Silver Star recipient, Michael R. Bernique, AM ’70, funds a professorship at Chicago Booth

For decades, veteran students have been valued at the University of Chicago for their diversity of experiences, exceptional leadership skills, and great maturity. Their discipline, strong work ethic, and self-confidence frequently put them at the front of the pack—both in the classroom and in their careers.

This was especially true for the late Michael R. Bernique. In 1968, before he enrolled in a master’s program at the university, Bernique, a Lieutenant JG in the Navy, volunteered for duty in Vietnam where he served as a Swift boat commander. Fluent in French, which is often spoken in Vietnam, Bernique was told by a group of friendly Vietnamese that a team of Viet Cong tax collectors was extorting money and supplies a few miles away on the banks of a local canal, an area which was off-limits to American forces. Ignoring that prohibition, Bernique quickly led his crew up the forbidden river, and at a range of less than 100 yards, encountered a band of armed Viet Cong. His surprise maneuver resulted in several Viet Cong casualties and the capture of weapons and intelligence information.

Soon after, when his enemy engagement became known, Bernique was flown to Saigon to explain his actions and why he disregarded regulations, a potential court martial offense. Hearing Bernique’s account, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt commended Bernique’s aggressive move and awarded him the Silver Star. It was key to a change in enemy engagement protocol, Operation SEALORDS, with Swift boats moved from patrolling coastal waters to the inland rivers. In addition, that section of the Rach Gia Thanh River was dubbed Bernique’s Creek on Naval maps in recognition of Bernique’s determined and groundbreaking assault of the enemy.

“At the young age of 25, he had the leadership skills to be a commander, and stood up to Navy regulations with bold action. If he believed in something, he acted on it,” said his widow, Michele (Mimi). “That’s how Michael lived his life.”

The Early Years

Bernique grew up in Fall River, Massachusetts, and spent his early years living with his French grandparents. French became his first language, and through them, he developed an affinity for all things French—he would eventually live in France later in life. He was always a bright child, independent, outspoken, and moved frequently, living in Germany, Massachusetts, California, and Washington, DC.

BERNEQUE REGARDED HIS YEARS AT THE UNIVERSITY AS THE MOST ‘INTELLECTUALLY EXCITING’ TIME OF HIS LIFE.

“He attended ten different schools by the time he graduated from high school,” Mimi said. “It wasn’t until the tall and imposing headmaster at Williston Northampton School took him to task that he straightened out and became focused on his education.”
Despite his atypical schooling, he was extremely well read and innately intelligent, so his Catholic parents urged him to apply to the University of Notre Dame. During his time there, he spent a year in France and earned a Certificat D’Etudes Politiques from Sciences Po, the prestigious Paris Institute of Political Studies. Upon graduation in 1965, Bernique, knowing he had some growing up to do, joined the Navy in their officer candidate program. As a Lieutenant JG, and after destroyer duty in the Atlantic, he volunteered for Vietnam, where his heroic actions earned him a Silver Star.

A UChicago Education Leads to Success in Business

Upon his honorable discharge from the Navy, Bernique went on to earn a master’s degree in international relations from the University of Chicago. He regarded his years at the university as the most ‘intellectually exciting’ time of his life. Hans Morgenthau, the renowned political scientist and expert in international relations, was his favorite professor. He played a very important role in Bernique’s educational experience and, decades after graduation, Bernique remained proud that Morgenthau oversaw his thesis.

“HE LOVED HIS TIME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO. THROUGH THIS GIFT, HE HOPED TO ENSURE THE SCHOOL REMAINS A PLACE THAT HONORS EXCELLENCE.”

—Mimi Bernique

After receiving his advanced degree from the university, Bernique joined IBM and met his first wife, Diana. They lived in various areas throughout the country as Michael pursued higher positions and better opportunities in increasingly important management positions at Exxon, Federal Signal Corporation, Northern Telecom, Motorola, DSC, including president of General Instrument. He retired in the 1990s, and in 2010, Diana died from complications of lifelong diabetes.

Creating a Legacy

In early 2012, soon after he married Mimi, Bernique was diagnosed with squamous facial skin cancer and began a prolonged, brave battle against the disease. By early 2016, he understood his was a fatal illness, and refined his bequest to the University of Chicago, funding the Michael R. Bernique Family Professorship at Chicago Booth.

“Michael had always been impressed that in the World War II years, the university hired Jewish faculty—which he said was not the case with some other high-profile Ivy League universities,” said Mimi. “That, along with his memory of Hans Morgenthau, his belief in capitalism, and entrepreneurship, were all underlying factors in his bequest to Booth.”

“When the doctor came to our home to tell us there was nothing more that could be done to fight his cancer, Michael established a professorship at Booth. He trusted Booth would always uphold its reputation as one of the finest business schools anywhere,” Mimi said.

Always a Warrior

Of her husband’s last days, Mimi said, “he was a warrior in his battle with cancer as he was with everything he took on in life. I would give him another Silver Star for how he handled that long, very difficult walk with cancer. He didn’t complain and kept asking the doctor ‘what do I do next—I want to live.’ He had numerous surgeries, 80 radiation treatments, 75 hyperbaric dives, and multiple sessions of chemo. He just never gave up and yet accepted his final prognosis with great dignity and courage.”

Bernique died in 2016 and was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Mimi makes the journey from California to Arlington to visit his grave each year.

“At his burial, the Naval band, the movement of the casket from the hearse onto the horse-drawn caisson, the march behind him to the gravesite, the graveside service, 21-gun salute, and Taps—it was incredible and such a tribute to him,” she said. “It’s emotional to visit his grave, but such a blessing and honor for me to do so.”

She recently visited the Hyde Park campus for the first time, a trip that she and Michael hoped to make together after his cancer was cured. Mimi enjoyed her time on campus, meeting students, and imagining Michael walking through the Gothic architecture as a young man.

“Michael possessed a prodigious intellect, incisive wit, commanding presence, deep voice, and hearty laugh. He was larger than life.” Mimi said. “He loved his time at the University of Chicago. Through this gift, he hoped to ensure the school remains a place that honors excellence.”