A Tribute to Ed Latessa: The Change Maker

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IT HAS BEEN almost a year since Ed Latessa passed away. We still catch ourselves reaching out to him to ask for advice, or send a link to a new grant, a picture of the kids or a text just to say hello. Ed was a giant in the field of corrections, and his work will live on.

Ed held many informal titles: a great scholar, a true leader, a loyal friend, a protective father, an excellent colleague, and an invaluable mentor. But probably the greatest accolade one could bestow on Ed was that he was a **CHANGE MAKER**. Ed wanted to change the world. Not for the glory; rather, his mission was to improve the lives of others. This mission carried across all his titles and was evident every day in his work.

From the beginning of his career, Ed set out to change things for the better. When he arrived at the University of Cincinnati in 1980, the School of Criminal Justice was a small program stuck in the back of French Hall. He was one of five faculty, but already he had a mission: to make this small criminal justice department one of the best in the country. He knew from the beginning he couldn't do it by himself. He had a vision, but he needed partners to bring it to life. So, he started recruiting great scholars. Larry Travis was already at UC, so the next two hires were Frank Cullen and Pat Van Voorhis. The four of them set out to grow the department into what it is today, the fourth best criminal justice department, according to the most recent *U.S. News & World Report*. All four original faculty retired from the University of Cincinnati's School of Criminal Justice while Ed was at the helm. Today the school has grown to roughly two dozen faculty and over 50 doctoral students, with the first doctoral students graduating in 1996. His program and students are clearly part of his legacy and will keep his mission of change active.

Ed came to UC at a time in which rehabilitation was not a popular philosophy in corrections. In fact, some would argue that was in the dark ages of corrections. On the heels of Martinson's "Nothing works" article (1974, p. 25), rehabilitation efforts for people involved in the criminal justice system nearly halted (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982). But if you are going to be a change maker, sometimes you need to buck the system. In fact, we don't think Ed ever met a set of bureaucratic red tape that he wasn't able to tear right through. He had an uncanny superpower of getting through what he would call "administrative bulls*@t" to get things done. So, when rehabilitation needed to be resurrected, Ed was among those who stepped up. Along with colleagues like Pat Van Voorhis, Frank Cullen, and the Canadian troop (Paul Gendreau, Jim Bonta, and Don Andrews) among others, Ed set forth to help save rehabilitation one jurisdiction at a time.

Ed's role in this endeavor was to talk to anyone who would listen. He jumped in a car, boarded a plane, and even took a helicopter once to get the "What Works" word out to the field. Ed would sometimes travel to four cities in a single week to speak to practitioners, administrators, and even legislators. Ed was a blue-collar academician. He preferred being in the field over the ivory tower. Don't get us wrong: Ed was a prolific scholar, with over 12,000 Google Scholar citations, more than a dozen textbooks, and a multitude of academic awards. However, there was also no one better than Ed at explaining the data in person. He had a way of breaking down complex ideas into understandable, relatable concepts. He was also funny. People remembered Ed. Wherever he went, he was invited back to talk to more people. So although Ed was a homebody who would have happily given up being on the road, he knew that the cost of changing the system was getting the word out about "What Works"—and he was definitely the person to do it.

In the area of scholarship, while most academicians at this stage in their career were focused on publishing in top-tier academic journals that were located behind paywalls, Ed was always more interested in writing for the field—ensuring that his research was used in practice rather than just in the classroom. So, when *Federal Probation* asked us to write a tribute to Ed, it felt like the perfect venue to talk about one of his greatest skills, his ability to translate research to practice. From his first articles for *Federal Probation* in the

1980s, to his 2002 article *"Beyond Correctional Quackery: Professionalism and the Possibility of Effective Treatment,"* to his last, *"A Rejoinder to Dressel and Farid: New Study Finds Computer Algorithm is More Accurate than Humans at Predicting Arrest and as Good as a Group of 20 Lay Experts,"* his writings in *Federal Probation* over the years consistently reflect where he stood throughout his career. As we look over Ed's contributions to *Federal Probation,* three distinct phases begin to emerge that define his professional life: 1) The Beyond Correctional Quackery phase, 2) The Risk Assessment phase, and 3) The Rethinking Corrections phase.

