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The Power of Mentoring

BY JOHN CANNIZZARO

“It still makes me emotional thinking about it.” These words come from Florida Supreme Court Justice Fred Lewis as he reflects on his mentor. Since being admitted to the bar 40 years ago, Justice Lewis still has fond memories of his mentor, Miami attorney Ed Perse. Even though Mr. Perse is deceased, Justice Lewis regularly talks to members of his family and still visits them. In speaking to Justice Lewis, he recounted to me a moving experience where he assisted Perse in walking to his office to get his mail one last time. Justice Lewis is very passionate about having positive mentors, as he is well aware that his relationship with his mentor was life-altering for him.

Justice Lewis believes that he was very lucky to find such a mentor that has had a life-long impact on him. Justice Lewis encourages each of us to seek out mentors that have the highest levels of professionalism and character. In his words, “honesty and openness” are two important factors when looking for a mentor who can potentially have a substantial influence in our legal careers, and quite possibly our lives as a whole.

A good mentoring partnership should begin promptly in law school. Many law schools have mentoring programs. One of the more successful mentoring programs can be found at the University of California Hastings College of the Law. The

director of the mentoring program, Phil Marshall is passionate about mentoring, and has been working with the school’s mentoring program more than 15 years. He and his staff have cultivated a mentoring program with more than 1,000 mentors in more than 12 different countries.

The program works seamlessly between the students and the mentors. Students who are interested in the mentoring program, first attend an orientation meeting, which allows Marshall to go over the goals of the mentoring process and detail what is expected of both the students and the mentors. Once the students have attended this meeting, they research the potential mentors and make a list of mentors

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in whom they are interested. The research is done mostly through the social media website, LinkedIn. For mentors who choose not to be on LinkedIn, a complete directory is available for students to browse.

Once the student has a list of possible mentors, he or she meets with Marshall and discusses the choices. Numerous factors are important to the students in selecting a mentor. Some students might be interested in older or younger mentors in a variety of practices with diverse cultural, ethnic, and legal backgrounds. While some students attempt to “match” some traits with their mentors, the best mentoring relationships are sometimes formed between two completely different individuals. It is these relationships that, once fostered, can have a powerful effect on both parties.

Marshall works with the students to help them select mentors, but allows the students to make their own final decision. Students learn that it is okay to have numerous mentors and that if one mentoring relationship does not work out, they are encouraged to try another mentor. There are certainly intangible factors at work as well. “Some of the best mentoring occurs because personalities mesh well. It is really the chemistry between the two”, says Marshall in explaining the success of the program.

Law school students are certainly not the only ones who can benefit from a positive mentoring program. Law firms, large and small, have been developing and implementing mentoring programs for many years. One mentoring program that needs to be highlighted is the mentoring program headed up by Mr. Tom Colis, who is in charge of the Miller Canfield firm’s mentoring program.

The mentoring program at Miller Canfield, led by Tom Colis, a principal in the firm’s Detroit office, is designed for newly hired associates, whether they just graduated law school or are a lateral hire. The purpose of the mentoring program is to provide an experience that is, as Colis says, “more focused, less stressed, and to give them a better idea of their career goals.”

The program works hand in hand with the recruitment efforts of the firm. All new associates have mentoring opportunities set up for them prior to their first day, which helps to ensure a smooth transition into the practice.

The firm initially assigns two mentors to the new associate, an associate mentor and a principal mentor. The associate mentor is usually a younger associate who can easily relate to the new associate and assist him or her with day-to-day tasks and help him or her get acclimated to the new environment. The principal mentor is a partner in the firm who provides the associate with further reaching mentoring experience.

The principal mentor helps the associate learn about the firm, and particular legal practice areas, as well as introduces the associate to the movers and shakers in the practice. The program runs for the first few years an associate is with the firm.

One of Colis’s biggest successes with the firm’s mentoring program is his ability to “get the mentoring program out in front.” Colis has branded the firm’s mentoring program with its own logo, letterhead, events, and receptions. The entire firm is invested in the mentoring program, which helps to keep the associates happy with their jobs. The associates in turn want to learn more about the firm and what they can do to advance, not only in the firm as partners, but also in their legal paths. Yearly seminars for both mentors and mentees are held as well as receptions following these events. All of the mentoring events are well attended and Colis is always looking for ways to improve the program.

Besides law firms having mentoring programs, some states now require a mentoring program. One of the most innovative bar association mentoring programs is the State Bar of Georgia’s Transition Into Law Practice Program (TILPP). Heading the program is Tangel King, who is very pleased with how the program has developed. The program itself began with a pilot program and has been more than 15 years in the making.

King is very excited with the program and the great resources that it provides, and says that “the goal of the program is to guide new attorneys to acquire practical skills, judgment, and professional values necessary to practice law.” To make this goal a reality, the program provides all new lawyers with access to an experienced lawyer who teaches the practical skills, seasoned judgment, and sensitivity to ethical and professionalism values.

The program is not a cookie cutter type of program and encompasses a variety of legal jobs, including mentoring to the lawyer who is not yet employed. There are three varieties of mentoring within the program: inside mentoring for those in large firms or public service; outside mentoring for those in small or solo firms; and group mentoring for those who are not yet employed. One of the best parts of the program is the freedom given to law firms in developing mentoring programs themselves, so long as their programs comply with the State Bar of Georgia’s rules. In this manner, each program is unique and focused on the best possible style that matches a firm’s identity. King has the ability to view each firm’s program and can assist the firms as well as any individuals navigating the required steps.

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King has received numerous requests to help with other states' mentoring programs as well as from other countries around the world that are interested in Georgia's mentoring program. She prides herself on the fact that, since the existence of the program, there has been a drop in complaints to Georgia's Bar. While the Georgia Bar has been very proactive in dealing with ethics and professionalism as a whole, there is no denying that the mentoring program is an important component to the process.

Regardless of when you begin your mentoring journey, there are some things to reflect upon in the process. In talking to Ida Abbott, one of the pre-eminent experts in the field of mentoring and career development, I was able to get some valuable input.

Abbott breaks down mentoring into two levels: skills development and career advancement. She suggests thinking of mentoring as a pyramid, with sponsorship at the top of the pyramid. Sponsorship is when a mentor really stands up to bat for the younger attorney, and is able to help get the position in the firm the attorney is seeking or the legal job to which the attorney aspires.

There is a vested interest in promoting and hiring the best attorneys out there—it makes our profession that much better. Abbott suggests that each attorney have his or her own board of mentors, similar to a board of directors. She encourages a variety of mentors and suggested mentors do not necessarily

have to be lawyers. Each mentor plays a vital role in our development as lawyers, whether a partner in our firm, an attorney on the other side of the aisle, or someone we have only read about and admire.

"Most attorneys are more helpful in providing mentorship opportunities than you think," says Abbott. Most attorneys are flattered to be contacted about being a mentor. Before working to establish mentoring opportunities, one of the most important steps Abbott describes is "self-awareness." An attorney should identify the direction of his or her legal career and what goals are needed to achieve this. Prior to developing a mentoring team it is also important to understand that mentoring relationships will change as an attorney advances in his or her career. The path from law school graduate to practicing law and career advancement will change as you follow it and different mentoring experiences will be invaluable to your continued success.

In conclusion, we all should be proactive in seeking mentoring opportunities. We need to be willing to work with attorneys who seek our assistance. Whether it be in law school, through a formal program, or an informal meeting, the power of mentoring is a great force in our legal profession. We have the ability to shape attorneys' views on our practice areas, professionalism, and ethics. Through mentoring there is hope for all of us to reach our full potential. ♦

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