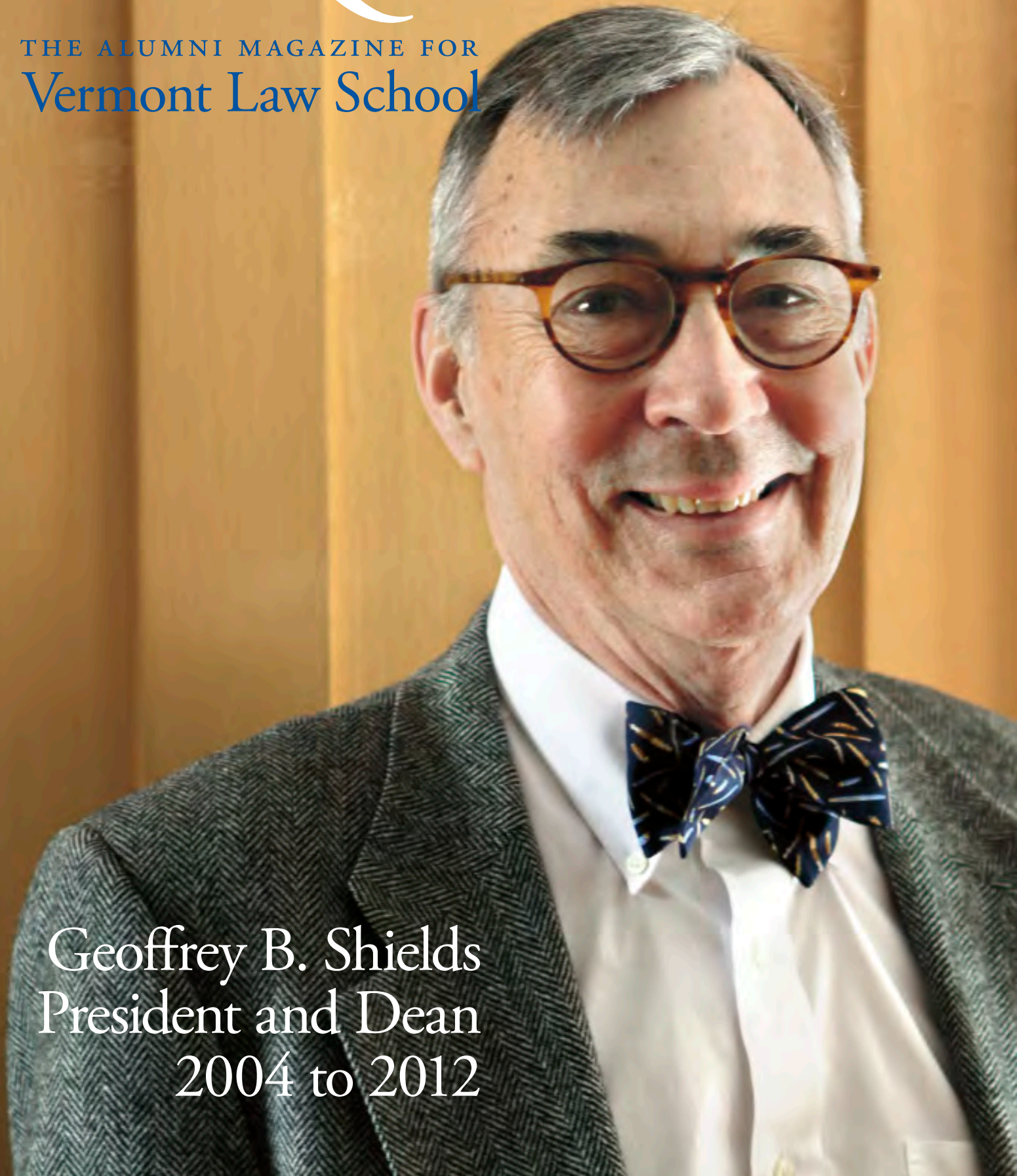


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Geoffrey B. Shields
President and Dean
2004 to 2012



Expanding the Reach of Vermont Law School: Geoffrey B. Shields, President and Dean 2004 to 2012

By Dana Grossman

It's a good thing Jeff Shields didn't come to work at Vermont Law School when the idea first crossed his mind in the 1970s.

Shields, who will retire on July 31 after eight years as VLS's dean and president, worked in Vermont for a couple of years following his 1967 graduation from Harvard and fell in love with the state. He left to enter Yale Law School and headed back in 1972, JD in hand, to clerk for Judge James Oakes of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

Oakes was involved with VLS from its earliest years, so Shields became aware of the then-nascent school. As his clerkship was concluding, he thought about the possibility of teaching at VLS as a way of staying in Vermont. His wife, Genie Bird Shields, had attended Bennington College and loved the state, too.

