

Around the Water Cooler

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Why Every Young Attorney Should Want a Mentor – Or Three

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In this blog, Elizabeth Spellmire Francis, a recent graduate of The John Marshall Law School, shares her thoughts on the value of mentors.

Frossard: Elizabeth, law students and recent graduates are frequently told to “find a mentor” and “network.” What tips and strategies would you suggest to put these words into action?

Francis: What no one tells you during law school is that finding a mentor and networking is not just about finding a successful person for the sole purpose of handing them your card. Rather, it is about creating genuine, personal relationships with individuals that you respect. More importantly, it is about holding on to those meaningful relationships throughout your career. I speak from experience.

I am the lucky daughter of George W. Spellmire, a legal malpractice attorney here in Chicago. As such, I was raised constantly surrounded by Chicago attorneys with whom I have intentionally stayed in touch. Though it took me a few years after college to find my way to law school, I knew that in the end – I was going to be a Chicago lawyer, like my father. Notably, I did well in law school. I studied hard and I worked part-time. Though my success in law school played a significant role in securing my first job, it was the personal relationships that I continued to hold onto and develop throughout law school that got my foot in the door.

The most important tip I can give to a law student, or new attorney, is to develop a genuine and personal relationship with your mentor, the attorney you exchanged emails with at the networking event, the family friend that is a lawyer, or a professional that you admire and respect. That means:

make it a priority to send emails and check in with these people. Ask them to lunch, buy them a drink, and attend seminars when they speak. It might be time consuming and take some effort, but in the end, it will open doors and create unforeseeable opportunities. More importantly, you will create a network of people that not only care about you, but have an interest in your success. Don't forget, you are a part of their network as well.

Following this approach has had a significant impact on my professional career. A casual lunch with a former associate of my father's turned into my first job as an attorney. A former classmate got me involved in the JMLS mentor program, which has given me yet another amazing opportunity to develop a meaningful and professional relationship. When I started practicing, the first person I called was a long-time mentor, a lawyer I have known all my life, and he gave me invaluable advice over a drink one night after work. I cannot emphasize my advice enough: it's all about developing personal relationships with people and holding on to them.

Margaret Frossard can be reached by email at mfrossar@jmls.edu or by phone at (312) 427-2737, ext. 112. To view her previous blogs, go to professionalism.jmls.edu. Frossard's next blog discusses the value of a legal education from the perspective of a recent law school graduate.