Overview

After a brief but hard-fought battle with cancer, John Law Jacobus, of Washington, DC, passed away on January 2, 2021. He was 57 years old.

John was born in Washington, DC, on December 23, 1963. A family move took him to Princeton, NJ, in August of 1970, where he spent the remainder of his youth, graduating from Princeton Day School in 1982. At graduation, he was awarded the English and Latin prizes, a Headmaster’s award, as well as being the first recipient of the John Douglas Sacks-Wilner '80 Award. He loved studying English and history, and participated in several dramatic presentations, including one of the first full Shakespearean plays mounted by the school, Twelfth Night.

John attended Harvard University, receiving a bachelor of arts (A.B.) in History, graduating magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. At Harvard, he was a recipient of the Detur Prize, one of the oldest academic prizes at Harvard College, awarded to only the top 49 freshmen in the class. He was also awarded a John Harvard Scholarship, in recognition of academic achievement of the highest distinction, as well as the Whitehill Prize, given by Lowell House to the junior student who “as a scholar and citizen best represents the tradition of the humane letters and arts.” Beyond his coursework at Harvard, John was a member of the Phillips Brook House Association, dedicated to public service in the greater community. He also served as head usher in the Memorial Church, then under the stewardship of the Reverend Peter J. Gomes. As head usher, John led the reading in the chapel service at commencement.

After college, John continued on to the Harvard Law School, receiving his Juris Doctor (J.D.) degree in 1989. Upon graduating, he accepted a position as law clerk to a federal judge, the Hon. Maryanne T. Barry, at the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey. Following his clerkship, John served as a trial attorney at the US Department of Justice in Washington, DC, beginning his career as a member of the Attorney General’s Honors Program. John served in the Federal Programs Branch of the Civil Division from 1991 to late 1995. The Federal Programs Branch was tasked with representing the President and Cabinet Officers in their official capacities, to both enforce and defend the policies of the United States. While at the Justice Department, John received two Special Achievement Awards from the Attorney General, one for Sustained Superior Performance of Duty (1993) and the other for Meritorious Acts Performed on Behalf of the Department (1994).

Following his service at the US Department of Justice, John went into private practice. He briefly joined a large national law firm, but left to serve as the general counsel in a family-owned business, the Jacobus Pharmaceutical Company, Inc., a position he relished. Following that service, John returned to firm practice, joining Steptoe & Johnson, LLP, in Washington, DC, where he remained for the rest of his career. Elected partner at Steptoe in 2001, John specialized in commercial litigation and arbitrations, often with a focus on insurance and reinsurance/risk trading. He was a distinguished member of the bar, both domestically and on an international basis, and served as chair of the Insurance and Reinsurance Practice Section of Lex Mundi, the world’s largest assembly of private law firms. While at Steptoe, John also devoted a significant amount of time to pro bono work, often with a focus on helping immigrants reach the safety of the United States following persecution or torture abroad. His representation of the underprivileged also included serving as lead counsel in proceedings before the United States Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia Circuit in litigation on behalf of developmentally delayed children, in a case challenging their stewardship by the government of the District of Columbia.

John was a life-long reader and collector of books, which he cherished. History was a particular interest; while he enjoyed building his knowledge on all eras and cultures, World War II and its aftermath were a special focus for him. Together with his partner (and later husband) of 23 years, John enjoyed traveling and seeing both the cultural sites of the world and its
geographical wonders, from Argentina to Zimbabwe and dozens of countries in between.

John enjoyed the vibrancy of urban spaces, but relished getting deep into rustic places as well. He was particularly fond of walking in the woods and along the rocky cliffs at Isle au Haut, Maine, where his family has spent summers for many generations. Isle au Haut held a special place in his heart, often inspiring deeply contemplative moments, especially at night, when the ink-black sky was spread with stars and the murmurs of the ocean sounded nearby.

Character was destiny for John, and he believed that kindness was the greatest wisdom. All who knew him would attest that he served as an exemplar of those values his entire life. He was utterly devoted to his husband, David Uhler, and was beloved by his family and many friends. John was predeceased by his brother, William Penman Jacobus, to whom he lovingly gave many hours of thoughtful care during a prolonged period of illness in William’s life. In addition to his husband, John is also survived by his parents, David and Claire Jacobus of Princeton, NJ; his sister Marget Jacobus of Westfield, MA; his sister and brother-in-law Claire Jacobus and Andrew Hildick-Smith of Winchester, MA; his sister Laura Jacobus of Princeton, NJ; three nephews (Gordon, Seth, and Neil Hildick-Smith), a niece (Ellen Jacobus), and a new grand-niece, Sophie, daughter of Gordon and his wife Alice Wisener.

A memorial service for John will be planned for a later date. Those who would like to honor John’s memory in the meantime may wish to make a donation in his honor to the Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center at Georgetown University (lombardi.georgetown.edu/giving).