Had he joined the faculty of the struggling, not-yet-accredited law school, it's possible Shields would never have ended up in its top post, and VLS would not be the same school it is today. "I don't want to compare deans—each of our deans has had certain strengths," says longtime Professor Stephen Dycus. "But I do think he'll be remembered as one of the very best."

Long known for its environmental program, the school no longer sings "a one-note tune," says Trustee William Lytton, a retired U.S. Attorney and Fortune 500 corporate attorney. Under Shields, he adds, VLS has become "a tremendously serious institution that is having a profound impact in not just environmental law but law in general."

Such assessments aren't limited to those with ties to the school. Shields has, says U.S. Representative Peter Welch, "en-

hanced the already good reputation of Vermont Law School as a premier institution.... He certainly has a lot of admirers in the Vermont Congressional delegation."

Back in 1973, instead of staying in Vermont, Shields set out for the halls of Congress himself—becoming counsel to the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then special assistant to the secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare—before entering private practice back in his native Chicago.

He made partner in three years, and by the 1990s, he was chair of the management committee of the Chicago and Washington, D.C. law firm of Gardner Carton and Douglas, specializing in legal and financial aspects of not-for-profit institutions. Not only was his day job devoted to nonprofits, so was much of his own time. He chaired the board of Lake Forest College and served on Bennington College's board. He was a trustee of Chicago's Shedd Aquarium and a director of the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation of Chicago. He was vice chair of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and an active member of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

Shields moved in influential circles, but he'd retained a belief in the law as a force for public service, a precept he'd absorbed from Judge Oakes. He and Genie had also retained their fondness for Vermont. In 1992 they bought a farm in southern Vermont with the idea of eventually retiring there; in the meantime, they welcomed any excuse to travel east. So when Oakes wrangled an invitation for his former clerk to give a talk at VLS, Shields happily accepted—and made a good impression in South Royalton. The stars were beginning to align



Community building is high on Shields' list. The Shieldses' home in Tunbridge is an important extension of the campus, a VLS community gathering place where Jeff and Genie often host events, meetings, teas, lunches, dinners, and barn dances for professors, students, donors, and friends.



Photographs by Glenn Suokko

for a reversal of that early decision not to settle there.

By 2003, VLS was seeking a new dean. On the advice of Judge Oakes, Trustee John Hennessey contacted Shields to see if he was interested in the post or knew anyone who might be. “John Hennessey’s a great salesman,” laughs Shields. Deciding the time was right to try something wholly new, he applied.

Jeff Shields became dean on August 1, 2004, bringing to fruition that fleeting thought back in the ’70s. “I would not have been interested in the deanship of any other law school,” he said at the time of his appointment.

Shields had his work cut out for him. The school was, by his admission, “young, poor, remote.” But it was also, “gloriously, the only law school in the state...the leading law school in the country—and probably the world—on environmental issues, and a school with a real passion for using legal training to give back to society. I found the challenges as interesting as the strong points. Plus,” he adds, “I liked the people.”

And VLS liked Shields. Actually, make that Jeff *and* Genie Shields. “When Vermont Law School got Jeff to come,” says Trustee Emeritus Ann Debevoise, the widow of former dean Thomas Debevoise, “they got a two-for-one, because Genie has been an incredible addition to the atmosphere and attitude.”

“Genie Shields has invested unbelievable amounts of time and energy in supporting individual students and the spouses of individual students and contributing to the spirit and liveliness of the community,” agrees Professor John Echeverria.

In fact, Shields calls the job “something Genie and I took on together.” At VLS she turned their home—a rambling farmhouse and barn in Tunbridge, 10 minutes from South Royal-

ton—into an extension of the campus. An author, trained as an art historian, Genie Shields put her career on hold and became a magnet for the members of the VLS family. “I counted up a few months ago,” says Jeff Shields, “and during the seven and a half years we’ve been here, we’ve hosted 600 VLS events at our house.” They had students for tea, student partners for potluck suppers, trustees for breakfast, donors for dinner, the third-year class for a pregraduation contra dance, and sit-down occasions for 60 in the barn.

Shields has had a tangible impact on VLS in many ways, including its finances and its facilities. Nevertheless, it is intangibles—relationships, connections—that constituents of all sorts cite first when asked about his impact.

“I’ve never met anyone who was more generous, more absolutely devoted to the community, both narrowly and broadly,” says Professor Steve Dycus. Both Jeff and Genie, says Trustee Bill Lytton, “took a real joy in the community that they found and that they helped knit together, in many ways, more closely.”

