

Prologue



Mentoring has been a very important theme in my life and in my work. I was a public school teacher prior to law school, and during law school I taught legal writing in a fellowship program at Georgetown Law. I mentored junior lawyers throughout my practice years, and I developed the *Best Friends at the Bar* book series to help young women overcome the challenges unique to females in the practice and guide them in making good personal and professional choices that could lead to satisfying and successful careers. I lecture, and I blog, and I counsel, and I write with that in mind. It is both my mission and my passion, and the feedback that I receive makes it clear that my work is making a difference for young women lawyers and those who lead them.

So, it is completely predictable that eventually I would get around to looking at who mentored *me* and what important lessons I learned along the way. I have had many mentors—those who taught me the fundamentals of practice, those who made me love the law, those who gave me the confidence to stretch myself and take risks along the way, and those who were strong examples as professionals. All of them were valuable for me in becoming the lawyer I wanted to be. They know who they are and that I am grateful to them.

But, among them, my truest and most powerful mentors were the lawyers, including my father, who I observed as a child growing up in a small town in middle America. They were my first “*Best Friends at the Bar*,” and I believe they serve as models for what our profession *should* stand for—and did at one time.

By their examples, the lawyers of my dad’s generation showed me what it is to be an honorable, compassionate, and effective lawyer and advocate, and I observed it all with enthusiasm and fascination. I loved to visit my dad’s law office and watch him work, and sometimes he would take me with him to the courthouse to file a paper or sit outside chambers while he spoke with the judge. There was something about those experiences that stuck with me and gave me the confidence to follow him in the profession at a time when women were far outnumbered by men in law school and law practice.

For decades after my dad and his colleagues turned out the lights on law practices spanning as many as 50 years and throughout my own practice years, I did not see as much emphasis on the values I observed in the lawyers of my dad’s

generation. Law firms had grown bigger, and the business of law took on the frenetic pace and the misplaced priorities of some of its corporate clients. The emphasis had shifted to power and money, and there was a lower bar for integrity and ethical and responsible behavior. Lawyers were indicted, judges were recalled, and the front pages of newspapers were dominated by scandals involving members of the legal profession.

Today, however, there is an exciting shift under way with the advent of a new generation of lawyers who have the potential to drive significant changes in our profession. They are young, their numbers are staggering, they have an arguably healthier set of values than recent generations of lawyers, and they represent the future of the legal profession.

They are known as millennial lawyers, and, generally speaking, they were born between 1980 and 2000. They look at the world differently, and they have a lot to say about changes to the law profession, which they consider essential to respond to the collective values of their generation of lawyers. And we have a lot to learn from them.

Of course, this does not mean that *all* millennial lawyers embrace these new values and are demanding change. What it means is that there is a trend among millennial lawyers to reject current law firm values, especially those at large law firms, and I see enough evidence of this trend to consider it significant and worthy of discussion.

It is the perfect time for a book about millennial lawyers. There is a crisis in the law profession that has been building for years and only now is being widely acknowledged. That crisis, which centers on the negative effects of “toxic” law firm cultures, puts the values of millennial lawyers at the heart of the debate.

In the Fall of 2016, I wrote an article for *Corporate Counsel* magazine that addressed the negative effects of “toxic” law firm cultures, which focus on power and money and encourage workaholic behaviors that lead to stress-related illnesses and dependencies. In that article, I concluded that at this point in history we do not *do* the profession of law well in America. Here is some of what I wrote at that time.

We need to start with a fundamental analysis of ‘happiness’ and healthy living in both our professional and personal lives and combine it with workplace practices and policies that we support and dignify.

The future of our profession depends on it. Generation Y [aka the Millennial Generation] already has made it clear that the flawed work ethic of prior generations is not acceptable to them. If these young people consistently refuse to go into professions such as law because they are afraid of the traditional lifestyle and the requisite choices that will negatively affect the balance of their lives, we all will lose.

