

# My Father, My Mentor

By Alex M. Chazen



While you have grown used to seeing construction and real estate legal writing in this space, I was asked this month to gear my writing towards Father's Day for this issue, so please indulge a slight introspective rather than legal, analysis. And because this is a legal column after all, I promise there will be no stories about coaching kids sports teams (one of the highlights of my life having had my dad as a coach and being a coach for my daughter).

For me while growing up, a sick day often meant staying home and getting to watch daytime television rather than going to school. However, on days when my mother wasn't able to stay home with me, it meant going and laying on a makeshift bed on the floor of my dad's law office. Over the dozen or so times that I got what I saw as an opportunity (I still remember the taste of the Grandma's brand peanut butter cookies he let me have from the downstairs vending machine during lunch time), I received a lot of advice – probably too much for an elementary or middle school kid to really take in and use. But the most common refrain was “Don't become a lawyer.” My dad, ever the academic, wanted me to achieve some otherworldly title in academia, or his true dream – my becoming an astronaut. Unfortunately for him, I didn't love education enough to match his B.A., MS, Ph.D., and J.D. (he'd have to settle for just the B.A. and J.D.) and my motion sickness (and my loathing of Chemistry class) would prevent me from ever having a chance to go to space.

But more than the myriad life lessons he talked to me about, few of which I can remember, I learned from the unspoken advice. I saw how he interacted with his clients, his opposing counsel, judges, and everyone in between. I saw how he diligently represented his clients' interests, and respectfully gave them good news as well as bad. I saw the way he researched his writing, how he responded to and crafted arguments. I even saw how he dealt with the rogue client who was upset about an outcome, or the attorney for the other side that yelled to make their points. In short, while aloud he always told me “Don't become a lawyer”, he taught me exactly how to be a lawyer, and helped me become the lawyer I am today.

Now, a wise person once told me that anyone who says that the relationships between fathers and sons isn't complicated is a liar, so I won't say that we didn't have our ups and downs, particularly as I honed my ability to craft an argument at the dinner table during high school, but through college and law school, I always had those lessons from sick days in the back of my head – treating others respectfully regardless of how they treated you, thinking and crafting an argument before speaking, and looking for the edge in your research.

After law school, and before going to work for a firm, I worked with my dad for a year. I was reminded of those sick days every day that I came into the office, and occasionally of those days at the dinner table when I was trying to get him to use some newer technology than MS-DOS. But working alongside him and getting to know him lawyer to lawyer instead of just father to son opened my eyes to a whole other side of the man.

It very quickly became clear that those unspoken lessons weren't just a show for younger me when I was tagging along in his office. In his editing of my legal writing, he gave fair, reasoned advice that continues to help me when writing briefs to the Court. He taught me about billing, about making sure that if you are going to charge a client for a task, that you better have actually provided them with a service, and not just gone through the motions in order to justify a billing entry. He had me help him with client intake – that initial interview where you determine whether someone has a case worth taking on or not and asked me just as many questions after they left in order to see what I thought and why. Everything always came back to “Why?” As the parent of a young child, I dread when she asks “Why?” in response to my answers to her questions, again and again and again. But this was different. This was making me think critically about each and every step I took as a lawyer on a particular case; it made me hone my thinking to get to the actual point, and avoid the fluff I so often enjoy using in my writing.

Every son should be given the opportunity to truly see their father at work – not just when they're a child, but as an adult, when they have the understanding of the effort and hard work that it took to get them to the position that they are now in. Children respect their elders because they are told to but getting to actually work with my dad allowed me to develop a respect for him that only a fellow lawyer can have. I know that for me, getting that opportunity made me a better lawyer, a better father, and a better man.

Happy Father's Day