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THE JOYS OF MENTORING

By: Michael A. Mogill*

I have long been a proponent for and participant in community service activities, to the extent that I have suggested to incoming students that I am a “community services junkie”. Pursuant to that belief, I have served on several boards of community organizations, provided direct service to recipients, mentored others in their participation, and both written and spoken about the importance of the concept of community.¹ I have previously explored the concept of community service through the perspective of how we as teachers in the legal profession can attempt to inspire our students to engage in their respective communities to assist those in need and how this can benefit the students themselves.² Yet law faculty may not realize how they, too, can benefit from mentoring their students in a community setting, and that the joy of mentoring can be treasured on both a professional and personal basis. Indeed, I believe that it is essential to additionally view the benefits from the perspective of the mentor, in

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¹ Regarding the latter, see Michael A. Mogill, *We Are...Community!*, DICKINSON L. IDEAS (2021), <https://ideas.dickinsonlaw.psu.edu/fac-works/265/>.

² See Michael A. Mogill, *Doing Good: The Ultimate Service*, 42 OKLA. CITY UNIV. L. REV. 147 (2018).

the hope of encouraging all law teachers to engage in this important service to their students and communities.

The legal profession is indeed a helping profession. In many instances, the first thought that comes to mind is that we can use our licenses to serve the underprivileged and unrepresented in whatever legal forums exist to pursue justice on behalf of those individuals. Yet, beyond the recognized need to engage in pro bono activities, we can also view the privilege of our educations as an opportunity to give back through “non-lawyerly” means, such as serving as volunteers for social service organizations. Indeed, involvement with these organizations can lead to the development of a sense of responsibility toward our fellow citizens while opening our eyes to the challenges of those who are less fortunate.

My primary goals in serving as a community mentor to our students are to build trust in our relationships so that I can assist in facilitating their career growth and to instill a sense of active engagement. In doing so, I have endeavored to enhance each student’s professionalism, self-confidence, and skills, while at the same time striving to encourage a sense of “giving back”.³

An example of one such organization that I have been involved with for over twenty years is our community’s food pantry, Project SHARE (“Survival Help and Recipient Education”). This is an interfaith, nonprofit cooperative that serves the indigent population in our local and surrounding area through several programs.⁴ Among the programs offered are gleaning produce on farms, distributing food, and teaching nutrition, wellness, and various life skills. My participation has been both as a member of the Board of Directors, including serving as the Chair, and directly assisting in the gleaning operations and distribution of food to the recipients. Based on my belief in the importance of the role served by Project SHARE, part of my initial personal mission while serving on the Board was to have it endorse a proposal for one or two of our students to join the Board. This would allow those students to offer their intellectual and

³ Will Davis, *The Importance of Quality Mentorship*, GA. BAR J., June 2020, at 10, 10, 12.

⁴ *About*, PROJECT SHARE, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190628232600/https://projectsharepa.org/about/> (last visited July 16, 2021).

analytical talents while enhancing their own practical and ultimately marketable skills.⁵ The Board graciously voted unanimously to offer these positions to our law students, and we have had multiple members of our student body serve over the past decade as contributing board members.

I have worked with student board members of Project SHARE over those years in soliciting our student body to become involved with Project SHARE in a volunteer capacity through joining the monthly food distributions. As a result, ten to twenty students have joined these highly organized distributions. The recipients would enter the Project SHARE building, be given a grocery cart, proceed through the building station-to-station to receive the particular food from that volunteer-staffed station, and then exit the building to place their foodstuffs into their vehicles. Throughout these years, I have worked alongside our students as a fellow volunteer at these distributions. In doing so, I have offered my veteran experience and knowledge from my years of having volunteered with Project SHARE, along with my familiarity of our target population. This has included instructing about ways to connect to the recipients, suggestions on the preparation and management of the food station, and recommendations for the subsequent breakdown and cleanup of the work site.⁶ During the several hours we spend together, our students have come in contact with some of the most marginalized, impoverished members of our community while also assisting those who have suffered from temporary setbacks. Throughout these food distributions, our students have been supportive and comforting contributors to both the physical and mental health of those in need of

⁵ Our students have participated as board members of various community service organizations through our law school's "Leading Law Students" program, which provides students with the opportunity to serve on the boards of nonprofit organizations. *See* McGill, *supra* note 2, at 158-61.

⁶ The manner of distribution was altered during the months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than continue having the recipients wheel their Project SHARE grocery carts from food station to food station inside the building, recipients instead drove their vehicles to a distribution site where the volunteers had prepared pre-loaded grocery carts. The volunteers then placed the items into the vehicles' trunks while maintaining social distancing and being fully masked. A provision was also made for the volunteers to deliver the food supplies to those without vehicles.

nutritional and emotional sustenance.⁷ Indeed, their participation in the food bank's activities has benefitted both the recipients and our students.

I have valued the opportunity to have our students serve as board members and as service providers at Project SHARE over our numerous years together. And I certainly acknowledge on a personal level the benefits of volunteering to one's sense of well-being, which have been well documented in terms of our mental and physical health.⁸ Yet, I also believe it is important to recognize how we as law teachers can additionally benefit in both our personal and professional capacities from the joys of that mentorship.

