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Instilling Civility and
Professionalism
Through Mentoring—
from Law School
to Retirement

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Dear Young Attorney

BY BOBBIE MONROE BANKSTON

I have a lot of hopes for you. You are at the beginning of a very long and demanding career, one I hope you enjoy and find rewarding and fulfilling. Even though you may not realize it now, there is still a lot to learn. Now is the time to look around you and find people who are successfully navigating the very waters you are now entering and learn from their experience.

At this stage in your career, you may not realize the importance of having a mentor in your life. You may be wondering exactly what a mentor is and what the relationship would look like, and if it is something that could benefit you. You may even think it is too difficult to find these people and put them in place, or think you don't have time to pursue this kind of relationship.

Although there are different kinds of mentoring relationships, in its simplest terms, a mentor is an informal teacher, someone who takes an interest in you and gives you guidance and assistance. A mentor also allows you a glimpse into their daily life in order to make your own run a little smoother. A mentor is not someone who does your work for you, someone to give you a fast answer, or listen to your complaints about work or a friend to "hang out with." A mentor is a special person in your life. They are worth seeking out.

As a more experienced attorney, I can now look back and see the positive impact having mentors had on my life and career. I have been fortunate to have several mentors in different areas of my life and at different times, four of whom stand out as

teaching and imparting particularly valuable lessons that I could not have experienced elsewhere.

As you begin your legal journey, not only do I hope you find mentors, but I hope you find these four particular mentors in your life.

Aunt Rita

Growing up, I spent my summers with my aunt in New Orleans. It was only an hour from my very small, very rural town, but it could have been days away, as different as it was. Aunt Rita was different from my other aunts. She wore makeup, heels, and jewelry everyday. She didn't watch television, didn't cook, and met Uncle Mike at the door every day at 5:30 with a kiss. She had constant instruction for me ("stand up straight, go to college, and for crying out loud, would it kill you to put on some lipstick?") and constant encouragement.

Some of the highlights of my young life were the summers spent at Aunt Rita's house. I was particularly enamored with her "office," a bedroom down the hall from mine where she had a desk and bookcases that held her trophies and awards earned for exceeding sales goals in her career as a

Tupperware representative. I loved looking at the different awards and accolades she received and she loved to tell me all about each one. I was a captive audience. She spent a lot of time telling me what a special little girl I was, that I could do and be anything, and imparting the importance of setting, meeting, and exceeding every goal put in front of me. She also allowed me to see a lifestyle that I would not have been exposed to anywhere else.

I hope you find a mentor who exposes you to a different lifestyle, another way of accomplishing things, broadens your experiences, and encourages you to do your best in all things.

Law School Professor

A few days before I began my second year of law school, I showed up at the door of a professor answering an ad for a research assistant position. I couldn't leave fast enough when I realized it was a tax professor office. I was evidently not fast enough as I was hired on the spot. The professor, dismissing my self-assessment that I was not the right person to assist in writing a book on tax law, was busy jotting down my first assignments. No amount of protesting worked. I became a research assistant for a tax professor, apparently whether I wanted it or not.

That was the year I spent a lot of time sitting alone on the fourth floor of the law library, where no one else goes, in the dusty stacks of tax codes. When I wasn't on the fourth floor, I was bringing my assignments to her house, where she often wanted me to sit and talk. All of these talks were liberally peppered with encouragement. She was constantly telling me, "You can do it. Sign up for the harder classes. Keep a good attitude. Take every opportunity that comes your way. You're a bright girl."

With her constant encouragement, for a short time, I thought I would become a tax attorney. But, when I was no longer in her constant flow of praise, it just didn't happen. After I left law school there was a few notes back and forth between us—my wedding invitation and a quick note to say how much I disliked my first job. She wrote back to say it wasn't too late to get an LLM in taxation. I laughed out loud when I read it.

Several years later, one beautiful afternoon, I returned to my law school campus and found my way to a large meeting room. I wish I were going to her office one more time, to chat, to listen to more of her stories, to bask in the bright glow of her encouragement and praise. Instead, I joined other former students assembling for her memorial service. She passed very quickly and quietly. Never letting anyone know she was ill and not allowing for any long, dramatic drawn out goodbyes either.

I hope you find a mentor who will involve themselves in your life, invite you to sit and talk then lavish you with encouragement and praise, and believe in your abilities more than you do yourself.

Woman at Bible Study

What's the best way to meet people when you are new to a large city? I joined the largest church and participated in a lot of events. When I joined a women's Bible studies class, the first event scheduled was a social at a restaurant. I naturally looked around the room and gravitated toward a well-dressed woman who looked friendly. I then spent the entire evening explaining that I was in law school, and law school is very difficult, and how much trouble I was having finding my first summer law clerk job. I went on and on while the nice lady just patiently lent an ear and didn't say much. She kept quiet until the following morning bright and early when she called me and introduced herself, as an attorney, then offered me my first summer law clerk position. I had the pleasure of spending my first summer job in her office watching her in action, noting how organized her files were, how she balanced a successful career with a happy marriage and how much she cared about each of her clients. It was eye-opening. I had never known anyone who could "do it all" like she did and make it seem possible for me to do so as well.

I hope you find a mentor who will allow you to look into their life then help you learn how you can be successful too, and what practicing law can look like in a practical manner.

Federal Judge

I was first invited to join the Dean Henry George McMahon American Inn of Court during my first year as an attorney. My first pupillage group was chaired by the founding member of the Inn, Judge John V. Parker (Ret.). I was an inexperienced attorney and unsure what to do with myself both inside and outside the courtroom. Not only did Judge Parker personally call me to welcome me to the Inn, but he also invited me to have lunch in his office. Can you imagine how special I felt to have a federal judge call me to welcome me into the Inns or how nervous I was to be invited to have lunch in his chambers? I was even more nervous than you can imagine. I wondered, what topics I would have to talk to a federal judge about? I wondered if it was too late to take etiquette classes? I wondered which fork should be used with which course? All my nervousness melted away after only a few minutes with the very warm and personable Judge Parker (and being served BBQ sandwiches from the greasy spoon down the road from courthouse). In

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fact, several other lunch invitations came from the judge, all of which involved sharing his wisdom and experience—and BBQ sandwiches. Those lunches made an impression on me. I realized how noble this profession is, that others are impressed with our knowledge, put us on a platform, and look to us to help solve their problems, and how important it is to reach out to others to make them feel welcome and at ease in this new career.

I hope you find a mentor to help you feel the importance of your calling as an attorney and help you realize what an amazing experience this career can be.

I also hope you are not too hasty in deciding that you have no time for mentor relationships or that you just do not need a mentor in your practice or in your life. Mentors will teach you things that you will never

learn any other way. Having trouble finding mentors? I suggest finding someone you admire in the legal profession and inviting them to coffee to discuss an area of law you are interested in. One of the best places to look for a mentor is at an American Inns of Court meeting. You will find a group of judges and lawyers who are committed to excellence in the legal profession as well as offering mentoring opportunities in order for you to reach your excellence in the profession as well. I hope to see you there. ♦

Fondly,

An older attorney

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