MENTORSHIP IS A TWO-WAY STREET

TIP mentorships provide opportunities for both parties to learn from each other

BY JIM SHILANDER, STATE BAR OF NEVADA

Mentorship is a two-way street in the legal profession. In one’s early months as an attorney, a mentee gets the benefit of someone’s real-world experience: a person who has lived through the reality of actually being an attorney. In exchange, mentors get a chance to gain, or regain, a fresh perspective on some of the things they might be doing in their own practice and brush up on important information.

The Transitioning Into Practice (TIP) program existed since 2011, and year after year, it has provided a positive mentorship experience for both new and experienced attorneys. While new attorneys have their classroom-provided knowledge of the law, and perhaps some work experience giving them a taste of an attorney’s practical concerns, TIP is immersive, providing them with the chance to explore different areas of the law, practice management, and undergo professional and ethical development. The program is flexible and customizeable.

The TIP Mentoring Plan provides an outline for the program, which includes mandatory and elective elements. There is also room for flexibility in its implementation, depending on the mentor’s and mentee’s schedules. During each six-month TIP cycle, mentors reported meeting at different intervals, some weekly, some biweekly and some monthly. Some met over coffee, some after work. It all depends on what works best for the individuals involved.

Providing a Real-World Look at the Profession

“Every new person I mentor is different,” attorney Travis Barrick said. “They may have different career goals or different practice areas they want to go into. As we get to know each other, I try to get to know what they’re interested in, and try to tailor the subject areas with those in mind.”

Mentor John Desmond concurs. “I try to customize it, depending on the particular attorney, what their background is, the experience they have and what their interests are,” he said. “I had one attorney who’d practiced in California for four or five years, so he was fairly familiar with the practice, but he didn’t have any experience with local practices and local rules, so we spent quite a bit of time on that. If someone’s coming off a judicial clerkship, they’ll tend to have a better understanding of the courts, so we’ll spend more time on the nuts and bolts of the practice.”

There are, however, some lessons taught to every TIP mentee, with a special emphasis on ethics. “We go through the Rules of Professional Conduct, and the first thing I tell [my mentee] is to put the phone
number for Bar Counsel into their cell phone," Barrick said. “I try to explain to them that Bar Counsel is their friend, and that they should feel very comfortable calling them any time they have an ethical question. A few times we’ve even met with Bar Counsel staff so a personal connection is made.”

Attorney Shea Backus said she also tailors the program to the individual, using the elective portion of the program to find an area of law the mentee might be most interested in.

“For the electives, I usually like to create discussions and work around an area of interest or my mentee’s area of practice,” she said. “My current mentee is interested in marijuana law, so we have customized her electives under this topic. We jointly attended a CLE on the current status of marijuana law in Nevada. She secured an internship out of this CLE, allowing her to learn more about this area.”

**What Mentees Learn**

Erica Nannini, a 2017 TIP participant, said her mentor, Brian Saeman, provided her with valuable guidance.

“He was great to bounce ideas off of about my own obstacles in my first year of practice, in a judgment-free environment,” Nannini said. “I also really appreciated hearing some of his cautionary tales about behavior that he had witnessed or experienced in his practice that I should aim to avoid – and those cautionary tales have also helped me to manage obstacles in interacting with opposing counsel and have helped me to develop a set of best practices to which I try to adhere.”

Christopher Warburton, who was also a 2017 TIP participant mentored by Bryce Earl, said he got the opportunity to see how a law firm actually works.

“The most practical lessons were relating to things like logistics, how to work as part of a firm, how to handle issues that arise relating to ethics, as well as how to build client relationships and bring in new clients,” Warburton said. “We also worked specifically on certain topics relating to my work within our firm, and this involved sometimes drafting agreements or researching topics for current clients.”

2013 TIP graduate Sean Forbush said his mentor, David Merrill, made sure he got to witness different aspects of an attorney’s work, up close and personal.

“David took me to one of his depositions and explained afterward what happened and why,” Forbush said. “It was very informative and included information that I still use today. He also gave some really good advice on how to track time and bill, which has helped me with my clients.”

**Mentors Get Something Too**

The mentors all agreed that they gain many things from their mentoring experience.

“My mentees tend to be much younger and typically have a better work-life balance,” Backus said. “I enjoy seeing them enjoy life while starting their legal careers.”

Barrick said the program’s emphasis on the Nevada Rules of Professional Conduct help him see new aspects of the rules every time he acts as a mentor. “I learn something new every time,” he said. “And I’ve learned from all of these mentees that they all have different reasons for going into law, and we talk about that a lot, and how we can get the practice of law to meet their goals.”

Desmond echoed those sentiments. As an example, his most recent mentee had more experience with rules from other states, after having served as a clerk for a federal judge.

“He had a lot of really interesting questions on some of the Rules of Professional Conduct, with the variations he’d observed in other states. We also spent quite a bit of time on changes on the local rules of practice, and that was great, because it was a refresher course for me, and it forces me to be up-to-date on those changes.”

Halstead said she’s been heartened by what she’s seen from her mentees. “My mentees have taught me that the future of the legal practice is in good hands,” she said. “The attorneys I’ve worked with have all been smart, eager and hardworking, and I’ve enjoyed getting to know them and see their legal careers progress.”

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A Real Opportunity

2018 marks an important milestone for the TIP program. For the first time, those who went through the program as mentees in 2011, the program’s first year, will be eligible to become mentors themselves. Attorneys must have been in practice for at least seven years in order to serve as mentors. Longtime mentors say this is an opportunity that attorneys, if they have the inclination and the time, should definitely pursue.

“I would absolutely recommend attorneys to participate as TIP mentors,” said Halstead. “The program is laid out so that all that needs to be done is to give a little bit of yourself and your time. It’s rewarding for both you and the mentee and, as I always say, we either had help getting to where we are in our own practices or we didn’t have help and wished we had, so either pay it forward or be the help you could have used.”

Desmond said having the time to really get into the program and the ability to open up helps create a successful experience for all parties involved. “The way the program is structured is very helpful, but you need to spend...
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