

Mentoring in the New Year



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The new year has always been an exciting time in my life. Part of that is due to the fact that New Year's Eve happens to be my birthday. It's a day people relate to as a party day. Celebrations center on sweeping out the old year while ringing in the new. Growing up, I used to say that everyone was just celebrating my birthday. Whichever way you choose to look at it, we all seem to enjoy ourselves on December 31.

In my family, the next day—New Year's Day—consists mostly of relaxing while watching college football and cheering on our favorite teams. More importantly, for those of us whose fiscal year is the same as the calendar year, January 1 signifies starting from scratch—putting the past year behind us and looking forward to a new year that's just as good or even better.

In this article, my reflections on my mentors should illustrate why I consider the simple act of mentoring as important now as it has been in the past, and maybe even more so in the twenty-first century. My experience as a young lawyer convinced me that mentoring is the lifeline of the legal profession.

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It's as important a function, obligation, and duty as anything we do in our profession. Fortunately, I was mentored by some of the best trial lawyers in the state.

On October 11, I was at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law for "Meet the Judges Night," sponsored by the Catholic Lawyers Society of Detroit, the Incorporated Society of Irish American Lawyers, and the Polish American Lawyers Society. I had been invited to give some brief remarks about my role as president of the State Bar of Michigan. I noticed a number of banners hanging from the ceiling that contained quotes from various well-known members of the legal profession. One in particular that caught my attention included the following quote from the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall that I will always remember:

None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody—a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns—bent down and helped us pick up our boots.

The word "mentor" is defined in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* as follows:

- Mentor; 1.) A friend of ODYSSEUS entrusted with the education of ODYSSEUS' son TELEMACHUS;
2.) a: A trusted counselor or guide;
b: Tutor;¹

Webster's *Dictionary and Thesaurus* defines mentor as "a wise and trusted person."² Wikipedia further defines the word mentorship as "a relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person."³

When I look back, I can readily identify the lawyers who took their time to mentor

me. They all made an impression on me and played a major role in making me the attorney I've become. They all had significantly more experience in the practice of law than I did. It was obviously a one-way street back then. They gave me information and knowledge, and I accepted it.

When I first came to Lansing in the summer of 1972, I had only one purpose in mind: starting law school by taking night classes in the newly opened Thomas M. Cooley Law School, beginning with the first class in January 1973. I began looking for a job in the interim. I had heard about a position opening up for a summer intern doing research on a recommendation for the Michigan Consumers Council.

The goal of the project was to come up with a recommendation for legislation on warranties and guarantees. Former state Sen. Lorraine Beebe was looking to fill three positions. Ultimately, she hired two recent University of Michigan Law School graduates and one law school student-to-be—me. And so it was that I had the unique opportunity to begin a summer job working with two gifted young lawyers before I had even started law school.

The law school graduates were minority students at the University of Michigan and classmates all three years in Ann Arbor. Lena had gone to undergraduate school at Radcliffe while Joe had done his undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan. Both attorneys took me under their wings and became not only my first mentors, but also lifetime friends.

Lena and Joe were as different as night and day. Joe grew up in an affluent, well-educated, prominent Lansing family. His father was a well-known dentist and his mother had her doctorate in the educational field. Joe, however, was taught by his parents to

work for everything he was to receive. He was never given anything without having worked for it.

Lena, on the other hand, related stories of growing up in the Deep South and days spent as a young girl working with her family to pick cotton.

I was well aware of my good fortune to have the opportunity to work with Joe and Lena. It was a short, three-month project that came to an end all too quickly. I learned how to research, draft proposals, and participate fully in the project. I listened, wrote, and shared my thoughts with them.

Eventually, Joe got me an interview with a well-respected law firm in Lansing. Dunning and Gibson, P.C., had offered Joe a position and, before the train had left the station, I hopped on and asked Joe if he could get me an interview for a clerk position. I interviewed and was immediately hired as the first white law clerk for the minority-owned firm. I soon found new mentors in Stuart and Ben. Ben was eventually appointed to a judgeship in the United States Federal District Court for the Western District of Michigan by then President Jimmy Carter.

It became obvious to me that mentorship was something that never ended.

Joe continued to introduce me to anybody and everybody as he helped teach me the ropes of the legal profession. He soon introduced me to Dennis, a respected but little-known plaintiff attorney in the city of Detroit who worked for the firm of Charfoos, Christensen, Gilbert, and Archer, P.C. Dennis held the key that opened the door to an entirely new area of the profession for me—the State Bar of Michigan.

After much mentoring and encouragement to get involved, I started attending the Young Lawyers Section meetings. The friends, lawyers, judges, and law students I met convinced me to stay involved in the State Bar.

I sought positions on the Young Lawyers Section Council and was eventually elected chair in 1984. That same year, my mentor, Dennis, became the first person of color to become president of the State Bar of Michigan. The mentorship continued and I grew as a lawyer.

I continued to seek out numerous mentor relationships with older lawyers. Don Reisig, Jack Coté, Bill Kritsellis, Camille Abood, Joe Reid, Leo Farhat, and former Michigan Supreme Court Justice Tom Brennan provided me with the on-the-go education I needed.

It always seemed like a one-way street. They were giving freely and I was taking. How would I ever repay all of the attorneys who mentored me and helped me get to where I am now?

It's simple! I am reminded that it's not a one-way street. What they did for me, I should do for others.

That goes for all of us. The lifeblood of this profession is mentorship. To all of those who took time to be a mentor to me, I can say that I have attempted to be a good mentor to others. So to Michael Dallas, Hillary Eagen, Jessica Fox, Jordan Hoyer, Rhonda Kunkel, Maureen Magras, John McBain, Andrew J. Moore, Jeff Sural, Michael Thomson, Gary Villas, Ward Zielinski, and countless others, including clerical and staff members, I hope I have helped you directly or indirectly in some small way.

The importance of developing a mentor relationship cannot be overstated. I have a sign in my office that reads: "When you get there, remember where you came from." I, for one, will never forget where I came from or those who helped me along the way to get there.

For those who have never mentored, try it. You might find that it develops invaluable relationships of respect and admiration. Your reward is a lifetime of friendship.

Oh, and to Joseph Clinton Canady III (Joe), Dennis Archer, and all of my other mentors, thank you for taking your time to mentor me. I hope you know that I will never forget what you have done for me and a multitude of others for whom I have had the opportunity to do the same.

Take the time to mentor another. It's the one thing in the profession that lasts a lifetime. ■

ENDNOTES

1. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed).
2. *Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus* (1989).
3. Wikipedia, *Mentorship* <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mentorship>> [accessed December 14, 2016].

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