
ARTICLE: What Beyonce Can Teach Attorneys Mentorship in the WBA

by **Melissa Kenney Ngaruri, Esq.**

Three months ago I signed up for mentorship at the Women's Bar Association. No one is assigned as my mentor yet, but with my recent entry in the MD Bar and my back-to-back work days, I can't spare much time to follow up and ask for my mentor. But I can always make time for the Video Music Awards (VMAs).

Did you watch it too? In case you didn't, in essence two relevant events occurred. First, Kanye West, a seasoned music professional, yanked a microphone out of a young woman's hands (Taylor Swift) in the middle of her first big moment – her first VMA – and effectively silenced her.

Second, not long after watching Taylor Swift fade into the backstage, up stepped Beyonce, also a seasoned music industry leader. She accepted her own award, and then graciously stated she would give up her time so that Taylor Swift could finish her acceptance speech. 'I remember what it felt like being 17 and winning my first VMA,' Beyonce asserted to the audience, 'this young woman deserves her moment.' Beyonce then stepped back and gave Taylor Swift center stage.

In reflection, I thought of how many times young attorneys "mics" get yanked from their hands by more experienced professionals brashly willing to take advantage of their hard work and moments of glory. Even during inglorious moments in some job interviews as I enthusiastically described my accomplishments, my "mic" was yanked from my hands by a hiring attorney asking whether my husband also worked (What a reality check for this 21st century attorney!). I hear all-too-common stories of other associate attorneys being required to put their boss' name on published articles written by the associate, find themselves in situations where the senior attorney gets full credit or takes the billable hours for the junior's winning case strategy, regularly deal with broken promises or agreements for well-deserved salary increases. In a poor economic climate and a highly competitive job market, with little actual legal work experience or network and economic capital, young attorneys find ourselves forced to step back from the stage because we are in no bargaining position to stand up to say "This is my time, my work, my reward," when someone is making a grab at our microphone.

In the same week as the VMA's, The New York Times published an article discussing how women are more effective legislators than men. One reason may be that those legislators hold certain traits, like being able to succeed in spite of little support and little mentorship. My generation of women didn't travel the same contentious road as Rep. Judy Biggert, who faced being told that a man should have been in her seat in law school. These legislative pioneers weren't handed a sign-up sheet for mentors at their swearing in ceremony! Yet young professionals sometimes wonder if this pioneering generation has too hard a time switching roles to be effective mentors.

Mentoring requires a different skill set, setting aside concerns about your protégé as a future competitor or making time to mentor. Who modeled to these pioneers on how to empower a future generation? Simply put, that mindset and skill may not come easily to those who succeeded without much mentorship. As a consequence, many of my female attorney friends confide to me that they think women's bars are self-segregating and passé. They want nothing to do with joining a "women's" bar.

I suspect it is their own lukewarm experience with these professional pioneers, pioneers who pay lip service to women's empowerment, but when it really mattered to my young professional friends, the same pioneers wouldn't take a stand to help them personally when someone was stealing their microphone. I find that a shame, because no one wants to be a pioneer in the fight for equality, one is forced to be a pioneer – and without that support from our predecessors, my generation of attorneys may find themselves as pioneers again, fighting the same battles as our predecessors did beforehand. (By the way, yes my husband works, and no, it shouldn't matter to you, hiring attorney.)

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Beyonce's action is exactly how experienced attorneys in the Women's Bar can fulfill their role as mentors – by standing up for young professional women through supportive actions and enforcement of high expectations from our peers and others in the profession. At the VMA's Beyonce supported a young artist in a highly competitive career (technically, Taylor Swift is Beyonce's competition) by publicly giving away her own moment to make a statement about how music professionals should treat each other. During the VMA's, Beyonce showed all of us how established professionals who have the economic security and the position to be able to take a stand and give the gift of confidence can do so in those moments when a young professional needs the help. Without the aid of seasoned professional women standing up, like Beyonce did, to both intercede to stop abusive practices by others and to model assertive behavior to the next generation, young female attorneys could finish last economically, politically and socially. Without that mentorship and support during these highly competitive times, the next generation could end up having to fight the same battles over and over.

I'm looking forward to meeting my mentor someday. Perhaps my mentor will share a gift of confidence, be a good storyteller, or simply had a similar problem and made it good. Maybe my mentor will be the one to step up and say 'that isn't how we should treat our associates.' Definitely my mentor will enjoy mixing pop culture and legal references. As for now, I have Beyonce showing me how to pay it forward when it's my turn to be a mentor.



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SAVE THE DATE

What: The 9th Annual "Preparing for Success" Fall Forum

When: Saturday, November 21, 2009

Where: Rockville Campus of Montgomery College

This event is open to high school students in Montgomery County from public schools, private schools, independent living, alternative schools, etc. It is an all-day event that includes breakfast and lunch. There will be a keynote speaker; practical workshops for students headed to college or the workplace; raffle prizes; and a fashion show. **We would love to see many WBA members helping with the preparation and/or participating on the day of the event!**

For more information go to www.preparingforsuccess.org and to volunteer, please contact, the Hon. Katherine D. Savage at 240-777-9372