

Many Mentors, Many Lessons

A Baby Boomer's Perspective

BY MARTIS ALEX

I AM A FEMALE LITIGATION partner in a mid-sized Manhattan law firm, and a proud member of the first wave of the baby boomer generation. While I would like to give credence to the female luminaries of the legal profession who inspired me to go to law school, who guided me through the competitive shoals of the litigation job market, who inspired me in the courtroom, and who helped me navigate law firm politics, that was not the experience of female litigators of the baby boomer generation.

There were 150 students in my first year class in law school, and only nine of us were women. I had no female professors, deans or counselors. I had no female supervisors or mentors in my first job out of law school in the public defender's office, or my second in the district attorney's office, or my third at a small law firm, or my fourth at a big law firm.

When the members of my generation went to law school, we did not have as role models Condoleezza Rice, Madeleine Albright or Hillary Clinton. We didn't even have Elle Woods in "Legally Blonde," or Kathryn Murphy in "The Accused," or Erin Brockovich. My role model was Perry Mason.

Nevertheless, I have certainly had important mentors in my life, who have each taught me valuable lessons along the way.

My Grandmother

It's all in the prep work.

Well into her 70s, my grandmother ran a boarding house full time while working as the night-shift waitress at the local diner. She

was tough, hard working and widely loved.

She taught me the important litigator's lesson that if you are going to serve the public meat loaf, success is all in the prep work. Her work ethic and commitment to excellence continue to inspire me in my law practice.

Male Mentors

Be tough, but follow your heart.

While my generation had female mentors outside of the legal profession, successful, experienced female lawyers were rare. Thus, my career mentors were men.

My supervisor in the public defender's office was an irascible but much loved older man who was a Holocaust survivor. He showed me at a young age what it really meant to be tough.

When I moved to a civil law firm, a male colleague showed me the ropes for navigating politics in a male dominated business world. Later, when I was struggling with career choices, it was a male partner who made the simple but profound suggestion that I follow my heart in pursuing my career path.

During my 30 years of practice, women have gradually joined the legal profession. No longer am I the only female at the counsel table, in the conference room, at the podium, or at a client meeting. While we all look forward to the day when there is greater gender equality at the top ranks of the profession, the increasing numbers of successful women at the upper echelons of the profession means that we have significantly more women in the mentor pool.

Women Mentoring Women

It is a wonderful change in my career that I now have female colleagues with whom to share the



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uniquely female aspects of the legal practice.

For example, women's initiative programs enable successful women from legal and other professions to share with young female lawyers lessons learned in achieving success, strategies developed to balance conflicting family and career demands, and tactics to negotiate discriminatory or sexist environments.

We now also have the opportunity for intergenerational mentoring. I try to pass on to my younger colleagues the lessons I learned from my own career experiences and from my mentors: be tough, follow your heart, speak your mind, and pay attention to your preparation. At the same time, baby boomers have much to learn from Generation Y.

In general, I find women lawyers from the younger generations to be outspoken, self-directed and self-assured. I believe this is, in part, because younger generations could look to female role models to learn what works, and what doesn't work, as they pursue their career paths.

As I continue my career, I am delighted and enthused to do so in the company of other women with whom I can share experiences and challenges in the profession that are unique to women, to share any wisdom I have gained from 30 years of practicing law, and to share the perspectives brought to the profession by younger generations.