“Community” tops Shields’ own assessment. “If you’re going to talk about accomplishments,” he says, “I think I’d put as number one on the list the internal and external community building and outreach.”

Another element of community building was Shields’s recognition of VLS’s “role as an engine for jobs and for support of local businesses. It’s one way Vermont can maintain its character of a state filled with vibrant small towns,” he explains. “To be a *vibrant* small town, you need some institution that creates jobs, and we permit that kind of vibrancy in South Royalton.”



He has also made friends for the school far, far beyond SoRo.

“He’s done an admirable job of advocating for VLS,” says Echeverria, “within the business community, within the legal fraternity, among elected officials at the state and national level. He has kept his eye very firmly on how VLS is perceived in the larger world and attempted to expand the greater world’s appreciation for Vermont Law School.”

He’s done so by highlighting areas where VLS can stand out as distinct or even unique among the nation’s 200 law schools. “I felt when I came here,” says Shields, “that it was crucial for this institution’s well-being to differentiate, to do some things better than other schools.”

Foremost among those things is environmental law. Shields put a priority on maintaining VLS’s preeminence in the field. *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked the school first in environmental law six of the last eight years and the last four years in a row.

But that emphasis has expanded in eight years with the establishment of the Institute for Energy and the Environment, the Land Use Institute, the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, and the U.S.-China Partnership for Environmental Law. Shields is fond of pointing out that VLS’s Chinese partners “know three places in the U.S.—they know New York, Washington, and South Royalton, Vermont.”

VLS is now one of the few U.S. law schools to offer international dual degrees—including with Cambridge University in England, the University of Seville in Spain, Renmin University in Beijing, and the University of Cergy-Pontoise, “the best

business-oriented law school in France,” notes Shields. There are new domestic joint-degree programs, too, including with the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Arizona and the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth.

A brand-new initiative is extending VLS’s reach in a different way. “Here we are in a town without a traffic light,” says Shields, “and yet we have a world-class group of faculty members. How do you get that intellectual capital used as fully and effectively as possible?” Here’s how: In 2011, the school launched the nation’s first online master’s degree in environmental law and policy.

Shields ticks off other things he’s proud of: The establishment of a certificate-granting program in dispute resolution. A focus in the classroom on more group work and more practical projects. The expansion of the career services office.

There’s a thread tying these efforts together. “A lot of law schools are quite insular in their relationship with the external world,” says Shields. He came in feeling it was important that students learn more than legal theory. He wanted to ensure that they leave VLS with real-world experience in carrying on the tasks of a lawyer. VLS now has an associate dean devoted to clinical and experiential learning, “in particular through our poverty law clinics,” says Shields, “but also through the environmental law clinic and the externships our students do.”

This has an effect on graduates’ careers. “Vermont Law School has turned out some excellent traditional lawyers,” says Echeverria. “But to a greater degree than a lot of schools, our students end up practicing law with a strong ingredient of public service—working in government, working for public inter-

Major Accomplishments at Vermont Law School 2004–2012

Building

Debevoise rehabilitation completed	2005
Kirsch House rehabbed	2005
Waterman remodeled	2005
Outdoor Classroom built	2007
Legal Writing Building rehabbed	2008
New Buildings and Grounds offices added	2010
Curtis House addition built	2011
Center for Legal Services building rehabbed	2012
Fitness Center construction begun	2012

Infrastructure

Campus goes Wi-Fi	2006, 2012
New computer server center created	2007
Lower riverside green reclaimed	2009
Zip Cars offered	2009
VLS/Montpelier bus route created	2009
Major landscaping implemented across campus	ongoing
Complete overhaul of campus software	2010–12
New phone system implemented	2011

Programs and Academic Offices

Environmental and Natural Resources Law Clinic	2004 startup (approved earlier)
U.S.-China Partnership for Environmental Law	2005
Institute for Energy and the Environment	2007
Assistant Academic Dean	2007
Dispute Resolution Program	2009
Land Use Institute	2010
Distance Learning	2011
Center for Agriculture and Food Systems	2011
Associate Dean for Clinical and Experiential Programs	2011
Nonprofit Institute	2012 (proposed)

Joint Degree Programs

University of Cergy-Pontoise	2007
Thunderbird School of Global Management	2008
University of Cambridge	2009
Renmin University	2011



Administrative Initiatives

Career Services

DC spring and fall job fairs; “road warrior” career service officers; career Boot Camps for 1L, 2L, 3L, and MELP students; quadrupled number of employers who interview our students (now 190)

Office for Institutional Advancement

Foundations and Government Affairs officers, planned giving program, parents’ committee, leaders’ circle program, \$30 million raised

Technology

Long-term plan created

Finance

Full depreciation budgeting, three-year projection budgeting, and “dashboard” reporting instituted

Admissions

Feeder school program, campus visit program, shift to online marketing, all admits called, focus on constant student capability improvement

Buildings and Grounds

Campus plan (2011)

International Advisory Committee formed

Website redesigned (2008)

Faculty Hired

(excluding adjuncts)

Betsy Baker
Margaret Barry
Laurie Beyranevand '03
Matthew Carluzzo
Christine Cimini
Teresa Clemmer
Jason Czarnecki
Sheryl Dickey LLM'10
Michael Dworkin
John Echeverria
Peg Elmer
Stephanie Farrior
Kat Garvey LLM'10
Clara Gimenez '03
Hillary Hoffmann
Donald Kreis
Siu Tip Lam
Mark Latham
Jingjing Liu
Michele Martinez Campbell
Michael McCann
Beth McCormack
Marc Mihaly
Laura Murphy
Sean Nolon
Brian Porto
Rebecca Purdom '96
Rene Reyes
Faith Rivers
Hilary Robinson
Betsy Schmidt
Stefanie Sidortsova
Benjamin Sovacool
Gus Speth
Ellen Swain Veen '99
Jennifer Taub
Jack Tuholske
Pamela Vesilind '08

VLS Family

600 events hosted at Shields' home
Campus bunnies introduced
Partners Group focus created
Annual VLS/South Royalton Community Day instituted

est organizations, working for nonprofits. It's a tradition that's long existed at VLS, but one that Jeff has strongly supported and endorsed and affirmed.”

He has supported the school's growth in other very tangible ways.

“Jeff came in with a fiat from the board,” says Scott Cameron, a 1980 graduate and chair of the board during most of Shields's tenure. “The main thing we needed from him was to raise resources, to move the school forward, to enable us to compete for students with scholarships, to help our students with loan repayments.”

Shields delivered. “When I came to the law school,” he says, “on average we were raising \$1 million year—sometimes a little more, but that would be about the average. Now it's about \$4 million a year.” Furthermore, “we've built an infrastructure in the fund-raising area that will serve the law school extremely well going forward; we're just finishing up a capital campaign that will exceed our \$15-million goal by a substantial margin.”

Most of the funds have gone to expand programs, but the physical plant has benefited, too. Since Shields's arrival, a major renovation was completed of iconic Debevoise Hall, originally South Royalton's grade school; another old schoolhouse was remodeled into a legal writing center; the former Freck's Department Store is becoming a home for the school's legal clinics; and a new fitness center will soon be under construction.

Shields has also built both the board and the faculty.

He has, says Dycus, made “what was a strong board of trustees even stronger by drawing on his experience and contacts with people around the country who've come in and just devoted themselves utterly to the school's success.”

At the same time, says Cameron, Shields brought “more diversity to the board—diversity of gender, race, and opinion.”

Lytton tells a story illustrating Shields's commitment to diversity. “There are two things that are not a secret,” says Lytton. “Number one, I'm a fairly conservative guy. Number two, Vermont Law School is not a very conservative place. Jeff asked me to give a talk on some of the experiences I'd had working both in government and for various corporations. As part of the introduction, he noted that I was one of Reagan's lawyers on Iran-Contra and said he was pretty certain that was the first time those words had ever been used in an introduction at the law school. I thought I noticed a distinct intake of breath from the assembled multitude.” But the talk went well, Lytton says. “I wasn't booed. Actually, they published my talk in the *Law Review* afterward. It's part of Jeff's openness to what



Photographs by Glenn Suokko

I think of as *real* diversity, not just the way people look but the way people think.”

Absolutely, affirms Shields. “For a law school,” he believes, “it’s important to act in the context of broad-based philosophical differences. This is a progressive institution with a progressive thrust in its mission, but it’s not a good thing for our students to be in an environment where every student is exactly the same in terms of their political philosophy. You learn to argue better and to parse through your own ideas better if you’ve got people who have different views—and I think that’s true with regard to our board as well.”

He was no less compromising when it came to building the faculty. “Something that probably differentiates me as a dean,” Shields says, “is that I’ve put a premium” on hiring faculty with “experience outside of academe as well as academic experience.”

In addition, “he insisted that when we hired, we hired the best and the brightest,” says Professor Cheryl Hanna, who has been at VLS since 1994. “If you look at who joined our faculty under his leadership, it’s quite astounding the quality of the folks we were able to attract.”

