his encouragement was great.

There aren’t many times in life when you’re able to have a lasting relationship with someone who begins as your teacher. Throughout the time I’ve known him, Roger has been a teacher, mentor, and, finally, a friend. After I graduated from Columbia, Roger became a mentor, giving me advice not just about career moves. I had a great time when I was here at Columbia and I, like many of you, share a love for Columbia and a commitment to its students. In 1992, Roger had the prescience to

encourage me to join the Columbia College Alumni Association, through which I've developed many friends over the years. But I really have to thank Roger the most for getting me involved with the Black Alumni Council. In 1997 he said to me, "You know, we really need to get this going and get some more people involved." I knew black students from the 1970s, when I was a student here, but I needed to learn about folks from the 1980s and the 1990s. In case you didn't know this, Roger knows *everyone*. I mean, everyone. He and I went through a list of living black alumni, and Roger knew every one of them.

Now, when I say Roger knew them, he didn't just know what class they were in. He has an encyclopedic memory, and he told me who was practicing law or medicine, or who was an architect or an actor. He met with us constantly and he'd consult us on different people who could help. Roger was a phenomenal source in getting the BAA off the ground. To him we owe a debt of gratitude that I don't think words can appropriately measure.

The third phase of our relationship is that Roger and I, to my happiness and joy, are friends. It used to be that when he'd call I'd say, "OK, what am I going to do for Columbia now?" But now he calls and we just go out to dinner and talk! We have fun. For me it has been great over the course of 30 years to know Roger as a teacher, mentor, and friend. I know that every one of you here has a great Roger story to tell. Let me speak for all of you. Roger, we love you, and we thank you for devoting your life to Columbia.



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >