

Professionalism Committee

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Find A Mentor, Be A Mentor

[Editors' Note: This article is a collaborative effort of the Professionalism Committee's Articles Subcommittee.]

Find a Mentor

What are the realities?

In this extraordinary time in our State's economic history, North Carolina is nonetheless facing an increasing number of new lawyers graduating from an increasing number of law schools. At the same time, because of the economic down turn a lot of firms are downsizing and the job market is tougher than it has been in quite some time. Many lawyers are graduating from law school, passing the bar exam and hanging out their own shingles in the absence of an offer from a firm or other employer. This is the right time to think about mentoring.

Why should a young lawyer want a mentor?

The nice thing about mentors is that with the benefit of an older and more skilled lawyer, a new lawyer can learn on a rapid learning curve many things about the area of the law where he or she intends to practice, and more importantly, many things about what it is like to be a good lawyer. You could spend days and days reading books about how to throw a curve ball in baseball, or you could go out to a vacant lot with a pitcher and see how it is done in about 15 minutes. When sorting through the complexities of the practice of law, it can be a challenge to discern the operative question, let alone the answer to that question. Many real-world topics, such as understanding people and running a practice, do not receive a lot of attention in law school. A lot of these things are learned in the school of "hard knocks." New lawyers have every reason in the world to look for a mentor to assist them in transitioning from inexperienced and uninformed to wise and experienced practitioners. There is no shame in seeking out a mentor. Scratch

under the surface of any great Wake County lawyer and you will find evidence of her own mentor from an earlier day. Several lawyers interviewed for this article indicated their mentoring relationships have lasted longer and are stronger than they could possibly have imagined at the time.

How can a young lawyer find help?

Many firms have formal mentoring programs. The North Carolina State Bar is currently considering programs and grappling with how to help prepare new licensees for the practice of law. The Professionalism Committee of the Wake County Bar Association and Tenth Judicial District Bar is considering a joint effort with Campbell University School of Law to develop a formal mentoring program.

If you are not with an employer who has built-in mentoring, you don't have to wait for these other programs to develop. Right now you can take advantage of the WCBA Young Lawyers Division's Silent Partners Program. You can sign up or request more information by contacting Rebecca Redwine at (919) 755-0025 or Rebecca@eghs.com.

Another good resource to consider for guidance is the North Carolina State Bar's ethics hotline which can be reached at (919) 828-4620.

Mentoring is a benefit many practitioners enjoy by getting together on a regular basis to focus on issues specific to certain practice areas (see for example the regular meetings advertised in the *Wake Bar Flyer* for family lawyers, criminal lawyers, real property lawyers, and legislative lawyers). Similarly, other organizations provide an opportunity to meet such as the Christian Legal Society and Wake Women Lawyers. These gatherings are opportunities to get to know other lawyers who have experience or share an interest in the same area of law.

Also, our bar association is taking ad-

vantage of social media tools such as Facebook@: <http://www.facebook.com/search/?ref=search&q=wake%20county%20bar%20association&init=quick#/group.php?gid=63429624958&ref=search&sid=100000874586693.881501789..1> and LinkedIn@: <http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=2219334&trk=anet ug hm#> where questions can be posed and issues discussed. Other bar associations such as the North Carolina Bar Association and Advocates for Justice have listservs for different practice areas where members can ask questions and seek advice.

Additionally, a number of different indexes provide information about lawyers who specialize in the various practice areas (even the yellow pages!) so that even if you have no direct connection with another lawyer or group of lawyers, you could research local experienced lawyers with an interest in the practice area that interests you. You may also find a mentor in opposing counsel or in other settings (for example an attorney you see trying a case at the court house or presenting at a legal education program.)

How should a meeting proceed?