The Beyond Correctional Quackery Phase

In 2002 Ed, Frank Cullen, and Paul Gendreau published "Beyond Correctional Quackery: Professionalism and the Possibility of Effective Treatment" in *Federal Probation.* If you ever heard Ed speak, you likely heard stories of the correctional quackery that takes place in the field of corrections. From a program in Tennessee that trains people incarcerated in marathons to using yoga for domestic violence in Texas, Ed was not shy in calling out professionals for not following science. This is one reason people loved (or hated) Ed Latessa. He was not afraid to challenge even the most-well-intended people if their work was not grounded in what the literature demonstrates to work in reducing recidivism. In fact, he and his colleagues composed a list of 16 of the most questionable theories of crime that are, unfortunately, still found in some of today's programs, including the "Been there, done that" theory or the "It worked for me" theory. Both of these "theories of crime" led to Ed often schooling a room full of practitioners on the difference between anecdotal and empirical evidence. He often joked about anecdotal evidence leaving the audience with one clear piece of advice: "drink more red wine."

Ed was a true follower of the science. He used research to move programs from what felt good to what was effective, improving one program at a time across the country. His initial study on Ohio's halfway houses and community-based correctional facilities (CBCF) led to a sweeping change of Ohio's community corrections system. Yet Ed's reach expanded well beyond the Ohio borders. At the time of his retirement, he had done work in all 50 states and more than 25 different countries. In fact, in his office hung a map of the United States in which Janice (his Executive Assistant) would add a new pushpin every time he returned from a new place. Needless to say, that map was so full of different colored pushpins, they eventually had to get a larger map that spanned the globe.

Ed's travels brought him to many programs that were on the right track, as well as ones he would later rank as "piss-poor." Seeing the disparity between different programs, Ed was always cautious about lumping all programs together into a single category. He learned a lesson from Martinson—not all correctional programs are created equal. This is why Ed spearheaded the development of the Correctional Program Checklist (CPC), a structured organizational assessment designed to help programs categorize their adherence to the research (see Flores et al., 2005; Listwan et al., 2006). The CPC allows programs to assess how well they are grounded in evidence-based interventions and provides a roadmap to help them improve. By 2018, he had trained agencies in 32 states, some with legislative mandates to use the tool to demonstrate program effectiveness over time (Duriez et al., 2018). Over the span of 40 years, it is estimated that Ed had a direct impact on more than 5,000 individual correctional programs, helping them understand the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) concepts, implement effective programming, improve program fidelity, and avoid correctional quackery.

The Risk Assessment Era

Ed truly believed in the importance of following the science, and this included the use of actuarial risk assessments. If you heard one of his talks, you would know all about watermelon thumping—his way of telling judges and practitioners that they weren't very good at measuring risk on their own. He was adamant that without understanding risk, programs could cause more harm than good. Armed with data on how people who are assessed low risk were more likely to do worse in intensive interventions (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004), he pushed judges, legislators, and correctional professionals to take risk into account as they designed their correctional interventions.

Given the importance of the risk principle, Ed often found his work grounded in the developing, validating, implementing, and training of risk assessments. Early in his career, he and his UC colleagues trained on the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) and helped agencies across the country implement risk assessment tools effectively. Ed would travel across the country training correctional staff on the LSI-R, helping them understand how the risk and needs of a person impact success on community supervision. Eventually he amassed a cadre of UC trainers (at first doctoral students, later researchers or practitioners) for the LSI-R and the Youthful Level of Service Inventory (YLSI), ensuring that correctional programs were armed with the best information possible to help people in the corrections system succeed.

