

CHAIR'S REPORT



ELIZABETH E. MACK

Go On, Be a Mentor

DON'T GENERALLY USE A CONVENTIONAL BRIEFCASE. Day to day, I carry something more like a book bag, or what is now marketed as a “tote.” I also favored book bags over backpacks in college and law school. For depositions, trial, or a very paper intensive meeting, I may also wheel a brief case behind me, but my book bag is invariably on my shoulder with my legal pad and essential notes and cases in it. One of my law school professors and mentors, Martha Minnow, warned me about book bags. “Brief cases rarely spill their contents,” she cautioned in a concerned voice, “but overfilled book bags often reveal all sorts of personal items at all the wrong moments.”


Professor Minnow, who taught family law and supervised the family law clinic, was absolutely right. Her words have stuck with me, and I am very cautious about my book bag, how it sits and what a passer by, or opposing counsel, or even a client can see by a glance into it. So while I did not adopt Professor Minnow’s no “book bag” rule, I did take to heart everything she said and modified my style to work for me.

Mentors provide advice not just on the law but on living life as a lawyer. It may be about a book bag, it may be about time management, it may be about big firm life, or life as a solo practitioner. We all need mentoring. I have learned so much from my mentors: the Honorable Sidney A. Fitzwater, Chief Judge of the United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, for whom I clerked some 20 years ago, who personified a scholarly and fair approach to the law; the Honorable T. John Ward, United States District Judge for the Eastern District of Texas, who, when he was in private practice, taught me how to be fearless in trial and how to win; Justice Elizabeth Lang Miers of the 5th Court of Appeals, who (also when she was in private practice) taught me how to stay calm even when you find yourself in a ditch (literally—off of Highway 80 near Tyler) and how to juggle parenting and a trial practice; Rick Addison, who taught me almost everything I know about environmental litigation and many non-legal life lessons; and my parents, Theodore Mack (also a lawyer) and Ellen Mack, both of whom taught me how to think and gave me every opportunity they could, sometimes even at great sacrifice to themselves.

I am the lawyer I am today from observing, listening, and integrating my mentors' advice into my practice and making it work for me. (Dad, I will never forget taking a walk with you just before I left for law school, and what you told me during that walk: "A lawyer knows many things; a great lawyer integrates that knowledge and uses it wisely.") I am a better person, too, for the time my mentors took to befriend and teach me. Mentoring takes time, care, and a little bit of chemistry. It is not about lecturing (although there is some of that); it's about showing and doing and explaining and listening. I only hope that I am as good a mentor to other lawyers as my mentors continue to be to me.

There is no substitute for one-on-one mentoring. However, group mentoring can be beneficial too. As part of the Litigation Section's Mentoring Program, we partner with the State Bar of Texas Law Student Division to organize and present mentoring discussions at host law schools throughout Texas. The Program is casual, occurs over lunch, and allows law students to interact with local practicing lawyers in informal settings to discuss various aspects of litigation practice. Many of the law students' questions highlight the need for mentoring. For example, this oft-repeated question: "I am in my first semester in law school-- how do I improve my chances to get a job after law school?"

If you have contact with a law student or young lawyer who needs a friend, take a moment. Invite him for coffee, talk about your life with a sprinkle of law, or if you prefer, talk about the law with a shot of life. It will help him, it will help our profession, and you will feel good for having done it.



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