

The Joy of Mentoring – From Thousands of Miles Away

By Stephen L. Ball



About a year ago, I clicked send on an email that signaled the start of one era and the end of another. After several rounds of interviews, in a short message to a recruiter, I confirmed my acceptance of a position with a large insurance company. I would start in January as Legislative & Regulatory Counsel at the company's headquarters in Walnut Creek, California, a suburb of San Francisco. A brand new job for the brand new year.

As I re-read my sent email, I immediately breathed a sigh of relief. This was it. Change was happening, and there was no turning back. California, here I come. I sat back in my chair and enjoyed a few moments alone in my thoughts, appreciating the flecks of sunlight that made it through my window despite the late-day haze of an early autumn afternoon. A passing siren blared outside. Just another note in the cacophonous symphony of a Manhattan workday. The desk in my 10th floor office faced away from the window, so I had to turn around completely in order to admire the window's view. And this was for a good reason. The view was pleasantly distracting. My office overlooked several of New York's most famed landmarks—the Empire State Building, Fifth Avenue, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Rockefeller Plaza. For a native Michigander like me, who had grown up dreaming of someday living and working in New York City, it was absolutely captivating—a permanent, inspiring, visual reminder of the arc of my early ambition. I'd spent so many days and nights enjoying the view. And now, I was leaving.

Riding home on the train that evening, I thought of the seismic change that the next few months would bring. Packing up for a cross-country move would be tedious. I would also have to find a place to live in the Bay Area, despite living 2,500 miles away. As an unmarried millennial living in New York, finding an apartment had almost become a bi-annual rite of the summer, but I had never had to do so from such a far distance. Then, too, there was the matter of resigning from my job as a litigation associate at a law firm. It was the only job I'd had since law school, and I'd been with the firm for over five years. While there, I had forged lasting friendships, done interesting work, learned a lot, and lived out the majority of my 20s. So turning the page was definitely bittersweet.

But, I reassured myself, in the grand scheme of things, these were minor hurdles standing in the way of greater happiness. I was leaving New York for a great opportunity with a well-established, respected company in one of the most desirable metropolitan areas in the country. I would soon be free from the tyranny of the billable hour! And, in a few months' time, I would be working on interesting, complex issues involving some of the most important public policy questions of the present day. With my 30th birthday quickly approaching and nothing tying me to New York, it was actually an ideal time to pack my bags and head west for a rewarding, new adventure. At the start of a new decade of life, to boot. And, just in time for the roughest stretch of winter in New York. “Who wouldn't trade New



York's rough winter cold for California's resplendent wine country?" I thought. There was just one problem in my calculus, though. One major hurdle I momentarily forgot to consider—Michael, my mentee.

Earlier in the year, I had signed up to be a volunteer mentor for Mount Vernon Star Scholars. Founded by a philanthropy-minded finance industry professional, Mount Vernon Star Scholars is a non-profit organization that helps gifted students at Mount Vernon, New York high schools gain admittance to highly selective U.S. colleges and universities. It does so by pairing a select group of students with adult mentors who must have an undergraduate degree as well as demonstrated professional experience, success, ties to the Mount Vernon community, and an understanding of the college admission process. Mentors are expected to take mentees to visit colleges and meet with them at least once a week to ensure they remain on track in preparing for college. As added benefits, the program pays for ACT or SAT preparation classes for its students, reimburses for travel expenses associated with college visits, and will reimburse students for up to ten college application fees. For the mentors, the experience is a rewarding opportunity to give back and actively participate in their community. For the mentees, the guidance received can prove critical and even life-changing. Many of them are first-generation college students, so their admission to a competitive university, without the program's resources and their mentors' guidance, is not a given. Mount Vernon, after all, is not exactly a community in which elite, university-level educational achievement is the norm.

Though its quaint moniker, "The City of Homes," might suggest otherwise, Mount Vernon, New York differs vastly from George Washington's idyllic, affluent Mount Vernon, Virginia. For one thing, Mount Vernon, New York is an inner ring suburb of New York City, with a palpable grittiness. Its southern end, in fact, borders the Bronx. And while beautiful single family homes and neighborhoods abound in Mount Vernon, so do densely populated multi-family developments. Within these homes, one can find a wide array of people, as Mount Vernon boasts uncommonly high ethnic diversity, including a large African-American population and many immigrants from Brazil. Many residents are no doubt drawn to Mount Vernon, in part, because of its desirable locale. Nearly all areas of the New York Metropolitan Area are easily accessible from its various parkways and multiple transit stations. Midtown Manhattan, for instance, is only a 30 minute train ride away. This advantageous location benefits commuters, residents, and business owners alike.