She believes much of the credit for recruits saying “yes” goes to Shields. “Jeff was very good at communicating why we were such a great place...that their lives and careers would be more meaningful here.” He was also, Hanna adds, very supportive of women as well as “very attuned to the fact that people didn’t come alone—we weren’t just recruiting individuals but we were recruiting families to our community.”

Shields is proud of the faculty hired during his tenure. “The new faculty have had a tremendous impact on the older

faculty—rejuvenating them and the way they think.” But he’s no less a fan of the veterans. “The older faculty,” he continues, “have had a tremendous impact on the newer faculty, because the older faculty often came here at a real pioneering time, were willing to take risks, were committed to living in northern New England and to a young, fledgling institution. It’s been a great dynamic.”

Yet his time as dean hasn’t been entirely, as the saying goes in Vermont, easy sledding. Count Shields’s health as challenge number one. He was diagnosed with lymphoma last year, and though he came through treatment with flying colors (and never stopped working), the possibility of a recurrence was among the reasons for his decision to retire.

Count the national economic downturn as challenge number two. The resulting budget crunch has had some personnel repercussions though VLS has been able to avoid layoffs. The sluggish economy has made fund-raising harder. It’s also affected students’ ability to find jobs after they graduate. Student debt is a related concern. “The ability of students to borrow is a massive trap in some ways,” notes former trustee Scott Cameron.

“The number of people applying to law school nationally has dropped in the last two years from 100,000 to 70,000,” says Shields. As a result, though class size grew by more than 15 percent during the first half of his deanship, the size of the student body is now closer to where it was when he arrived. For a school dependent on tuition revenue “that’s a concern,” says Cameron.

These are challenges Shields’ successor, Marc Mihaly, will need to grapple with, challenges that now face all law schools.



Being dean *and* president of VLS is “a huge job,” says Cameron. VLS is one of only a handful of U.S. law schools not attached to a university. Shields sees benefits in that status: an independent school is less encumbered by bureaucracy, more nimble. But its leader must shoulder an extra measure of responsibility. And those closest to Shields say he never cuts himself slack.

“He holds himself to very high standards,” says Hanna. “And he held the faculty to some very high standards, too,” she admits. “It’s hard to work for somebody who’s demanding like that, and I think all of us at one time or another felt pushed or prodded by Jeff more than we might have liked. But when we look back at what we accomplished over the last eight years, it really is astounding—and I don’t think that would have happened but for Jeff’s insistence that we keep moving forward.”

How did he accomplish so much?

By traveling a lot. Despite what he calls “the gravitational pull of being on campus,” Shields has spent a lot of time visiting donors, legislators, and other movers and shakers around the country and the world.

By being an enabler as much as a doer. “A lot of the role of the dean,” says Shields, “is to surface good ideas that other people have and then champion them.” He hopes he’s remembered “not as ‘this project or that project was Jeff’s,’ but rather ‘this project or that project happened on Jeff’s watch.’”

And by meshing with the school’s culture. Cameron recalls meeting Shields to interview him for the deanship. “Here’s a guy who’s running a huge law firm,” he says, “yet he did not seem arrogant, he had the common touch.” These days the dean

sets off his trademark urbane bow tie with well-oiled hiking boots and regularly dons rumpled khakis to lead student hikes.

It’s clear VLS wasn’t a job for Shields but a cause.

“He’s just *thrown* himself into it wholeheartedly,” says Debevoise, “with no personal agenda—he was totally committed to the school’s interests and needs.”

“He’s approached every aspect of the job with an attitude of enthusiasm bordering on joy,” comments Dycus. “He has a marvelous sense of humor into the bargain. That was evident this past Halloween. His impending retirement by then widely known, Shields came to work in costume—wearing a cardboard bill and webbed feet and walking with a cane. As if he were lame. A lame duck.”

But he’s stepping out of the dean’s suite with the grace of a swan. He and Genie will spend next year in Cambridge, England, once again trying something wholly new. He’ll be a visiting fellow at Clare Hall, a graduate college at the University of Cambridge, where he’ll help develop a new master’s degree program in comparative business law and do some lecturing and writing.

Then it will be back to Vermont, to the house in Tunbridge, which is now home. They’ve come to love the place, but even more the people. Shields hopes to follow in the footsteps of his immediate predecessors, Kinvin Wroth and Maximilian Kempner, and retain an association with VLS. They “were always helpful to me,” Shields says. “I hope I can perform that kind of role for the law school...be around as a cheerleader and a supporter.” He left SoRo in his rearview mirror in the 1970s. He doesn’t plan to do so again.