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The Intern of Dorian Gray

Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com
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New Jersey Volunteer
Lawyers for the Arts
director Tracey Batt

One of the real benefits of running a legal services organization like New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (NJVLA) is the opportunity to work with an ever-changing lineup of law students.

When I first left big-firm practice three and a half years ago to become Legal Services Manager at Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (PVLA), I approached my oversight of the law student volunteers with trepidation. Although most were unpaid interns, some of these people were *externs*, for heaven's sake – they were getting school credit for working for me. To put it another way, they

were *paying tuition* for the privilege of working for me! As I perused résumés, looked at graduation dates, and did a little quick math, I was struck repeatedly by one thought: boy, am I old. Because I invariably measure both history and my life in terms of popular music, the questions I posed framed themselves in this way: what on earth could I possibly say to someone whose lifespan does not cross John Lennon's? What could I offer someone who was smearing her first birthday cake across her face while I was at Live Aid?

Much to my surprise, the answer turned out to be, and still is: a lot more than I would have thought. Many students enter law school without a career plan more definite than "be a lawyer." These people often seek internships at places like The Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts to focus their goals more narrowly by networking with practicing attorneys and gathering experience in as wide as possible a variety of substantive areas of the law. Here my advanced age and embarrassingly meandering career path miraculously transformed themselves into "a wealth of wide-ranging experience."

Did an intern want to know what it was really like to work for a big firm in Manhattan? I could regale him or her with exciting tales of working on billion-dollar deals, seeing my name on a brief to the U.S. Supreme Court, car service, and three shifts of administrative assistance, not to mention horror stories of unreasonable deadlines and 48-hour "days."

Did an intern want to know about life at a small firm in a small town? I had logged nearly 20 years in various low-level positions at my father's six-person firm before law school. (Before you get the impression that I am even older than I actually am, my father, in clear violation of child labor laws, set me to work as Saturday-morning receptionist before my age reached double digits, compensating me with corned beef sandwiches and 45 RPM records. If you do not understand the latter reference, the chances are slim that you will understand the point of this column.)

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Most important to the artistic types who make up the bulk of the PVLA and NJVLA law student workers, I could answer, affirmatively and personally, the question "are there positions out there that combine arts and the law while allowing one to retain one's sense of self?" Of course, I would need to add, "But you can't have my job."

Once I relaxed into my role as mentor, I started to notice something strange. As semesters progressed and I got to know the interns, their levels of maturity increased, and I felt younger. The street, it seems, runs two ways. There is no way I can spend so much time with these young future lawyers without absorbing some of their enthusiasm for the law, for the arts, and for life. I even find myself learning another generation's popular culture references, from "Saved by the Bell" and "Oregon Trail" to the "Hollaback Girl."

I always thought that being a mentor would be time-consuming, onerous, and unpleasant. I could not have been further from the mark. It's easy, it's fun, and it's rewarding, and I highly recommend it. Here's all you need to do:

- Make yourself available at all times and answer every question fully and with brutal honesty.
- Share your experiences, both good and bad.
- Respond immediately and enthusiastically to all requests for reference letters and calls from potential employers.
- Brainstorm as many ideas as possible when asked for career guidance, and don't be afraid to suggest something different.
- Use all your contacts – don't hesitate to make a telephone call, send an email or letter, make an introduction, or call in a favor on behalf of the next generation of legal professionals.
- Keep abreast of developments in the law and start conversations with, "Did you see yesterday's decision in that field that interests you? How do you think that will affect the industry?"
- Be a friend.

I was lucky enough to have a great mentor at Weil, Gotshal & Manges. Jonathan Weiss was just a few years my senior, and we had a shared love of music and similar off-beat senses of humor. He taught me many things about surviving big-firm life, and his enthusiasm for music licensing law and litigation was highly contagious. When he died recently, after a courageous battle with cancer, in addition to being hailed as a wonderful family man and exceptional co-worker, he received two much quieter tributes from unexpected sources. First, former Weil Gotshal associates turned out in droves to remember him as their mentor. This surprised me only because I couldn't imagine Jon having the time to lavish as much attention on other associates as he did on me. Second came the parade of attorneys at other firms with whom he had waged pitched battles over the years as he zealously represented his clients. In fact, the very general counsel whom Jon had joked had a dartboard in his office with Jon's face on it was there to pay his heartfelt respects. This is a legacy I can only aspire to leave behind me: that I was respected by my co-workers and opponents alike.

Be a mentor to a law student. The benefits to both of you will be incalculable. It's cheaper and less painful than plastic surgery for rolling back the years. And if you're really good at it, your beneficial influence will continue long after you're gone.

Tracey I. Batt, Esq., is the Executive Director of New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, Inc. Before joining NJVLA, she was the Associate Director and Legal Services Manager of Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts and an associate at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP in New York, where she practiced copyright and music licensing law for seven years.

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