

MENTORING IN YOUR RETIREMENT

Congratulations if you have reached that point in your career when you are planning to retire. It is a time of joy and pride for all you have accomplished, but it is also a time of sadness and regret for leaving the profession you love. Let me make a suggestion – do not leave the profession entirely. We need your experience, counsel, and professionalism. You can, and depending on your circumstances, should remain active as a mentor or volunteer.

Webster defines a mentor as “a trusted counselor or guide.” Approximately eight hundred (800) new lawyers are admitted to practice law in North Carolina each year. A significant percentage of those lawyers join firms that provide mentoring assistance to young lawyers. However, a growing number of lawyers each year begin as sole practitioners or as small firms, usually with other members of their law school class. Most of these sole practitioners do not have a mentor, but they all need one.

Lawyers who have recently passed the North Carolina Bar Exam know more law than at any other time in their career. However, in spite of all of the knowledge they may have gained from books and computers, they have no experience “practicing law.” These new lawyers need a mentor during their first few years of practice.

You may have been a great baseball or softball player in your youth, but you needed a coach or a mentor to teach you the importance of a bunt or a hook slide. You may have had a great voice, but until your choir director or your musically inclined mentor taught you the importance of harmony, you would not have achieved your full potential as a singer. At each new phase or endeavor of your life, the guidance and experience given to you by a parent, a teacher, or an older lawyer was invaluable. Law books and statutes do not always teach us the right way to handle a difficult situation.

Senator Robert B. Morgan was an honoree and the speaker at this year’s Fifty-Year Lawyer Luncheon sponsored by the N. C. State Bar. Senator Morgan reflected on many things from his illustrious career, but one of his humorous anecdotes reminded me of mentoring. Senator Morgan said, “It’s a sorry dog that won’t wag his own tail every now and then.” We need some of you “old dogs” to teach some of our “new dogs” your “tricks” and in the process, wag your own tail a little.

Remember the first time you were faced with a difficult ethical question? Do you remember the anxiety that accompanied any of the following:

- Your first meeting with a client;
- Your first loan closing;
- Your first court appearance;
- Your first jury trial;
- Your first appellant argument;
- Your first will and estate plan;
- Your first contract; and
- Your first staff meeting?

Much of the stress caused by any of the above situations could be greatly reduced if the newly licensed attorney had access to a mentor. If you and your friends have breakfast or lunch at the same table in the same restaurant every week, invite a young lawyer to join you for a meal. Young lawyers love to hear “war stories,” particularly those that have gotten better with age. If your hobby is fishing, take a new lawyer with you the next time you “wet a line,” and explain the similarities between waiting for a jury to return with a verdict, and waiting for that five-pound bass to take the bait.

Young lawyers trying to balance their time between a law practice and small children need a mentor who can relate to those situations. The dynamics of handling several difficult matters simultaneously has not changed. Your experience in dealing with these matters can be comforting and reassuring.

Mentors can be the profession’s greatest ambassadors for professionalism. An explanation of the importance of civility by an older lawyer carries great weight with a new lawyer. They need to understand the importance of a handshake before and after a trial. They need to return all phone calls within twenty-four hours. As a mentor, you could explain the importance of *pro bono* and public service.

Finally, you could explain the history of our great profession, and why it is so important for new lawyers to understand and be willing to take the high road of professionalism. Let them know that they will not win every case, but the profession will win if their ultimate goal is justice. Let them know you will be there to support them in the good times and the bad. Tell them the mistakes you made in the hopes they will not make the same. Share with them things you did that led to good results.

Mentoring in your retirement can be a rewarding experience for both you and a new lawyer. As you move on, plan not to move out, but plan to stay connected with the profession that has been such a large part of your life. You may no longer need the profession, but the profession certainly needs you.