Despite these positive features, however, Mount Vernon remains fraught with numerous socioeconomic challenges. For example, according to recent U.S. Census data, 16.1% of Mount Vernon residents are in poverty. In neighboring Bronxville and New Rochelle, the percentage of persons in poverty is 2.6% and 10.7%, respectively. Crime rates have declined in recent years, but continue to sit well above national and state averages. Economic development occurs in fits and starts, but struggles to match that of similarly situated inner ring suburb communities nearby. The high school graduation rate also falls well short of the New York State average.

Against this backdrop, I met Michael, my mentee, last summer. A bright, shy, exceedingly polite 16-year-old, Michael was a junior at a high school in Mount Vernon. We first met at a local diner a short walk from my apartment and a few storefronts down from the real estate office where Michael's dad worked. After Michael and I each exchanged brief, semi-awkward pleasantries, I quickly got to the important questions: What's your favorite sport? Soccer. Do you like video games? Yes, Call of Duty is my favorite. From there, I moved on to the more

mundane—but, I suppose equally important—questions, like whether Michael had thought about college much, and if so, what did he want in a college. I quickly learned that he had not thought about college much, but knew that he wanted to stay close to home and major in marine biology. This provided a great segue for us to discuss some of the many terrific universities within a four-hour radius of the New York Metropolitan Area. And, like any proud University of Michigan alumnus, I got to pontificate about the merits and joys of spending four years in Ann Arbor. Unfortunately, Michael was unmoved by my pontification.

Following that initial meeting at the local diner, Michael and I would return nearly every week for an hour or so to chat about his college preparation plans. Perhaps foreshadowing my eventual move, I always ordered the California Club Sandwich. During our meetings, we discussed Michael's classes, different colleges, the SAT/ACT, summer programs, extracurricular enrichment classes, and occasionally, the most inscrutable yet inescapable topic for 16-year-old and 30-year-old guys alike—the fairer sex. As one who was similarly studious and sometimes shy as a 16-year-old, I felt uniquely positioned to offer him advice and reassurance based on my own experience. “Don't worry,” I said, “things will get better with the ladies. Eventually the tables will turn and they'll appreciate a smart, polite, nice guy like you even if they don't right now.” For Michael's benefit, I neglected to mention that in my case, the table-turning took about ten years. Maybe his luck will be better.

It took a while for Michael and I to develop a strong rapport. To his credit, he was initially wary of befriending a total stranger—even one who purportedly only wanted to help him. So at the outset, my gregariousness—or, perhaps garrulousness is the better term—was met with reticence. As one who takes pride in often being able to connect with others fairly easily, this was slightly unnerving. After all, I have a nephew only a couple of years older than Michael. He and I have always been able to talk easily and openly, so I (incorrectly) assumed the same dynamic would naturally occur with Michael from the start. Our early disconnect made me wonder if Michael saw me as a mentor/friend or just another annoying, lecturing adult whose longwinded orations he had to endure. With time, to my relief, I learned that Michael saw me as the former. Or, at least, that's what I convinced myself. So all was well. In fact, to borrow a sports analogy, I began to imagine myself as the older, sagacious locker room veteran, with Michael as the young, upstart talent—limitless in potential, but desirous of my guidance. And then, just as our mentor-mentee dynamic was improving, I decided to move to California. Three time zones and 2,500 miles away.

And not for a family emergency or something similarly compelling, but for a job. Another lawyer job. Something that I—presumably—could have found in New York. How could I explain this to Michael? I wondered. He wouldn't know or care about the professional benefits of being in-house versus at a firm, or doing government affairs work instead of litigation. Nor would he appreciate the work-life balance change or the Bay Area's proximity to Napa. And, he likely wouldn't care that I had, in fact, looked for similar jobs in New York for years, but to no avail. He would just see it as me leaving—only a few weeks after we'd met. With this in mind, the excitement surrounding my move soon gave way to guilt. I didn't want to abandon Michael just as we were getting to know each other. The mentor program required a two-year commitment that ended when the student graduated from high school. I wanted to fulfill that commitment. I just didn't know if I still could.

