

Mentoring as...Door-Opener

By Wendy L. Patrick, Master

Near the beginning of my career as a prosecutor, I experienced the unlikely transfer into the high profile Special Operations division of the District Attorneys' Office. This is the division responsible for handling ultra-sensitive cases such as the investigation and prosecution of other lawyers, law enforcement, and even other prosecutors. Suffice it to say, it was a bold assignment for a new prosecutor. The best part, however, was that I ended up getting assigned the office next to Brian Michaels, a person I only knew at the time as a legend in the ethics community as well as in our office. Coincidentally, he was also my sponsor for membership in the Louis M. Welsh Inn of Court. Brian's title in the office at the time was the Professional Responsibility Advisor, which meant that he single handedly dealt with every single ethics issue faced by the office, and in practice, by the state. To my great surprise, not only was he one of the most humble people I had ever met, despite his nationwide fame, he was also very interested in mentoring an energetic young attorney who wanted to learn as much as she could.

Before long, although it was not in my job description, Brian asked me if I was interested in volunteering some of my time assisting him in the field of ethics. Not knowing much about ethics at the time, I enthusiastically agreed. That began a mentoring relationship that in retrospect, defined the course of my career. Before long, not only was I researching and writing about ethics issues daily, I was attending conferences and co-presenting ethics programs with him around the state on a regular basis. I can still remember when he took me to my first San Diego County Bar Association Ethics committee meeting where he introduced me to ethics gurus like Danny Eaton and Bob Gerber and told me that if I was accepted for membership in that committee, I would want to get to know these guys because I could learn a lot from them and eventually he was going to retire!

Brian and I became very good friends over the years, which meant even more to me than the incredible work we accomplished every day in the office. We worked together right up until his very last day when he retired and moved with his wife and two adorable daughters to the boutique community of Midway, Utah. Since that time, I have come to appreciate the reality of what a selfless role a mentor really has, and how much a good mentor has to be willing to invest in a protégé to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship. While I am not sure I can ever live up to the ambition, I can only aspire to be as good a mentor to others as Brian was to me.