Although training over ten thousand practitioners would be a lifetime's work for most, Ed was only getting started. Once agencies began adopting risk assessments, he recognized the importance of inter-rater reliability, using assessments that are valid and that have been normed on their local population, and implementing them in ways that improve outcomes for people in the system (Flores et al., 2005). In 2006, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) approached Ed to create a risk assessment system that spanned the different stages of the criminal justice system (pretrial, post-adjudication, prison intake, and reentry). While recognizing the prominence of the LSI-R at the time, Ed decided that having access to a non-proprietary risk assessment for states and local jurisdictions was important to ensure that every jurisdiction in the state had the capability of measuring risk using a common language (Lowenkamp et al., 2008; Latessa et al., 2010). While some wanted Ed to monetize the assessment, Ed was adamant that the assessment remain free to the field. He wanted to make sure that agency budgets didn't get in the way of providing effective interventions. This was a general theme of Ed's life—generous with his time and resources to ensure that people could do their best work. This concept was adopted by the juvenile justice system in Ohio, with the subsequent development of the Ohio Youth Assessment System (OYAS). Both of these tools have been adopted, validated, and normed by several other states seeking a non-proprietary statewide risk assessment system. Risk assessment is yet another example of Ed's large footprint on moving the field of corrections forward.

The Rethinking Corrections Phase

Often, Ed would have conversations with all of us about what we could do to improve the field. I don't know if it was his proximity to practitioners or his unique ability to identify people's needs, but Ed always had

his hand in creating material to better the corrections space. Among his favorites were EPICS for Influencers (Effective Practices in Community Supervision—EPICS-I)—a community supervision model that identifies a prosocial community support person and teaches that "influencer" core skills within the EPICS model to assist their loved one. Another major product was the Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention curricula (CBI), a set of curricula that have been used in prisons and residential and outpatient programs to help lend structure to the delivery of behavioral interventions that target criminogenic need areas. Ed was always on the forefront of helping to improve the system. In 2012, working with Paula Smith and colleagues, Ed helped create a case review conference model that could be used within departments to help them uncover systemic issues that may have caused a serious event from occurring (Smith et al., 2012). Drawing on the medical field, where they are called mortality and morbidity reviews, this case review conference model helped juvenile probation departments take a systematic look at a serious incident and find ways to improve their system while avoiding casting blame on an individual. These are just a few examples of the works developed under his leadership.

Ed understood that the way to improve the system is through the staff closest to the people. When we look back on his career, his work centered around giving skills to line staff to help improve their delivery of interventions. He always recognized that if we can't provide tools to the people who work with the people in our system, we will never have a positive impact on outcomes. In 2018, Ed co-authored an article in *Federal Probation* that summed up his thinking about how correctional staff should approach their work in a different way. "Probation Officer as a Coach: Building a New Professional Identity" (Lovins et al., 2018) was a piece born out of 20 years of working directly with probation and parole officers in training and implementing core correctional practices. The concept of probation officer as coach resonated with Ed, who always saw himself as a coach. He coached his kids' sports teams. He coached his students. He was a coach for his colleagues—always helping figure out a game plan, creating successful paths forward, knowing when to provide a pat on the back or a kick in the rear. The model of probation officer as coach is now being tested via federal grants, which is exactly as Ed would have it. If the science does not back the theory or concept, time to move on.

Conclusion

Ed always saw the corrections system as a way to help people move on with their lives rather than keeping them stuck. During his 40-year career, Ed was always fighting for how the system should provide pathways back to the community. He believed that once the court process was over, our system's role was no longer to punish people but to help them move forward. He believed every step of the system should help improve the outcomes of people in the system, not become a barrier to success. He saw his role, and that of his students, as creating opportunities for improvement, whether through research, training, curricula, assessment, graduates—all were avenues to help better the field and improve the lives of those working and participating in the justice system.

Sadly, Ed's life was cut short due to pancreatic cancer. He had beat it once, defying all odds, but when it returned, his fate was written. The final year of his life was hard. The pandemic had taken its toll, but people across the world reached out to tell Ed about how great a difference he made in their lives. Judges, practitioners, legislators, government officials, and organizations joined Zoom calls to let Ed know how much he impacted them and their system. And Ed did not forget a face or a name. He took a wealth of knowledge with him when he left this world but left a remarkable legacy—as a great father and husband, an incredible scholar, a loyal friend, a fearless leader, an amazing mentor and teacher, but most of all a **CHANGE MAKER**.

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