Two months passed. On a chilly weekend afternoon, I ambled into the diner to meet with Michael. Because the demands of my move—packing, trips to California to see apartments, etc.—had occupied most of my free time, I had not seen Michael in person in a few weeks. Instead, we’d kept in touch via text message. At this point, my apartment was all packed up with boxes destined for a new home on the other side of the country. The countdown to California and my bittersweet, gradual farewell to New York were well underway. Christmas decorations hung in the storefronts along our Mount Vernon neighborhood’s main thoroughfare, Gramatan Avenue. As Michael and I sat and talked, the pangs of guilt stirred within me. Two months had passed, and I had not yet told him about the move. But today was the day to do it. I was leaving quite soon, so it made little sense to wait any longer.

Toward the end of our lunch, I handed Michael an early Christmas gift. The box containing the gift was adorned with the best wrapping job I could muster, though it still looked like a sloppily assembled mess. Nevertheless, Michael, in his unfailing politeness, tore off the wrapping paper with the steady, dexterous precision of a surgeon. Minutes later, the gift was revealed: a shiny new iPad. Evinced the muted enthusiasm of a teenager (and professed Android fan), Michael thanked me for the gift. Then came the moment. I sheepishly divulged that the motivation for the gift was not generosity alone.

I told Michael that I had accepted a new job that required me to move to California very soon. It was a tremendous career opportunity that I could not pass up. And though I was excited, one glaring downside was that a significant change in our mentor-mentee relationship was inevitable. After apologizing for moving away and not sharing the news of my move sooner, I expressed to Michael that I wanted to remain his mentor and I did not want to break the two-year commitment I made to him. So the solution to the long distance, I proposed, would be for us to use his new iPad to conduct our weekly meetings via FaceTime. I asked Michael if he would be ok with this arrangement. Fortunately, he said yes. Phew! Although visibly disappointed by the news, Michael ultimately understood why I made the difficult choice to move away for the new job. In fact, exuding the calm levelheadedness of someone many years his senior, he actually offered encouragement—telling me that everything would be okay. Shortly thereafter, we shook hands and departed the diner. Michael headed home, while I went for a short walk, relieved that Michael had taken the news so well. Though my guilt would not subside entirely, I relished the chance to meander around the neighborhood for a final time, at last free of the weight of my concern about breaking the news to Michael. No longer did I have to worry that by moving to California, I would abandon my mentee. Off to the West I went.

Since that chilly weekend afternoon, I’ve tried to fulfill my mentoring commitment as much as possible. Michael and I communicate regularly, both through text messages and our weekly FaceTime check-in calls. We’ve even taken trips to Boston (in April) and Philadelphia (in late July) to visit numerous colleges, with his dad benevolently doing all of the driving. For the Boston trip, Michael and his dad drove up from Mount Vernon, while I flew in from San Francisco. Taking advantage of my company’s generous policy of giving employees 24 hours of PTO for volunteer work each year, I was able to take a day off from work to fly to Boston without losing a precious vacation day. Even without this benefit, I would have made the trip. But my company’s forward-thinking policy prevents employees from having to choose between taking time for themselves and taking time to serve the community. In fact, if anything, it incentivizes the latter.

The trips to Boston and Philadelphia were incredibly rewarding. Strolling through the lush campuses of several elite Northeastern universities, I could see Michael excitedly envisioning himself as a college freshman in the fall of 2017. This was a far cry from our first meeting, when Michael told me he had not thought much about college. In addition, not only did I get to know Michael and his dad better through the college tours, but I was also touched by their uncommonly tight father-son bond. As an infant, Michael cried inconsolably on the morning of September 11, 2001. Instead of ignoring Michael's cries, his dad delayed his commute into Manhattan to stay and comfort him. Because of the delay, Michael's dad missed a meeting scheduled for that morning—in his office, on one of the upper floors of the World Trade Center. Everyone who made it to the meeting was killed. To this day, Michael's dad graciously credits Michael as the hero who saved his life, perhaps with the aid of Providence.

