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### Lessons from the Big Dog

A little more than a year ago, Chicago lawyer Michael W. Coffield died at his desk. Mike was a friend and mentor to all and a lawyer's lawyer. Those who had the privilege of knowing Mike knew that there was always some nugget of wisdom glistening in the frenetic frenzy. Mike was always teaching us how to be better — better lawyers, better friends, and better people.

In the fall of 1996, I read an article in *Chicago Lawyer* about Michael leaving Coffield Ungaretti & Harris and going solo. On a lark, I picked up the phone and introduced myself.

"Call my secretary Monday and schedule a time to come over for coffee," he said. With Mike, it was always that simple. Everyone was welcome.

At our first meeting, Mike was gracious. He was always gracious. We drank coffee, he looked at my resume, and he talked about "Moby Dick." For nearly the entire next decade, I had the privilege of practicing law in the office directly next to his.

Mike was a mentor par excellence. Though it's a certainty I missed many of them, here are 10 of Mike's lessons, in no particular order:

Lesson 1 — Always be civil.

"Do you know who is the most important person in a courtroom? It's not the judge ... it's the judge's clerk. Treat the clerk better than you treat the judge."

It's doubtful that there has been a lawyer in the history of Chicago who befriended more adversaries than Mike Coffield. Of course, Mike fought hard for his clients. But when a case was over, his opposing attorney was usually added to his list of friends. Many would come to him for advice.

Lesson 2 — Dress like a lawyer.

No one dressed better than Mike. His haberdasher shed many a tear at his funeral. Mike

never bought in to "casual Fridays," and when I'd show up to the office in jeans, he'd shoot me a look that said, "C'mon Peter, you're a lawyer. You don't work at the rodeo."

Lesson 3 — Read.

Mike was an avid reader of *The New York Review of Books*. Whatever interested him, he bought, reading multiple books at the same time.

"I've got one going in the bedroom, one in the bathroom, one in the car, one in the kitchen, and one at the office."

He read novels, history, politics, and art, and encouraged everyone to do the same.

Lesson 4 — Share, and don't keep score.

Mike couldn't just take one person to lunch. He'd take everyone to lunch. If a book sounded especially interesting, he'd order multiple copies and hand them out. He bought tickets to just about everything and gave most of them away. And most importantly, he never kept track of any of it.

Lesson 5 — Leave something on the table.

Many believe that the best negotiators are those who can squeeze the last nickel out of a transaction. Mike didn't. "Always take the long view. You are better off at the end of the day with a little goodwill than you would be with the few extra dollars."

Lesson 6 — Lead.

One might think that Mike's selflessness might have made him a human doormat. Not the case. He was honored constantly and elected president of just about every organization he ever joined, accepting each role with vigor, throwing himself wholeheartedly into and improving everything he touched.

Lesson 7 — Think of others.

Mike was lavish in his praise and congratulations, usually by way of a personal note scribbled with huge letters in blue, green, or

purple marker. And no occasion was too small to celebrate: "Congratulations, I heard you had lunch yesterday. I wish you all the best. Mike."

Lesson 8 — Mentor.

Mike was proud of his role in the Inns of Courts and its mentoring of young lawyers. "How does one pay back a mentor?" he once asked. "The only way to do it is to pass along what you've learned to someone else. Pay it forward."

Lesson 9 — Take it as it comes.

Mike had his fair share of challenges, especially in the last few years of his life. In handling the steady deterioration of his wife's health due to Alzheimer's disease, not to mention living with his own health issues, he never whined.

"Getting old ain't for sissies," is all he'd say, quoting his mother.

Lesson 10 — Leave 'em wanting more.

"The best place to sit at a party is with your back to a wall and with a clear shot of the door. From there, you can see people come and go and can spend at least a little time with everyone.

"And when do you leave? Leave right at the point when you're having the most fun you ever had. Why leave then? First, it's never going to get any better. Second, leave when everyone still wants you to stay. Leave 'em wanting more."

These, of course, were just a few of Mike's lessons.

But when you boil everything down, perhaps the greatest lesson was to enjoy being alive. Mike did that by living "big," adopting what can only be called the "Golden Rule Plus." Treat others better than you could ever hope to be treated.

And that was, perhaps, his greatest lesson. ■

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