

A Few Good Mentors



By Terrence J. Lavin

Behind every accomplished lawyer is a great mentor. I had Phil Corboy, who was mentored by Jim Dooley, a groundbreaking trial lawyer who wound up being an Illinois Supreme Court judge who wrote decisions that still stand as precedent today. We could track the lineage of all of the great lawyers of today and find people who took the time to give them the benefit of their perspective, criticism, and wisdom.

What makes a good mentor? A good mentor is somebody who cares without being a coddler. A good mentor will make sure that the "apprentice" finds out most answers by herself, rather than spoon-feeding the law and its many curiosities. A great practical teacher of the law truly leads by example and allows his pupil "on the inside" to observe all aspects of the practice of law. A good mentor understands that his "mentee" can learn by osmosis, but only if she is allowed to observe everything in order to absorb everything.

Above all else, a good mentor is a generous professional who is delighted by a protégé's progress rather than being threatened by a sudden burst of talent. This year, as the temporary custodian of this treasured office, I am calling on each of you to summon up your teaching talents and volunteer to be a mentor to a lawyer who needs your generosity and wisdom.

It might be a bright young woman who decided to challenge the odds and set up shop in a strip

mall in suburban Chicago, and who is scared to death about her first real estate closing. It might be a young man who has agreed to defend a friend charged with a misdemeanor arising out of an altercation at a ball game. It might even be a lawyer who has been practicing for 10 years but suddenly finds himself trying a case he thought was going to settle, and he's sweating the reality of jury selection.

The common denominators are need on the part of the pupil and wisdom on the part of the mentor. By the end of this "bar year" we will hopefully have systems in place to allow a form of lawyer matchmaking that will materially benefit both parties in the transaction, not to mention help the people we care about the most - the consumers of legal services.

We need to keep those consumers, our clients, at the forefront of our professional consciousness. When clients are shortchanged, when clients know their lawyer is in over his head, when a lawyer doesn't ask for help because her ego gets in the way, all of us suffer. You don't have to be the administrator of the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission to know that the lawyers who "get in trouble" are those who are rudderlessly navigating through the practice of law. Mary Robinson will tell anybody who cares to listen that virtually all disciplined lawyers lack a mentor. She'll also be the first to acknowledge that lawyers who make ethical mistakes are very seldom attendees at CLE

programs, until they are forced to attend as part of their discipline.

The need for mandatory CLE in Illinois will be the subject of a future missive on this page, but it bears mention here: A good mentor will encourage his pupil to go to every possible program she can in order to become a better lawyer. I have been going to CLE programs for 20 years and I *always* learn something worth knowing.

The devil, as always, is in the details. I can preach all of the pertinent platitudes about the benefits of mentoring, but unless we have a dependable system in place that allows mentees to easily and fearlessly ask for help, this mission will fail. Unless many of you volunteer to serve as mentors, this mission will fail.

I have learned many valuable lessons from failure, but I want to learn something from a successful project of the organized bar when it comes to mentoring. So I'm calling on each of our committees and section councils to establish a subcommittee to begin to form a mentorship infrastructure that will remain a permanent part of our organization. Our Special Committee on Mentoring, capably led by Leonard Amari and Sheila Murphy (along with honorary chair Phil Corboy), will soon present a report with recommendations for the organizational appendages that will be added to our existing structure to facilitate this much-needed service to our members and their clients.

We can't do it without you. We're looking for a few good mentors. ■