

SBM's New Mentoring Center Looks Forward, Gives Back

By Lynn P. Ingram

When new Michigan attorney Erica Hoodhood went looking for a mentor, she never imagined she'd end up with two. And she certainly did not expect to land a former State Bar president!

But that's what happens when the legal community talks and bar leaders listen.

With the rising number of new lawyers going solo or joining small firms upon graduation from law school, the need for structured mentoring has never been greater, which is why the State Bar recently launched its online Mentoring Center.

State Bar Executive Director Janet Welch said the Mentoring Center's launch was a quick and direct response to a recent wave of member requests.

"We regularly ask our members for feedback, and we typically receive a significant response," Welch said. "In our most recent member survey, we heard a resounding call for a statewide mentoring program to supplement existing local bar programs. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents said they would like to see such a program. We listened, strategized, and responded with this new service."

Current State Bar President Bruce Courtade applauded both the overall call for mentoring and the Bar's responsiveness, and said he thinks the Mentoring Center will be well received and highly beneficial.

"Surveys have shown—and my conversations with lawyers around the state confirm—that our members believe mentoring programs not only provide a meaningful and easy way for established lawyers to give back to the profession, but are also more critical than ever as the number of new attorneys hanging up their own shingle continues to rise," he said.



Former SBM President Julie Fershtman, left, with mentee Erica Hoodhood

Hoodhood, being one of those new attorneys, signed up for both the Mentoring Center and the Grand Rapids Bar Association's mentoring program. And, just like that, she had Foster Swift shareholder (and former State Bar president) Julie Fershtman and Miller Canfield attorney Jeff York by her side.

She said the experience has been "wonderful" and signing up was simple.

"The Mentoring Center website was very easy to navigate and it only took a few minutes to sign up," she said, noting that she simply indicated her location and prac-

tice areas and then waited for a match. It was Fershtman.

She was matched with York through the Grand Rapids bar, and said having both mentors has helped her tremendously.

"Because Jeff and I are both in Grand Rapids, we have been able to meet for lunch to discuss various legal issues on a regular basis," she said. "And Julie and I have met for lunch and corresponded through e-mails and letters. She even sent me a copy of her favorite book before we met. Both Julie and Jeff have been wonderful."

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“The process was surprisingly easy and, of course, was free of charge...I logged on, was prompted to create an account, and then asked to designate myself as a mentor or mentee.”

Fershtman echoed Hoodhood's sentiments about the ease of signing up and the promptness of the match.

“The process was surprisingly easy and, of course, was free of charge,” she said. “I logged on, was prompted to create an account, and then asked to designate myself as a mentor or mentee.”

From there, Fershtman said, she created a profile highlighting her background and practice for potential mentees to see; within a day or two, she received notification that a mentee was interested.

“I responded and we took it from there,” she said.

Courtade said this is how it should work, and explained that the Mentoring Center offers members the opportunity to help the profession in two significant ways.

“First, veteran attorneys can help inexperienced attorneys develop and maintain sound, ethical business practices and avoid inadvertently stepping into minefields that more seasoned attorneys could spot and avoid, and which might reflect poorly on the profession as a whole,” he said.

“Second, mentors can serve as role models of professionalism and civility, thereby encouraging the next generation of lawyers to practice in a way that not only reflects well on our profession but makes the practice of law more enjoyable and less stressful.”

Welch said this is the exact purpose of the Mentoring Center, noting that these opportunities fit the core mission and vision of the State Bar.

“We are always looking for ways to advance the profession and improve relationships between lawyers and the public,” she said. “This program does that.”

As for mentoring in general, York said it's a great feeling to know that you might play a small part in the success of another member of the profession, and he urged other veteran lawyers to give it a try.

“It is an easy way to give back to the profession that has provided your livelihood,” he said, “and it's fun to be around young, eager professionals who bring a fresh perspective to the practice.”

In one of her final blogs as State Bar president, Fershtman may have said it best when referring to the Mentoring Center: “Take my advice,” she said, “Don't wait any longer.” ■

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The State Bar of Michigan Mentoring Center Becoming a Mentor or Mentee*

1. Click on “Mentoring Center” under the Member Services tab on the SBM home page (michbar.org).
2. Choose “Mentor” or “Mentee.”
3. Create a user name and password, then verify via e-mail.
4. Log in and click “Create New” to create your profile.
5. Provide basic information about your location, employment, practice area, and experience level.
6. Be sure to take advantage of the “Keywords” and “Summary” boxes. This is where you can really describe yourself, your interests, and what you're looking for in a mentor or mentee. It also ensures the best possible match.
7. You can also provide links to your website, online profile, publications, and more.
8. Click “Save.”
9. You're in! Now you can search for potential mentors or mentees by location or keyword or view additional resources for using the Mentoring Center. You can also view system-generated matches or simply wait for a mentor or mentee to contact you.
10. You take it from there; the scope of the relationship is up to you!

Good luck!

*The entire sign-up process typically takes 5–10 minutes.