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Barney earned a BA in Philosophy from the Jesuit House of Studies at Loyola University New Orleans, a MA in Philosophy from the University of Toronto, and a JD from Harvard Law School, where he was an editor of the Harvard Law Review and a research assistant to Professor Arthur R. Miller. After law school, he served as a law clerk to Judge John T. Noonan, Jr. of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.