

Paying It Forward Through Mentoring

By Rinat Shangeeta

My desk is full of law books, bundles of legal research papers, some awards and certificates, and then there is one lone yellow picture frame made of foam with myself next to a child. However, the child in the photo is not my own preschooler son; rather it was my mentee from an elementary school mentoring program I participated in years ago. This frame is very simple with some random letters, snowflakes and ghost stickers, and a glowing little girl next to me. Yet, the reason it occupies a special space in my otherwise serious-looking desk is that it serves as a powerful motivation for me. It constantly reminds me why I am passionate about mentoring and how much satisfaction mentoring provides me with. I had invited this fourth grader mentee of mine to the large corporate campus of my workplace during a "bring your kids to work day" and she came with her family. I will always remember the excitement in her and her family about being there. That day, I could see some dreams in the eyes of a little girl, and I hoped I was able to ignite some inspiration in her to follow my footsteps one day and work at a similar environment when she grows up. As a gratitude, she gave me a lovely little picture frame she made herself, which touched my heart at that time. The same picture now motivates me to pursue my passion for mentoring despite the many challenges of law school and running a family.

I want to combine my passion for mentoring with my legal education to help fellow women attorneys attain success in their careers. I am a firm believer of the benefits of mentoring. I believe a mentor can inspire and support a mentee, share their valuable life experiences whether those are successful or not, and pass on hard earned knowledge to the mentee. Having a strong mentor means that a new attorney can be confident of their actions and choices, know that someone is there to support her and can advocate for her. I believe it is important for everyone to have someone who will listen to them and who they can ask any questions. If that person is a woman attorney, her experiences may be more similar and effective in helping another woman attorney. However, the foremost reason I choose mentoring as a vehicle to pay forward is because I myself have been benefitted firsthand from my own mentoring relationships. A peek into my background reveals why mentoring means so much to me.

I was born in a crowded hospital in the small, overpopulated, underdeveloped country of Bangladesh. I grew up speaking Bengali, wore traditional clothes, created intricate henna designs on women's hands, and performed classical Bengali music. I remember celebrating the election of a female prime minister, which helped overcome the challenges of women holding the most powerful positions such as the head of the nation and made me realize women can do anything if they want to. Then, when I was 17, my family immigrated to the US, and I encountered a world I had barely known existed.

I felt like an "alien" in every sense of the word in my small town Virginia high school. I feared that I would never be part of this new society. However, as I stumbled uncomfortably towards assimilation, I eventually found my savior in a Puerto Rican woman. Mrs. Yau was my ESL teacher; she created a home for all of us "aliens" in her classroom.

Mrs. Yau was always demanding during class, pushing us ceaselessly to learn English, the first step to attaining success in America as she told us countless times. Still, she was also always there to listen to our anxieties and share her own experiences after class. She gave us confidence that being different did not mean being inferior. She taught us to accept who we are, proudly acknowledge our diversity and focus on our strengths as we strove to overcome our challenges. I found my strength in math, quickly jumping from 10th grade algebra to a college level calculus class. When I graduated with 3 outstanding student awards, I saw Mrs. Yau beaming with pride. Mrs. Yau had a profound impact on me personally and academically, and I am inspired to mentor others because of her example.

Ever since I realized the benefits of mentoring, I have attempted to dedicate a significant amount of time towards helping others facing different types of challenges. As the president of the Rutgers International Student Association, my goal was to support other students who were new to America. As a female, I brought another diverse perspective to the Electrical & Computer Engineering program at

Rutgers where only about 10% of the students were women. To encourage and support my female classmates, I actively took part in the Society of Women Engineers, which encourages young women in this field and helps them proactively confront gender stereotypes and issues related to work and family.

When I started my career as a technology analyst at Merrill Lynch, I continued my efforts to combat gender inequalities as a steering committee member of the Women's Professional Network. My formal mentoring experience began with the mentoring programs for the Merrill Lynch Technology Analyst Program and Summer Analyst Program where I mentored new hires and summer interns for several years. I volunteered to serve as a mentor for a local elementary school mentoring program, and met my little mentee who gave me that big picture frame present. I was grateful that Merrill Lynch recognized my commitment to community service, specifically my mentoring efforts, by awarding me a special Leadership in Diversity and Inclusion award, which was given to only 0.1% of staff worldwide. At Educational Testing Service, I was selected as a mentor for a college freshman through the Employee Community Action Fund Mentoring Program. During this period, I met another powerful woman whom I would be honored to call my mentor as she has been there to support me through many difficult steps.

As I embarked into a new journey in the pursuit of a legal career, I took my passion for mentoring to another level in law school. I went from being a participant in an established mentoring program to launching a brand new mentoring program myself. As the president of the Rutgers Intellectual Property Law Society, I initiated and worked tirelessly to launch the first Intellectual Property Mentoring Program to aid in the academic and professional development of students interested in intellectual property law. It was very exciting and satisfying every time I was able to secure a successful practitioner as a mentor for my fellow schoolmates. We inaugurated the program in the Spring of 2014, matching thirteen pairs of mentors and mentees which surpassed our expectations for the first year. The Mentoring Reception Dinner in February brought the mentors and mentees together for a night of networking and exchange of career development information.

I am devoted to incorporate my passion for public service and mentoring with the new skills I will acquire as a patent attorney. I particularly see the need for more women attorneys in the field of intellectual property. According to the American IP Law Association's 2013 economic survey, only 19.1% respondents were female, so the lack of balance is quite real. I believe that those of us that will be practicing IP law need to be role models to the newer generation and show that women can succeed in this field as well. When people see your success firsthand through personal relationships, it becomes more than a story they heard and it inspires them. That is why I think that through mentoring relationships, I can convince and attract more women to join the field of intellectual property.

Even beyond the IP field, women attorneys can benefit from mentoring relationships in general. One can never tell what impact he or she may have on someone else, but just being there may be enough to make a positive impact on someone's life. People can learn from your success as well as your mistakes, so all experiences are valuable. Many women stay away from higher career goals in the fear of depriving their family. However, when women can get support and mentoring from other women who are successful in their careers, many of whom achieved balance in family life, they have the strength to do it themselves as well. As for my family, my son knows that while, as a female professional or a student, I have essential work to do during the day, I am always there to kiss his pains away or read him to sleep. I know I would love to share my experiences of attending law school while raising a child to inspire other women. As a mother, I look forward to becoming a successful attorney as well so that I can be a role model to other women.

My goal is to work towards developing and fostering mentoring programs specifically for women and for women in IP through organizations like NJWLA. I hope to use my mentoring experiences and the lessons from developing the IPLS mentoring program to help me succeed in these goals that I am so passionate about. Due to my own obstacles and the support I received, I would like to follow my mentors who exemplified bringing out the best in others through mentoring.