

Mentors

Robert Gerber

Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton, San Diego



It was April 2003. I anxiously took my seat as a call-back interviewee in the office of partner Robert Gerber in a San Diego high-rise. I remained an idealistic third-year law student, but was starting to believe the Am Law 100 world did not share my enthusiasm for effectuating social justice through the legal profession. The fact I'd done my summer work at a public interest organization was a turnoff for big law firms ("We're in this business to make

money," I'd been told). So I prepared myself to dialogue with Mr. Gerber about the usual stilted interview subjects, such as, "How was your moot court experience?"

But something caught my eye — a quilt hanging from the wall, each patchwork square containing the painted handprint of a different child. So I took a chance. "What's the story behind that quilt?" His answer literally changed the course of my life.

Turns out he got the quilt through a nonprofit organization for which he was a board member, after it was involved in humanitarian pro bono work helping a group of children with AIDS living in an orphanage in Africa. The handprints were those of the grateful children the organization had served. He concluded by looking me in the eye: "That quilt is a constant reminder to me that practicing law will earn you a living, but doing pro bono work will give you a reason to live."

So where do I sign?

Had he taught me only that truth, he would have been an inspirational mentor. But I was privileged to work closely with Bob Gerber for the next several years, learning what it really means to be a lawyer. To my delight, he gave me opportunities for pro bono work to solidify the lesson that practicing law is, at its core, about helping the most needy in society and bringing them justice.

But he also taught me how to exercise good judgment in any legal context. That included how to strategize and prioritize the elements of a case, and plan for contingencies. One time I cavalierly remarked, "I don't think that issue should be a problem," and he rightly chastened me, "An attorney's job is to always assume there will be a problem and figure out in advance how to solve it!" It included giving me permission to fail (which I did plenty), and to learn by doing. He taught me his office was a safe place so long as I took ownership of my mistakes, and when I did, he proved there was nobody more faithful to help correct them. And it included learning to accept honest, constructive criticism for the benefit of my growth, always followed by genuine affirmation when I got it right.

And through it all, he cared about me as a person, demonstrating great friendship in times of both professional and personal need. Bob Gerber taught me how to be a lawyer, but he continues to teach me how to be a better human being.

— Nathaniel Bruno,
Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton