

Mentoring as...Path Maker

By Jan Mulligan, Master

Gretchen was a partner at the firm then known as Fredman, Silverberg & Lewis. I was a newbie attorney working as a junior associate for a firm of equal size and stature. We met working on political fund raisers for a state senator and a local city council member.

To summarize everything I learned from Gretchen would take a book, and what an interesting book it would be! However, three of the many things I learned from her are how to have balance in my life (while practicing law like a maniac), how to be a rainmaker while having fun, and the many paths to success in the law, far beyond the traditional blueprint.

Balance in life is probably the most important lesson I learned from Gretchen—but balance is a relative term. Gretchen worked long hours practicing law, day after day, week after week, month after month... until she left for an annual trip abroad to exotic places like Dubrovnik (now in Croatia, then in Yugoslavia), Bled (now in Slovenia, then also in Yugoslavia), as well as islands in Greece and hamlets in Germany. These places were her respite, destination vacations that she fled to for a month or more every year. Gretchen taught me as long as I put the hours in and got the work done, why not take time off? I learned the lesson, and I would like to think I learned it well.

The second important lesson I learned is how to be a rainmaker. The key was to find something I enjoy doing and to do it well! I found early on that I like socializing with lawyers and I enjoy bar activities. Gretchen taught me how to run a “campaign” for running for bar boards. Early in my career, she helped me to successfully run for the bar boards of many local legal organizations. It has been a great source of business, but that is only a footnote to the joy I have had in serving in these organizations.

The third lesson I learned from Gretchen is that there are many ways to succeed in the practice of law. In law school, I learned that the optimal blueprint for success in the legal profession was to clerk for a judge, then become an associate at a prestigious law firm, where success was measured by the size of the paycheck as well as the location and size of one’s office. For many, this is certainly true and it is good, sound advice. However, when I followed this traditional thinking, I was miserable and feared that I was doomed to failure.

Imagine how surprised I was to learn that Gretchen started out at Fredman, Silverberg & Lewis as a receptionist! She graduated to legal secretary, and worked for the firm while she went to law school. She was a law clerk, associate, junior partner and partner before finally becoming managing partner - all at the same firm...from receptionist to managing partner! Absolutely brilliant, she is an expert on drafting commercial leases for large corporations, both in the U.S. and abroad. After her firm dissolved, she decided she needed a new adventure, so she joined the City Attorney’s office and became a trial attorney. After a string of successes, she “retired”. In retirement, she learned how to man a boat and navigate by the stars...and she sailed away.

I am grateful for her mentorship and for her continued friendship. She has big shoes to fill, and I love the challenge of leaving even a small footprint in following her.