

Mentors as...Big-Picture Thinkers

By John E. Sands, Esq., Master of the Bench

I am forever indebted to two able-bodied seamen from Savannah, GA who took me under their wings in 1960 when I shipped out as a deckhand on a Cities Service tanker: Frank “Jellybean” Nelson and Benny “Porkchop” Brinson. It was the most useful educational experience of my life, and, as a Princeton and Yale Law alumnus, I’ve had some dandies.

Among many important things, they taught me what I call the common denominator of mankind: everyone wants respect, and it doesn’t reduce me to give it. That lesson has served me well, as I use it every day in my arbitration and mediation practice. Porkchop and Jellybean also summed up the concept of interest-based bargaining in a single sentence: “We all slop from the same trough.” (And, thanks to them, I can still tie a bowline knot in one second, and my gutter vocabulary remains impressive upon appropriate occasions.)

The partners who mentored me as a baby lawyer were Bertram Perkel and Andrew McEvoy. They taught me the ins and outs of practice, strategic thinking, and effective writing, all lessons that have served me well. As General Counsel of New York City’s Office of Labor Relations, I paid forward their lessons and the benefits of my own experience. As a professor of law I did the same for my students, passing on what I hadn’t learned in law school about how the practice of law actually works, and how to determine and serve client needs effectively.

Finally, as an arbitrator and mediator, I ran the NYSBA Labor and Employment Law Section’s Arbitrator Mentoring Program for ten years. The program “hatched” dozens of new arbitrators, many of whom are now members of the National Academy of Arbitrators and have their own successful practices. I still take on one or two fledgling arbitrators each year and enjoy sharing the knowledge others have passed on to me. The monthly meetings of our Sidney Reitman Employment Law American Inn of Court continue to provide those kinds of opportunities.

The bottom line of mentoring for me is that the success of my mentees is what I call the deferred compensation of teaching – that plus the pleasure of fond memories on both sides of the mentoring relationship. Mentoring isn't about the mentor; it is about the mentee. Your job as mentor is to help your mentees find and hone their own gifts and styles so that they can become better lawyers. It is not to create a clone of yourself. Respect your mentees. Allow them to grow. Earn their respect.