First, identify a prospective mentor and make contact. Request a meeting at a place and time convenient for him or her, whether that is lunch or stopping for coffee in the morning before work. If you have a few extra dollars lying around (not always the case with new lawyers) offer to buy her coffee or a sandwich. Make a list of things you are interested in knowing. If you have a list, you are more likely to focus your conversations on things that will be of direct benefit to you. Ask him about things that are rewarding or that have worked well in his practice. Ask her about things she considers to be the biggest trapdoors, obstacles or dangers in her practice, or how she balances her personal life and her law practice. Ask him when he is going to be in court or a similar public environment where

you could learn something by watching him in action (maybe taking a deposition, trying a case or working his way through a closing or mediation). If you do not get along with a particular person, move on and try to find somebody who is compatible. Not all match-ups will be perfect. Try to avoid making your first meeting one to handle a current disaster or on-going tragedy. One good reason to use a mentor is to avoid such situations at the front end! Senior lawyers might be more hesitant to take the time to meet and address particulars of situations if they feel that they are simply being tapped for free legal advice on an isolated matter. Rather, preventive prospective advice and guidance is always the better course.

Get Started!!

The important thing is to take the first step and decide that you would like to get some advice from somebody older and more experienced. That is the big step. Everything else is easy. Finding a mentor is easy if you decide you want to have one. The reasons for doing it are numerous.

Be a Mentor

Why is mentoring important?

We're very fortunate to practice in Wake County. Our local bar is recognized nationally – really, we have the ABA's Gambrell Professionalism Award to prove it – for being cordial and professional. This did not happen by accident. The lawyers who came before us set the tone. They served as our role models and coaches. We learned to advocate for our clients' best interests without getting personal or being underhanded. Our local lawyers know that practicing law is difficult enough, and that with trust, professionalism, and sometimes a little grace, life is better. We also learned that "what goes around comes around," and that our own reputations and careers are a culmination of our choices. Norms are fragile and can change in a short time (perhaps all the shorter given the speed of e-mail and Blackberrys®). Now, it's our turn to set the tone with the next generation of lawyers.

Why me? The better question is why not me?

If you've read this far into this article, then you probably recognize that we have something special here in Wake County. Preserving that is in all of our best interests. Your actions can make a huge difference in the quality of a young lawyer's practice and the practice of law in Wake County as a whole. For those who are more legalistic, consider this analogy -- just as lawyers are to provide pro-bono services, it is our duty as experienced lawyers to mentor other lawyers who are asking for or are in need of guidance. Indeed, Rule 6.1(b)(2) of the Rules of Professional Conduct was amended in January to clarify that pro bono service includes participation in activities that improve the legal profession. Mentoring falls into that category and can be a component of meeting the 50-hour annual and aspirational goal promoted by the North Carolina State Bar.

How much time will mentoring take?

Like anything, you can expect to get out of it what you put into it. Doing it right will require at least some time and effort. Clearly, some "mentees" will need less guidance than others. That being said, meeting for lunch once or twice per year is probably not "mentoring." Instead, mentoring has more to do with being available to provide timely guidance. Mentoring can lead to a career-long journey with a lawyer who becomes a trusted friend and advisor. Mentoring also benefits the experienced lawyer in giving him an opportunity to refocus on what is important and reflect on the key ingredients in being a good lawyer.

How do I start?

The first step is to be open to situations and opportunities where you can serve as a mentor. Look for opportunities on bar committees, listservs and social media outlets (remember WCBA is on Facebook@: <http://www.facebook.com/search/?ref=search&q=wake%20county%20bar%20association&init=quick#/group.php?gid=63429624958&ref=search&sid=100000874586693.881501789.1> and LinkedIn®: http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=2219334&trk=anetug_hm#).

Next, do not assume that the "mentee" has the burden of seeking out a mentor. Perhaps the mentee perceives that you are too busy or too important to take the time to be a mentor to her. You can reach out to a younger lawyer to establish a mentoring relationship. Make contact and make yourself available. Reaching out can be as simple as inviting him to have lunch or coffee with you; sitting with a new lawyer at the bar luncheon or CLE or asking him to join a committee on which you serve.

Third, contact Rebecca Redwine at (919)755-0025 or Rebecca@eghs.com to let her know of your interest in the WCBA YLD's mentoring program. Also stay tuned to the *Wake Bar Flyer*, the bar luncheons, and the WCBA's website: www.wakecounty-bar.org as opportunities will be mentioned there as well.

Be ready.

The class of 2010 will be here in six months!