



## MENTORING MONTH STORY: LAWYER AS MENTOR

Joshua Levine

When I was 19 years old, I was elected president of my fraternity. Normally, this would be a pretty amazing achievement, and it was...for all of a month. Two weeks into my presidency, we hosted an event at which our pledges (potential new members) were encouraged to get to know one another. I could not be there, but, apparently, the affair went forward as anticipated until the pledge master (the one in charge of teaching recruits the fraternity's history) pulled a gun and put it to the back of a pledge's head to make a point.

This was the story as it was related to me a few weeks afterwards...by the *school!* As I said, I wasn't even there. In fact, I didn't even *hear* about it until the university contacted me, to inform me that "someone" had anonymously tipped them to what had happened.

Imagine my reaction: I am nineteen years old and shouldering a huge responsibility that, until this moment, had seemed pretty stress-free. All of a sudden, it's definitely *not*. All I could do was swallow hard and listen. Next, the official advised me that, unless I could explicitly prove 1) that it was a rogue event or 2) that I had taken steps to report it myself, then, as "the face of the fraternity," I would be held responsible...for this and for whatever else had taken place during the gathering in question.

*Is this what it means to be president of a fraternity?* I was always warned about facing consequences for the actions of my brothers, but I thought I could trust them enough to not do something like *this*. While there was always an everpresent threat of something happening, I never thought it could become my reality.

My head was spinning. I didn't know what to do, outside of cooperate with the school. But how could I prove either of those defenses when I didn't even know that a gun had been pulled until weeks after it happened? When everything that I knew I had been told *by my prosecutor!* Now I was on the verge of losing everything that I had worked for, all because I had trusted the wrong person to be in charge of a simple get-together.

At this point, I could really have used a mentor. But there was no where I could turn for help. No one I knew had suffered anything similar and no one in my circle could offer me any significant advice.

So, I buckled down. If no one was going to help me then I was going to work my tail off to prove my innocence and, in turn, to save my fraternity from being kicked off campus. It took several months. It involved my debating with and, yes, sometimes yelling at (how did I dare?!) university administrators who were less than available to work with me (although some seemed to truly care).

While all this was going on, the media was splashing my name and face all over the place, insinuating that I had condoned the rash action of one irresponsible fraternity brother. I got phone calls from far-away relatives I rarely saw, asking "What the hell did you do? What were you thinking?" I heavily suggested my brothers not speak to anyone about the episode or to publicly represent our fraternity in any way. I found myself wearing hats and glasses to hide from the media that seemed everpresent on our campus; I just wanted to attend my classes and get through the days, preparing for the inquiry. But we finally got there.

The day of the final hearing dawned. The school's inquiry consisted of an uninterrupted four hours of me explaining what I had uncovered about the incident. I answered questions clearly meant to back me into a corner.

I introduced witnesses to the fact that the incident had occurred because of the actions of a single fraternity brother who had gone rogue, making an ill-advised decision entirely on his own on the spur of the moment.

All of that preparation and pain for it to come down to this agonizing four hours. And those four hours were excruciating, truly painful for me to undergo. Yet, in the end, I won. I had my answer. I had overcome the odds. I had proven my innocence and my fraternity's lack of guilt, despite the media, that assumed I was guilty, despite the public, that therefore *knew* that I was guilty, and despite the school officials, who also, for their own reasons, held fast to that belief.

So why did I feel so defeated? Because I felt betrayed by someone whom I thought was a close friend. Because I no longer knew if I could trust anyone. Because it had cost me all of that time and effort *just to prove what I knew to be true from the get-go.*

Eventually, my overwhelming distress faded. Other student leaders started coming to me for advice. Because of my experience, I was now able to provide the guidance to others that I had needed so badly and been unable to obtain, mentoring my colleagues and friends. This is not to say that other student organizations were constantly getting into trouble. Instead, they wanted to know how to avoid it, so that no one would have to go through what I had suffered. Over the next three years, my advice was often sought. Not only that, but, together, the university and I were able to put together a plan that properly protected the student organizations, their leaders, and, of course, the university.

What I discovered about mentoring over those three years was invaluable. When you go through an experience this traumatic, you change for sure, but there is also so much that you learn after the fact. Serving as a mentor to others taught me more than any student conduct case could ever have done. It gave me a way to work through everything that I had been through and the opportunity to ensure that others benefit from my mistakes.

Most importantly, it showed me that as a mentee, you can access knowledge that will be truly beneficial, and, that as a mentor, you gain something even better: personal growth.

This is part of the reason I plan to attend law school. I see the role of lawyer not just as advocate and counselor, but also as mentor to the client. What a fabulous opportunity, to be paid to mentor my clients!

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*This article was written by Joshua Levine with support and assistance from his mentor, Joryn Jenkins as part of their participation in [Mentoring Month](#).*

**Joshua Levine** is an intern with Open Palm Law where he is gaining legal experience while he applies to law schools. A graduate of the University of Central Florida with his B.A. in Legal Studies, he served as president of his fraternity and was heavily involved in the Interfraternity Council on campus. [Connect with Joshua!](#)

**Joryn Jenkins** is a trial attorney with 40 years of courtroom experience, now in private practice at *Open Palm* in Tampa, where she focuses her practice on family law. With her B.A. degree from Yale and her J.D. from Georgetown, she has authored several books on legal marketing. Her expertise in legal ethics led to her receipt of the 2001 *A. Sherman Christensen Award* from the American Inns of Court; she also received the 1997 *President's Award*, the Federal Bar Association's highest award. [Find out more and connect with Joryn!](#)

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