

Mentor as...Teacher

By Daniel E. Eaton, Master

Guillermo Marrero was a partner in the litigation department of the firm then known as Gray Cary Ames & Frye when I arrived as a first-year associate in 1989. About my third year at the firm, I worked with Guillermo on a hotly disputed case in which we had to use a variety of legal tools to keep a bad guy from making off with hundreds of thousands of dollars that belonged to our client, but that was parked in two or three bank accounts in the bad guy's name.

I learned a lot about writs of attachment working on that project, but I learned about sustained intensity of effort, too. There were mornings when I had to get into the office at 3 a.m. because I needed to prepare for one of many early morning ex parte hearings in the matter. During part of this time, Guillermo was in Mexico on vacation with his wife and recently born son and called me in the wee hours of the morning to check in on me. It was great having him as a resource – particularly because these were the days when e-mail was mostly limited to internal communications and when virtually no one thought a Blackberry was anything other than a fruit.

I remember there was a bitterly contested discovery motion on which I had to prepare the draft papers. When I reached the “Conclusion” section I wrote what is the standard line even today in most briefs: “For the foregoing reason, this Court should grant the plaintiffs’ motion to compel” or some variant of that. I remember Guillermo giving me an incredibly valuable lesson on why drafting a conclusion like that was a wasted opportunity. It was the equivalent of a grade-schooler writing “The End” on a school composition. A judge, no less than a teacher, knows the end of a submission without having to be told. Guillermo didn’t write the conclusion on that brief, but guided me to use that opportunity to give the judge one last concise, artfully-worded summary of why we should win. I don’t recall whether we won that particular motion, but I do know that we were able to block the bad guy from withdrawing the money in those accounts and leaving our client without a remedy. Along with the remarkable lesson he taught by example about persistent and tireless effort in litigation, Guillermo’s specific lesson about the value of an effective conclusion has stayed with me long after the details of this particular victory have passed from memory.

Working on this program has led me to reflect on how a mentor/protégé relationship differs from others. A mentor, like a teacher, instructs and, like a friend, counsels. But a mentoring relationship somehow synthesizes those roles into something qualitatively different from either role alone. My most important mentorship relationships have provided me with specific lessons about the science of practicing law and broader lessons about the art of practicing law. The handful of really important mentors I have had in law – some of whom are members of this Inn – have conveyed technical skills and character traits that a successful advocate must have. I have been able to pass on these lessons to others, sometimes long after regular contact with the mentor has ended. These lessons that last can be conveyed in moments or in years. But the twin pillars of the mentor’s craft are giving lessons, by word or by example, that last a lifetime and empowering the protégé to pass them on to others.