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Acting Dean Nolan Was ‘Natural’ Choice

By BRUCE C. SMITH
STAR I.U.-BLOOMINGTON BUREAU

Bloomington, Ind. — Unflappable Val Nolan Jr. was a natural choice to be acting dean of the Indiana University School of Law at Bloomington, according to his colleagues.

He’s unusual in the academic world. A respected professor of law, he also is an authority in ornithology and a zoology professor at I.U.

Other professors in the law school here say they look to him to get to the heart of an argument muddied with emotional debate.

"UNFLAPPABLE" is one of the words college professors use in referring to other professors skilled as teachers and able to deftly field the questions of advanced students.

Dan Hopson Jr., a law professor and associate dean of faculties, used that term to describe Nolan. He also labeled Nolan a dedicated classic-style instructor with a reputation for mind-expanding class sessions.

With that sort of respect from students and fellow faculty members, Nolan was not a surprise candidate when I.U. President John W. Ryan announced appointment of an acting law dean in January.

Nolan’s friends said he is glad to serve the school as a temporary dean but is too dedicated to teaching and research to be interested in a long-term deanship.

RYAN IS weighing several nominations for a permanent dean suggested by a faculty-student search committee screening dozens of applicants. A new dean is expected on the job by the fall semester in August.

Of the known candidates, one reportedly is Philip C. Sorensen, 42, a former lieutenant-governor of Nebraska, executive director of the Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Foundation of Columbus and chairman of the 1968 Indiana Executive Reorganization Commission.

Nolan, 55, is one of the professors found on a large campus valued for his integrity in the hardest jobs, such as membership on the tenure policy committee which decides the future of his colleagues’ careers, according to Ryan.

Nolan is modest and prefers to keep a very low public profile, declining interviews about his life and most photographers’ requests for pictures.

THE OFFICIAL university photograph of Nolan is more than 25 years old, taken when he was sporting a very short haircut left over from duty in the White House Secret Service and United States Navy combat intelligence in World War II. But he consented to

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be photographed by The Indianapolis Star last week.
He has carried on the tradition of a unique, literary Indiana family.
His father, the late Val Nolan, was an attorney, former Federal district attorney for southern Indiana and son of a Democratic mayor of Evansville.
His mother, the late Jeannette Nolan, was an author of extreme sensibility, shown in 50 books including many for children. She was a daughter of a Republican mayor of Evansville.

YOUNGER brother Alan Nolan is exercising a penchant for writing fiction and nonfiction books in his spare time from labor law practice in the Indianapolis firm of Ice, Miller, Donadio and Ryan.
A sister is Kathleen Lobley of Indianapolis.

“He’s a beatnik,” Alan quipped about his older brother. “Val is not motivated by the things that move most people. Prestige and power offer him no interest” Alan said.

Val Nolan has a recluse quality, jealously guarding his time, but he is always open for talks with his students or other professors.

Nolan has been well known in the university for a quarter of a century as a professor of property law. But six years ago, after he was assured the other professors agreed, he accepted a joint professorship in the Law school and the College of Arts and Sciences department of zoology.

A SELF-TAUGHT ornithologist, Nolan is completing a book based on a 25-year research project during which he exhaustively studied the prairie warbler and other birds of Indiana.
The day of his first zoology class in 1970, so the story is told, Nolan, in a shrewd but genuine fashion, walked into the classroom and announced, “You people know a lot more about most of this discipline than I do. I know a few things from field work that you don’t know. So we’re going to teach each other.” The students loved it and learned.

His field experiences, besides an enthusiasm since high school for bird-watching, includes many trips such as last year’s to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef.

WRITING IN some of the esoteric zoological publications about his advanced experiments, Nolan began to gain a scholarly reputation in his hobby and was asked to lecture at Oxford and The Hague.

Alan Nolan remembers that Val was two years older but was four years ahead in their Indianapolis high school days at Shortridge. Val was a good baseball player and a “terribly successful student” with ambitions of becoming a newspaperman, Alan said.

Val Nolan returned from the war to begin law school at I.U. where he is remembered as one of the “smartest students the university has ever produced” by former law dean Leon Wallace.

In 1957 he received a prized Guggenheim Fellowship to continue research in both of his vocational areas—one a study of Indiana land statutes and another in his bird studies.

“THERE’S A constant feeling and questioning that because I’m a biologist and a lawyer, there should be some kind of environmental connection. But I’m not interested in joining the two,” he said.

“When I was in college, the big question was, ‘What are those idiots sitting around splitting atoms for?’ And it’s very hard for many people now to understand the value of ornithology. But the study of birds is worthwhile for many reasons,” he said.

“The study of animal behavior has been based heavily on the study of birds. Because of the ease with which they can be observed, because they rely strongly on the same senses that we use and because of the consistency of some of their behavior patterns, birds were one of the first animal groups systematically studied,” he said.

“I like dealing with empirical data. It’s nice to study something and be able to say to yourself, ‘Hey, I’m the only guy who knows that.'”