

**Honoring Libraries**  
Dedication of the Michael Kelly Commons Room  
University of Texas at San Antonio  
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By  
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I very much appreciate the opportunity to come “home,” so to speak. I left San Antonio 30 years ago after graduating from Thomas Jefferson High School. One of my former bosses, Supreme Court Justice Byron White, was fond of saying, “Be proud of your home town.” I’ve always been proud to be from San Antonio.

Many of you must privately question why you’ve come to hear a speech about a library. I looked really hard for some good library jokes but had a hard time finding any! A comment by the great film producer, Samuel Goldwyn, captures the experience many of us have with books we check out of libraries. When asked to comment about a book he was considering making into a movie, he said, “I read part of it all the way through.”

The story of why I’m here and how I came to be speaking to you today warrants a brief explanation. For those of you with discerning judgment, it will not be immediately obvious why a lawyer who now practices in Washington, D.C., has come all this way to talk to you about the UTSA library. I hope you’ll indulge me a little bit of personal history.

While in high school, I came to know UTSA, which is not too far from where I grew up near Fredericksburg Road and Loop 410. The John Peace Library Building opened in 1976, when I was a freshman at Jefferson. During the next three years, my debate partner Todd Wong and I came out to use this library to research speeches and debate topics. As I reflect on those years, it is quite amazing to see the growth in this campus. I remember vividly it being just a few buildings in my teen years. We would come out in the evenings or on a Saturday, and it seemed like we had the full run of the place, there were so few students around.

Occasionally, we ran into debaters from other high schools. Our high school speech team at Jefferson was one of the finest in the nation, and among our strongest competitors was the team from Churchill High School. One of the Churchill stars, Peter Kelly, is the son of the man we honor today. Peter was an intense competitor, a highly analytical thinker who was not afraid to give his views on a debate topic. Todd and I always looked forward to our debates with him, because we knew we had to be at our best to prevail. I’m especially glad to meet Neil, today. I know your father would have been very proud of what you both have accomplished personally and professionally.

After college, I got to know Peter’s mom, Mary Kelly, who was a star attorney then with the law firm of Mathews & Branscomb. I got a summer job as a legal assistant with that firm before I went over to England to study at Oxford. Through her, I met Michael Kelly a few times, and remember him as a generous, insightful, and thoughtful man. In his self-effacing way, I

don't think I even knew back then that he was the architect and master craftsman of this fine institution.

I am honored today to be asked to help share in the celebration of the Michael Kelly commons area. It is named to commemorate Mike's memory and the library he built in more than three decades as the head librarian and dean of the UTSA library system.

Michael Kelly was one of the first stalwarts to join the faculty at UTSA in 1972, first as a professor in the English Department and shortly thereafter as head of the library. He subsequently became permanent Dean of the library system here at UTSA. In that capacity he essentially built the library from scratch. With no disrespect to the fine presidents who have served UTSA, Professor of English Mark Allen observed shortly after Mike's death in May 2006 that he "may well be the single most influential person in the first thirty or so years of UTSA." He led the UTSA library system in an era of great financial challenges and constrained budgets. And he did so with a caring attitude toward staff and the special stewardship of leading a fledgling institution.

Professor Allen's observation speaks to the central place the library has become to the academic life of this campus. When Mike Kelly became the head of the UTSA library in the 1970s, he followed in the footsteps of the great builders of libraries who came before him, erecting institutions of higher learning, collecting the materials on which our knowledge as human beings is based, and providing places where thought, reflection, and learning are treasured.

Cicero once famously observed that, "If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need." From Cicero's time forward, the possession of a private library became a necessity to every scholar, teacher, writer, and man of affairs. One such private library in the 3rd Century A.D. was reputed to consist of some 62,000 volumes. The spread of civilization throughout the Mediterranean world created an intense, knowledge-based competition. The Roman Emperor Augustus quickly grasped the importance of spreading intellectual thought and making available the tools for Roman students to enhance their knowledge. He created a system of state-sponsored libraries. We know the names of only a handful of the libraries he established, but he first inspired the notion that government could sponsor such institutions for the welfare of all.

After Augustus's time, libraries typically were affiliated with temples. Later, with the rise of Christianity, libraries and churches went hand in hand. The most educated priests were those who carefully copied manuscripts for distribution to other libraries before the invention of the printing press.

With the rise of institutions of higher learning, libraries became even more important. In the medieval period, the libraries of Europe were almost exclusively ecclesiastical. They belonged either to religious institutions or, after the first millennium, the universities that were being established in places like Oxford, Cambridge, and Paris.

In 1597, Thomas Bodley wrote to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford. He noted that the public library in Oxford had fallen into desuetude and offered at his own expense to re-gather the books to “reduce it again to its former use, and to make it fit and handsome with seats and shelves and desks and all that may be needful, to stir up other men’s benevolence to help to furnish it with books.” Before he died in 1612, Bodley had secured passage of an act ensuring that every book copyrighted in England would be deposited in Oxford’s library, which has since become known as the Bodleian Library.

