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Fall 2005

Mentoring: Pass it on

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Recommended Citation

Richards-Wilson, Stephani, "Mentoring: Pass it on" (2005). *College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Research and Publications*. 3.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/cas_rss/3

development, even the backhanded kind where a former student might say, "I didn't think I learned much in your class, but just the other day, I was able to answer a question on 'Jeopardy' right off the bat."

Maybe that's enough, or maybe there is someone out there somewhere who will suddenly think of me years after I'm dead and say, "If she only knew how much she'd opened up a world for me. It's funny, I can even remember that she spelled her last name with a 'K.'"

*Evelyn Kain
Ripon*

PASS IT ON

It's been two years since I last saw my mentor. We worked together as administrators at a university in California, she in the law school and I in the business school. What a difference two years can make. During that time, I moved my family 2,100 miles away, witnessed Mr. Schwarzenegger become the governor of my former home state, and had just begun to feel acclimated to the Midwest when I learned that several of my former colleagues lost their homes in California wildfires.

Although I think of my mentor often and fondly recall our conversations, it wasn't until I saw the rampant destruction of the wildfires on television that I realized just how meaningful her mentorship had been, especially since I had never asked her to play that role. She must have sensed the professional challenges I would face as an introvert with career aspirations. Had she not reached out to me, I wonder if I would have developed the confidence not only to pursue a new career in a new state, but also to act as a mentor to someone else.

Ironically, my mentor and I share little in common. She is an extrovert, loves to travel, and has an affinity for collections, one of which includes an exten-

sive assortment of Christmas snow globes. I, on the other hand, am an introvert, a minimalist, and a homebody. While I also like Christmas globes, one or two suit me just fine.

Although my mentor and I differed in personality, we did have one important professional aspect in common, namely that we worked in male-dominated fields. My mentor never brought this to my attention, nor did she ever discuss it. Yet I often wondered why she took the time to mentor me. I can't help but think she suspected that aspiring professional women need a mentor not only to survive but to excel in male-dominated fields.

Instead of talking about the glass ceilings and walls we kept bumping into, I took my cue from my mentor and went about my daily business, all the time working on my doctorate at night and seeking other opportunities for career advancement. My mentor offered to review my resume, let me know of career opportunities she had heard about, and ensured that I was included in social networks. When she learned that I applied for a new position in the dairy state and she would be called for a reference, she called my future employer instead!

Thanks to my mentor, I landed the job I always wanted. She hugged me and brought champagne to work the next day. When I think about her mentorship, I realize that I received so much more than a new job. I learned what it means to be a mentor. Instead of waiting for someone else to ask, to call, or to volunteer, I learned how to offer myself without limitations or expectations of receiving something in return. Being a mentor is a labor of love in its purest form.

I initially had a hard time grasping the fact that there are professionals who, like my mentor, are selflessly gracious and helpful. Perhaps the vindictiveness of the business world had tainted my perspective. Unsure about how to thank her, I asked my mentor what I could do for her in appreciation. She initially avoided the question but then replied that I should help someone else. I never asked her to be my mentor, but I will always remember her mentoring.

Perhaps the best way I can honor her is to do as she asked and pass it on.

*Stephani Richards-Wilson
Waukesha*

Share Your Stories

We welcome your contributions to "In My Words." Stories should be no longer than 600 words. The next topics are:

MOVING, deadline Oct. 15 (extended deadline for the winter issue). Load up the truck and start a new life. Any story about moving and related life adjustments.

BIRTHING, deadline Dec. 1 (for the spring issue). It's everything you'd dreamed of! (Maybe.) Your vision of childbirth versus what actually came to pass, or your experience of giving birth to anything (e.g. a work of art, a business) either firsthand or as an observer, happy or sad.

E-mail submissions are greatly preferred. Please send to:

jfischer@wisconsinacademy.org with the subject heading "In My Words," or mail it to In My Words, Wisconsin Academy Review, 1922 University Avenue, Madison WI 53726. We will contact selected authors; names may be withheld from publication on request. We regret that we cannot take phone inquiries or return submitted material.