Law firm leaders are capable of the creativity and vision to make a

brighter future for the next generation of practitioners. . . . The only thing standing between the current workaholic culture of law firms and this brighter future for lawyers is greed. It was the greed of Wall Street that brought on the Great Recession of 2008, and that experience should serve as a harbinger to law firm leadership. Greed and pursuit of high profits at the expense of the well-being of lawyers and their families will lead to no good. . . . Surely, we can do better than that.

Today, almost two years since that article was published, much more is being written about the problems related to toxic law firm cultures. And the problems appear to be getting worse. I have included some of this information at the end of the book for your reference. The research will reinforce the excellent instincts millennials have about the law profession, and it also will challenge millennial lawyers with the wisdom of more experienced leaders. All law professionals need to pay attention to this research and use it as both an outline and a mandate for change.

But there is a major impediment to that goal and process. The negative attitudes of senior practitioners about millennial lawyers present a significant obstacle to the change that is necessary.

My anecdotal research indicates that senior and more experienced practitioners fall into two categories in their attitudes about millennial lawyers. They are either the “complainers” or the “complainer/fixers.” Inherent in this rough categorization is the realization that almost all experienced lawyers complain about millennial lawyers at one time or another because they do not understand them and because the values and beliefs of the new generation of lawyers interfere with traditional methods of practice.

The *complainers* include lawyers in small firms who are likely to shutter practices at the end of their careers and do not need to rely on millennial lawyers for firm succession plans and future income generation.

The *complainer/fixers* tend to be concentrated in mid-size and large practices where issues of law firm succession, legacies, and responsibilities as income sources are constantly on the minds of managers and leaders. These practitioners complain, but they also understand the imperative of fixing what is broken to safeguard the future of their firms.

And, some of these *complainer/fixers* see darkness on the horizon. It is the opinion of at least one partner in a large international firm, who also is a member of her firm’s management committee, that millennial lawyers could lead to the demise of Big Law. Another Big Law partner put it this way, “Understanding how to motivate and lead younger generations of lawyers is at the forefront of the managerial issues for nearly every law firm leader I know, and, for those who aren’t focusing on it, they need to be!”

These comments are ominous and forecast huge challenges for law firms that are not flexible enough to embrace new ideas and new ways of doing business. Just as the law profession is being saturated with millennial lawyers, the business clients of law firms are being saturated with Millennial Generation business school graduates. Millennials speak the same language, have similar values, and understand each other. Losing millennial lawyers risks losing millennial clients as well.

If the law profession fails to harness the power of this new generation of lawyers and to accept responsibility for addressing and bringing about the kinds of changes that are responsive to millennials and their values, our profession will be on collision course with a world that is pulsating with change. The time has come to start paying attention to clearly articulated lifestyle declarations from the present to inform positive and lasting policies and behaviors for the future.

It also is time for us to recall what our profession used to be. We must start listening to strong voices from the past—voices from the generation of lawyers who mentored many of us and who tended the profession well and did not compromise their values. If we do that, we will discover that the values of that past generation of lawyers and those of millennial lawyers intersect and create a bridge from the past to the present and forward to the future.

The concept of practicing law in a way that creates harmony between personal and professional lives, that embraces opportunities to reach those who cannot afford legal services, that benefits neighborhoods and communities, that demands the highest levels of respect for clients and colleagues, that provides willful career guidance for young lawyers, and that brings distinction to the profession and upholds the highest ethical standards of practice is what I inherited from my mentors. I now pass those lessons on to you.

All young lawyers and law firm leaders can apply the messages here to a wide variety of practice settings, whether they are small-town lawyers or urban practitioners, and they all should embrace the information here as a means toward improving their professional lives *and* the profession. It is all about values and the way lawyers look at their roles in a demanding profession and in a world that is changing with or without them.

This book is for millennial lawyers and for those who lead them. This book is for Big Law and Smaller Law. This book is for you.