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Mentoring: A Two-Way Street

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Not long ago I asked my assistant, Matt, to look up something in the Virginia Code. Matt, who has worked for me as a law clerk for three years, had just received his JD two days before. Matt said he would get on Lexis and find it right away. I stopped him and suggested that looking under “Appeal and Error” in the Michie’s Code index might be quicker. “What’s that?” Matt asked. I looked at him and said, “I can’t believe I get to give a brand-new JD his first look at the actual bound volumes of the Code of Virginia. Three years of law school and you’re telling me you’ve never looked up the Code in a book? I can’t wait to tell my buddies in the Senior Lawyers Conference about this. They’ll think it’s a hoot.”

Matt didn’t skip a beat. “I hope you can round up enough carrier pigeons. A lot of them can’t deal with e-mail.”

My encounter with Matt brought home the real joys of mentoring law students and new lawyers. If they have learned anything from me, I have learned more from them. Thanks to my student assistants, I have learned how to substitute e-mail for most letters, learned time-saving shortcuts in Microsoft Word, mastered the Palm Pilot, found more free Internet legal research sites than I can use, and opened my first—and last—IM (instant messaging) account.

I have also learned that this generation of lawyers looks at our profession differently than ours did. They face a completely different set of pressures. Many feel trapped by student loans which limit the employment choices they can make. Their anticipated “career path” resembles hopscotch more than it does a steady progression of accomplishment leading to a secure partnership in an established law firm.

Ironically, law students and new lawyers have much to teach us about how we approach our own careers in this changing legal environment. They understand that developing their skills and abilities is their career. They have looked at the attrition rates in large firms, the changing ratios of partners to associates and the increasing uncertainty of the “secure” position in any firm. Consciously or not, they make decisions which keep their options open as long as possible. This means they are always keeping an eye out for their next employment opportunity. Rather than fearing change, they expect it.

Although I don’t necessarily agree with everything they’ve taught me, I do pay attention to their observations and points of view. Many of the executives and lawyers I’ve represented over the years would have done well to pay more attention to these observations. Business and law practice today are quite different from the models which formed and informed senior lawyers. When we become involved as mentors to those entering our profession, we can pass on our best traditions: civility, integrity, effective advocacy, ethical practice and sound judgment. At the same time we learn new attitudes, new technologies and new ways of approaching the professional challenges of today.

Our becoming mentors to law students and new lawyers certainly benefits them, but often we gain even more. We can become renewed and re-energized in our own practice. Mentoring offers rewards for all involved. It’s not just another way to serve others. It’s a way to do something for ourselves. ■

Senior Lawyers Conference CLE



On May 10, 2005, Frank O. Brown Jr. of the Senior Lawyers Conference presented a two hour ethics CLE to the Alexandria Bar Association in the American Legion Hall in Alexandria. Pictured above are some of the attendees, each of whom received a copy of the *Senior Citizens Handbook*, in addition to the course materials. The program, “Protecting Your And Your Clients’ Interests In The Event Of Your Disability, Death Or Other Disaster,” may be presented either as a one hour or two hour CLE, and is approved for full ethics credit. This is an ongoing program of the SLC, as a service to the Bar. If your local bar association wishes to schedule this program, please call Pat Slinger, VSB SLC Liaison, at (804) 775-0576.