A Guide and A Friend

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Recommended Citation

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By now, the Hon. Jeannette Ogden '83 has lost track of the number of UB School of Law students and graduates for whom she has served as a professional mentor. Not one of them, though, has lost track of her. That’s because Ogden, a former Buffalo City Court judge who now serves as a New York State Supreme Court justice, has made herself accessible to those who are seeking information, advice or wise counsel about anything from career paths to relationship problems. At first, the requests came periodically, by word of mouth or recommendation of former mentees. Later, as the law school and local bar associations developed formal mentor programs, she found herself guiding new mentees on a regular basis, in addition to the elementary, high school and undergraduate students whom she mentors.

It’s an important role – and one that she approaches with careful intention. “When we first get together, I ask them what they’re looking for in the mentor-mentee relationship and advise them that it takes work on both sides to make mentoring work. Their response determines the way the mentorship will go,” Ogden says. “I tell them that a mentor can help a person improve their abilities and/or skills through observation, assessment, modeling, listening and providing guidance. I also tell them that I don’t have an end date for their mentorship – we establish these relationships and continue them throughout our professional careers. We eventually become colleagues and sometimes we become friends. I am committed to helping them find success and gratification in their legal careers.”

Whether she’s meeting regularly with the person or just on call for questions, Ogden says the topics of conversation vary widely. “They ask me about the legal profession and how to navigate within it. Sometimes they ask me work-life balance questions. The topics vary on a case-by-case basis. Maybe they’re thinking about changing their area of practice from criminal prosecution to civil litigation. We discuss preparation, job searching, law firm politics and whether I’m familiar with the firm. Sometimes we discuss more personal problems and/or concerns, their impact on professional standing or what recommendations I may have.

“I’ve had students tell me they’re stressed, that they have family problems that affect their ability to focus and study. I’m always careful to maintain confidences, to be candid and truthful; characteristics that are crucial to building the trust that a good mentoring relationship requires. I tell them that I’m extending the attorney-client privilege to them, just as they’ll be required to extend it to their clients. The duty of competence and confidentiality is not only crucial to a good mentoring relationship, it’s the hallmark of a lawyer-client relationship.” She also tells them to “Never underestimate the importance of listening. Sometimes people simply need you to listen to the problem.”

For Ogden, the role of mentor has its roots in guidance that she received as a young lawyer. “I was a first-generation attorney, which meant I didn’t have any attorneys in my family who could help me navigate within the legal profession,” she says, “but I did meet people who mentored me. They taught me that you never get too busy to give back. Therefore, I adopted the motto ‘lift as you climb.’”

That was a point of connection with Hon. Betty Calvo-Torres ’98, now a Buffalo City Court judge. She was an intern in Ogden’s office after her 2L year at UB School of Law and became her mentee. It was her goal to become a judge.
"I am the daughter of a first-generation immigrant – the first in my family to go to college and to law school. That was really pie in the sky, becoming an attorney," Calvo-Torres says. But working with Ogden, she says, "I was able to obtain the perspective that many law students don’t have. I got to see what happened behind the scenes and how she prepared for court. "There was a whole myriad of cases that I saw firsthand. That was a very insightful experience. It gave me a leg up in understanding where the judges were coming from and it made me realize what a difference we can make as judges."

Now, Calvo-Torres says, she accepts interns every semester, "due, in great part, to the fact that I was given that opportunity."

It was also an internship that connected Ogden with The Arthur A. Duncan ’12, a former City of Buffalo lawyer who has recently opened his own general law practice.

"If it weren’t for Judge Ogden, I wouldn’t be where I am right now," Duncan says. "She was the first person in the Buffalo law community that I interacted with and who took an interest in me. I got the internship, and it turned into a mentorship. Judge Ogden became a person I could turn to for advice, whether it was about the legal community, family, or dealing with certain things that I was going through."

He says that sometimes meant a good talking-to, like she delivered when she learned he was going out on his own. "She sat me down and grilled me: 'Is this the right move? Are you sure about this?' She’s been there for me and I think the world of her. The mentorship is genuine. You get a lot of lip service in this field, but this is a relationship where I can call her any time and she’ll call me back."

Ogden says she is motivated by the words of Lucia Bassas Traynor: "The mediocre mentor tells, the good mentor explains, the superior mentor demonstrates, and the great mentor inspires." "UB School of Law has been a great mentor," she says. "Inspiring me, and so many others, to be mentors."

The Arthur A. Duncan ’12