An initial joy has been in having developed a consistent and closer relationship with the students who have volunteered, both in their board membership and as participants during the distributions. At some point during our collaborative, non-competitive volunteer experience, it is almost natural that our serving together provides a sense of fellowship engendering communication, resulting in the dropping of the real and perceived hierarchical barriers that exist in the school setting. Indeed, I have discovered that the informal task of volunteering and interacting with students in a positive manner has created a connection between us. I have actively listened as students have connected with me and "let down their guard", allowing me to learn and understand more about their backgrounds and personal goals. Many of our students are admittedly still trying to decide what they want to do in their professional lives. The bond that we form also allows me the opportunity to use my own organizational and communication skills as a guide for the students, and to share stories from my own professional journey, including the doubts, uncertainties, and unexpected revelations that I have had along the way. Moreover, our conversations have helped to break down barriers and improve their morale, as the students have viewed me not only as a mentor but also as a giving peer through serving as a community volunteer. Having stepped down from the perceived "professorial pedestal," I have worked alongside our students on a collective task

⁷ Mogill, *supra* note 2, at 153-54.

⁸ *Id.* at 154-57.

having a meaningful purpose. And in so doing, we share a mutual comfort in getting to know one another, allowing me to look forward to continuing those relationships during the law school experience itself.

A second joy of mentoring has been the positive impact on my teaching that has been forged by the connection with the student volunteers and also with the greater student body. I have taken the time to get to know the students and earn their trust, while potentially serving as a role model in a friendly and supportive atmosphere.⁹ Students have come to know me at the distributions or board meetings and to ask questions in a non-hostile setting. They have also become more comfortable in providing me feedback on my classes and on the law school process in general. Moreover, many have spread the word that I am indeed an “approachable” professor, resulting in students who have not actually been involved with Project SHARE coming to my office and sharing their own backgrounds and professional goals. The feedback on my classes has been essential over the years in my reformulating my teaching approaches and striving to improve my pedagogy. In addition, I have been cognizant that many of our students who have shared their personal stories are experts of their own life experiences. I have used that knowledge in the classroom to aid our discussions while accrediting that expertise. I have been able to use that awareness to assist in providing career guidance, encouragement, and the reassurance that their dedication and hard work will pay off, while also addressing the importance of achieving a workable balance between one’s life and the demands of law school.

The opportunity to promote community engagement and make a positive difference in the lives of the participating students has provided a third joy of mentoring. It is surely important to recognize the needs of our students and motivate them by providing the opportunity to contribute to the good health of our communities. As lawyers, we have a civic duty, indeed a sense of social responsibility, to maintain and care for the disadvantaged in our society. As I have

⁹ *Become a Mentor*, MENTOR, <http://www.mentoring.org/take-action/become-a-mentor/> (last visited July 16, 2021).

volunteered alongside our students, I have provided the guidance and encouragement that has assisted the students in establishing bonds among themselves while contributing to their development, so that they will be inspired to respond to the needs of our greater community.¹⁰ And as I have mobilized the power of student empathy, I have been gratified in seeing their appreciation for the opportunity to serve those who are less fortunate and to know that their activities will assist in relieving the stress of law school (at least temporarily) while casting a positive light upon our profession. Indeed, I have noted the “reality check” that many students receive as a result of serving marginalized populations. This can help students remain grounded and realize that they are fortunate in the opportunities that their educations will provide along with aiding in their personal growth, thus further motivating their learning in the classroom.

A fourth joy of mentoring has been the effect that the connectedness resulting from our joint volunteer experience has served in the classroom. I have found that the students who I volunteered alongside have subsequently become more comfortable and become even greater active learners in engaging in our classroom dialogue. Many of those who have done so have attributed that to us getting to mutually learn more about each other in an informal, volunteer setting. Indeed, there is the realization that we as law professors are indeed “human” and truly want to be supportive and inclusive in our relationships so that we can assist all on their professional journeys. And I believe that, as law professors, our greater engagement and shared responsibility in serving the community alongside our students will further benefit our school in attracting future students who will value having that experience and opportunity.

Beyond all these above joys, there is also the recognition that I have personally enjoyed the chance to engage students in a volunteer environment and have some fun during the process. Getting students involved in serving the community and nourishing a joint culture of caring for others allows me as a mentor to have a sense of

¹⁰ *The Benefits of Mentoring*, UNIV. OF CAL. DAVIS: HUM. RES., <https://hr.ucdavis.edu/departments/learning-dev/toolkits/mentoring/benefits> (last visited July 16, 2021).

personal fulfillment and hopefulness that I am making a true difference for both the students and those whom they will serve.¹¹ Moreover, I have the satisfaction of seeing our students achieve a sense of self-worth by selflessly helping to make a difference in the lives of the disadvantaged, along with my belief that they will continue in their efforts to better our society. This has added a sense of purpose to my own career, while improving my sense of self-esteem and mental health, with the result that my job as a professor has become even more meaningful and fulfilling.¹² And that sense of satisfaction has carried over in sustaining my own positive attitude in the classroom.¹³

The joys of mentorship are multiple and can indeed provide a two-way street. The relationships that we form provide the opportunity to further develop our emotional intelligence in understanding ourselves and others, through relating to those others and coping with our surroundings. As professors, this will provide us with the satisfaction of helping budding lawyers create a vision for their evolving futures and possibly discover one's true passion while they find their way on their paths into our profession. At the same time, the enthusiasm of our students is contagious and revitalizing to us as mentors, assisting both the professor as mentor and the students as mentees while we continue to grow, both personally and professionally.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Nicola Cronin, *The Powerful Benefits of Mentoring*, GUIDER (Nov. 23, 2019), <http://www.guiders-ai.com/blog/mentoring-benefits>.

¹³ *Become a Mentor*, *supra* note 9.