

No One Gets There Alone: The Value of Mentorship Programs in the Legal Profession

By **Josh Mathew**

August 10, 2023

While serving in the U.S. Army, I was lucky to be surrounded by wise and compassionate sergeants who reminded me to “take care of soldiers,” and that “no one gets there alone.” They recognized that even the most accomplished, high-speed service members have leaned on the support of instructors, mentors and peers along the way. And I knew that principle to be true, as countless sergeants and junior enlisted folk took care of me as an officer and kept me straight.

That was also the case as I transitioned out of the Army, entered law school and began my legal career. So many friends, attorneys, and professors helped me along the way, and it has made me recognize not only the duty to pay it forward, but the critical need for mentorship in the legal profession. And that need is even greater if we are to make progress in ensuring that our profession reflects our country’s varied backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

The lack of diversity in the legal profession is **well documented**, and numerous structural changes are necessary to bring lasting change. But, by getting involved in pipeline mentorship programs, attorneys can provide support that lifts up those who might otherwise be left behind—particularly in the highly competitive process of becoming a judicial law clerk.

One such program is **Service to School (S2S)**, which provides free college and graduate school application counseling to military veterans and service members. Another is **Law Clerks for Diversity**

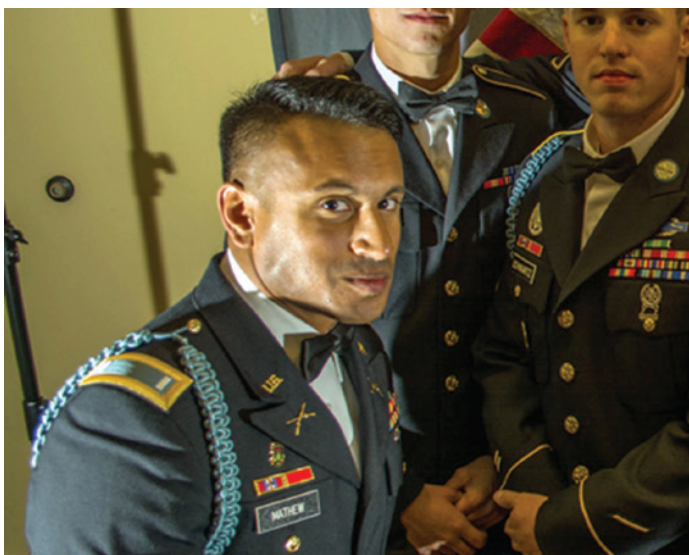


Courtesy photo

Josh Mathew of Zuckerman Spaeder LLP.

(LCD), which, in addition to working with law schools and judges, pairs students and recent graduates with mentors who can help them understand the benefits of clerking and how to navigate the application process. Echoing the sage advice of my sergeants, LCD’s mission recognizes that “everybody who ‘makes it’ has help.”

The unique importance of these pipeline programs was well-described by a first-generation law student of color I work with through LCD. She told me that the programs have been invaluable because they’ve connected her with people who have “survived” law school admissions or the clerkship application process. She has appreciated speaking with former clerks who have actually reviewed clerkship applications, and with attorneys who—by the very fact



Josh Mathew with his platoon

of going to law school—are familiar with the profiles and experiences of their classmates.

Because of this, my mentee knows that competitive applicants come from all kinds of backgrounds, and that her experiences are similar to those of folks who have made it. Without these mentorship programs—and without a lawyer in her family—she felt she would have largely been left to the (misguided) speculation and limited anecdotes often shared among anxious applicants (e.g., “You won’t get a clerkship if you’re not on Law Review.”). These conversations often discourage students from underrepresented backgrounds, who might already be on the fence, from applying at all.

Mentoring might seem daunting if you haven’t done it before or you don’t share your mentee’s background. And I fully acknowledge that, with my particular experience, it has been a natural fit for me to support applicants who are veterans or persons of color. But I guarantee that, regardless of your circumstances or background, you can make an impact as a mentor simply by being willing to share experiences, have a little empathy, and (in some cases) make a lot of “track changes.”

As an example, I serve as an ambassador in S2S’s Law School Group, where I assist current and former service members with application essays. For fear of sounding entitled or weak, many service members are reluctant to share stories of hardship as part of

the law school application process. However, with some active listening and a few questions, I have prodded mentees to open up about their compelling stories—a medal earned in combat, or obstacles overcome, like homelessness or substance abuse. This convinced them that they would not scare off admissions officers by discussing the trials that defined their service, and they became open to describing them in vivid detail.

Similarly, as an LCD mentor to prospective clerkship applicants, I work to pull back the curtain on what it means to be a clerk. I have worked with mentees to draft compelling cover letters that highlight their experiences as first-generation law students and explain how those experiences will enable them to be great clerks. In one case, I persuaded a mentee to highlight how she supported herself through college with part-time, not-so-glamorous jobs. Those experiences tell prospective judges that she has a strong work ethic, can manage stress, and navigate competing deadlines—all key traits of a great clerk.

Much of being a mentor in a pipeline program is explaining to first-generation mentees that their particular experiences will be respected, and drawing out the unique or powerful stories that they may be reluctant to tell—or may not even realize are compelling. Then it is simply a matter of helping them describe their experiences, in both their personal statement and resume, in language accessible to admissions officers or employers.

It will take structural reforms to dramatically improve diversity within the legal profession, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t steps each of us can take right now. Getting involved in a pipeline mentorship program is a relatively easy, low-commitment way to help our profession better reflect the make-up of our country. It also offers the chance to broaden your own perspective by connecting with law students and young lawyers from underrepresented backgrounds. Finally, as lawyers who have leaned on others for help, we have a duty to support mentorship programs as a quiet recognition that no one gets there alone.

Josh Mathew is a U.S. Army veteran and an associate at *Zuckerman Spaeder LLP*.