Along with their father-son bond, spending time with Michael and his dad has also allowed me to learn about some aspects of their worldview that stem from their unique heritage. Reflecting Mount Vernon's diversity, Michael's family is Indian, but his parents came to the United States from Guyana. So his father's outlook, in particular, offers a rare blend of experiences and affinities tied to being at once South Asian and South American. Michael's dad often speaks of how growing up in Guyana made him want to move to the United States for more opportunity. And although he missed his family when he left his country at 18 to go to college in Canada, certain precepts of his Indian culture gave him the strength to embrace the trials of developing into a responsible adult in a faraway land with no family or friends nearby. Throughout our car rides around Boston and Philadelphia, Michael has typically sat silently in the back of the car while his dad and I have talked. I can only imagine the thoughts running through his head. Probably something along the lines of: "Gosh, I wish these blowhards would shut up!" Still, one thing is certain. The sacrifices his parents made to provide a life for him in America have undoubtedly seeped into Michael's consciousness. And I have no doubt that they will continue to motivate and inspire him as he moves forward in life.

Late September marked almost exactly one year since my first interview for my current position. What a difference a year makes. Early in the afternoon of an unseasonably warm Tuesday, after leaving an insurance industry conference, I hopped into a rental car in Philadelphia. The destination: Mount Vernon, New York. The drive time: about 90 minutes, maybe more with traffic. Driving up I-95 into familiar surroundings, I felt a familiar sense of anticipation. It was the same anticipation that greeted me on my jaunts to New York during my college years in the mid-aughts, and, even more memorably, during my first ever visit to New York in the spring of 2001. At that time, I was still in high school and came with my parents. We drove all the way from Michigan. There's nothing like that initial, split-second peek one gets at the Manhattan skyline when approaching from New Jersey. A teasing glimpse at the wonders of the world's greatest city. The Empire State Building playfully waves hello from afar before ducking out of sight with the curve of the highway. Since my first visit back in 2001, taking in the skyline view from the other side of the Hudson has given me goosebumps. And this time was no different.

After navigating pockets of early rush hour traffic heading toward Westchester County, I arrived in Mount Vernon. With the chatterbox GPS as my guide, I pulled into the parking lot of the Board of Education. It was my first time visiting the building, which appeared to be in the midst of a major renovation. The ramshackle façade, I presumed, belied the hard work and brainpower exerted by those laboring within. Once inside, I immediately recognized the familiar face of the founder of Mount Vernon Star Scholars, Norm Savoie. He was already seated in preparation for

the Board's meeting and warmly said hello. We chatted briefly for several minutes before a hush swept over the crowd as the meeting began. Then Michael's dad walked in. Just in time.

At the start of the meeting, the Mount Vernon Board of Education honored Mount Vernon Star Scholars for its contribution to the community, including students at Mount Vernon's high schools. Norm spoke briefly to provide information about the organization and accept a plaque given to him by the Board. It was wonderful to see such an impactful organization receive much-deserved recognition. Because I was already in nearby Philadelphia for a business trip, I had driven up to show support. I also hoped that I would be able to spend some time with Michael. After all, I hadn't seen him since our Philadelphia road trip with his dad in late July. To my disappointment, though, he was not able to make it to the meeting. A severe ankle sprain in gym class the day before had made it inadvisable—and painful—for him to walk. So we promised to meet at the local diner whenever I was in town again. Just like old times. Michael's understandable absence was certainly a letdown. But, as a consolation, Norm, his husband, Michael's dad, I all went to dinner together. We talked about Michael, Mount Vernon, and the joys and challenges of mentoring, among other things. They even told me they would someday help me find a house in Mount Vernon, if I should ever want to return from the West Coast.

With the upheaval of the last year behind us, this fall is crunch time for Michael and me—the launch point for his college applications, and my biggest test as his mentor. I welcome the challenge. Serving as a mentor, even from afar, has been amazingly worthwhile. Michael was already an impressive young man when we met for the first time. But I've watched him grow, mature, and develop into an independent thinker—ready for college and ready for the world. And while I have no idea which university he'll ultimately choose, I am confident that, having explored many colleges in-person already, he will make an informed, responsible choice. This will, I hope, springboard him to excellent career opportunities down the line. And perhaps someday in the future, he can mentor a promising high school student like himself, and pay it forward.

I share this story not to tout myself, but rather, to tout Mount Vernon Star Scholars and mentoring programs like it, that help students in underserved communities. Despite our demanding careers and busy schedules, mentoring offers each of us a chance to make a world of difference in the life of a young person. And the wonders of today's technology—texting, FaceTime, gchat, etc.—make mentoring doable, at least occasionally, for even the busiest among us. Even, in some instances, from thousands of miles and several time zones away.