For me, few places are as inspiring and humbling as the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Within those walls I spent many contented hours. Boswell, the great biographer of Samuel Johnson, once wrote that “The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading, in order to write: A man will turn over half a library to make one book.” That certainly seemed true for me, as I spent thousands of hours reading hundreds of books over a three-year period in the Bodleian Library working on my doctoral dissertation. I caught a few naps in there, too, after particularly vigorous rowing outings.

But I always knew that I studied best at the Bodleian, because I felt a keen awareness that within this ancient institution studied some of the greatest thinkers in human history. With its attention to architecture, design, and furnishing, a library can be an oasis to inspire a person to think more deeply about a subject.

At the Bodleian I came to appreciate one of the great attributes of a library – the open stacks – the ability to roam among books and to pull them off the shelves to have a look. What distinguishes a library from a database is the ability to get lost for a few hours in discovery by physically inspecting a book, by searching for titles that you never would have encountered but for their adjacency to a book you came to examine. No matter how many indexes I have perused or databases I have searched, I have almost always encountered a new and meaningful book simply by getting in the stacks. And I have enjoyed so many hours of discovery in the process. I’m sure many of you are like me and enjoy occasionally getting off-track through the discovery of books on entirely different subjects. What better place to take an intellectual detour than a great library.

While at Oxford, I recall my delight in examining books that hadn’t been checked out for a quarter-century or more. It was as if the books had been waiting for me to find their highest use. To many, it would seem wasteful to devote such resources for so little use. But to me it is inspiring that our civilization can honor research and knowledge to such a degree that we have established and lovingly maintained such institutions.

A library, of course, is more than just a storage receptacle of books and data, and a place for intellectual nourishment. For many institutions, it is the lifeblood of the work they do. Justice Robert Jackson was being facetious in some measure when he wrote that, “When the [Supreme] Court moved to Washington in 1800, it was provided with no books, which probably accounts for the high quality of early opinions.” Having derived his own education from thousands of hours of self-study reading books, Jackson understood full well the importance of the library to the Supreme Court’s work.

The Court's decisions rest on historical foundations. The incremental steps of common law judging and constitutional interpretation turn on the opinions and conclusions of more than one hundred justices spanning two centuries. The librarians at the Supreme Court are all trained lawyers. Their ability to devise a 50-state survey of some arcane point of law or to find an obscure legal source cited in an old Supreme Court opinion is a source of great pride. And their ability to do so in short order is nothing short of amazing. The justices and their law clerks rely on them as an invaluable resource to master the details of arcane areas of law.

The experience of clerking for Justice White and interacting on a regular basis with the librarians there instilled in me a deep appreciation that a library is more than just the books it possesses. A library would be nothing without highly skilled and dedicated professionals who understand how to find pertinent and on-point materials. And, in my experience, few things excite librarians as much as when a user seeks to tap the hidden resources of their institution.

With our Nation in economic crisis, state budgets being slashed, and resources tight, a university's library can be a convenient target for cuts. In these times, we all must find ways to do more with less. This was just the skill at which Mike Kelly excelled. As we consider how to direct scarce dollars, recall the words of Lady Bird Johnson, who once said that "Perhaps no place in any community is so totally democratic as the . . . library. The only entrance requirement is interest."

And that interest, in turn, cultivates the ambitious hopes we have to better our understanding of our world and the human condition. Past knowledge promotes contemporary understanding and inspires future change. We continue to create new libraries and to invest in established ones because the past merits preservation as an always viable window into what may lie ahead, if properly understood and interpreted. Libraries warrant our investment because they are bastions for the preservation and protection of such knowledge, and incubators of the ideas that shape our futures.

A central strength of libraries is that they are institutions of accreted knowledge. In libraries, each generation hands to the next the most valuable of the knowledge it amasses. With libraries, we reaffirm the best of what we can create and accomplish as human beings. As Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, "My library was dukedom large enough." He understood that the power of the ideas he contemplated was far more valuable than any tract of land. Mike Kelly, himself a Shakespeare scholar, well understood that, too. Long after dukedoms have become largely obsolete, we still read Shakespeare and marvel at his dramatic muse. And the power of a compelling idea can be far more valuable than any plot of land.

Here, at UTSA, many people have been responsible for the growth and development of this library. Many more will do so in the future. Each of us can engage in meaningful acts to preserve, grow, and develop this intellectual resource. We honor Mike Kelly today for his many contributions to the library and for his singular achievements in its success to date. But just as he would have pushed on, had he not succumbed to illness, we should embrace the challenge to continue to enrich this institution.

Years from now, maybe a student will pick up a book that hasn't been touched since the library first opened its doors. And when she does, maybe she'll have an idea that changes the world. But even if the insight is not quite so profound, it is sure to deepen her own perspective on life and her surroundings, leading to a fuller life and contributions that enrich the lives of others.

D.C.F.