

The Friends Who Had Your Back

Take a moment to remember, and thank, your mentors, the friends who were there when you most needed it.

Kevin McGoff

I've been moderately good at expressing appreciation for those who pulled me up. Lots of people looked out for me on the path through my personal and professional life.

I kick myself for missing one expression of gratitude I neglected to make. But it was some years before I realized the favor a boss had bestowed upon me. There were others I missed, no doubt. With some I was better about saying thank you for moving me along.

The list of mentors gets longer as I pursue interests apart from the law. I'm a bit more conscious of letting those helping me along as a writer know that I value their time and advice. Along with the help they provide, good mentors leave us good memories and a story or two.

Like everyone, I was the beneficiary of much useful advice frequently offered by unpaid advisors. My father was one of them. He was never short on tips. His pearls of wisdom were more welcomed as I got older.

During my first paying job, I encountered a thorny issue. I was having difficulty collecting from a customer on my paper route. My father was on hand to help sort it out. His lesson on how to get paid for my work stuck with me—good thing, as I later encountered clients who thought I should work for a discount.

Dad's recipe for success in having my invoices paid was perseverance, proper timing, and calling in reinforcements when convincing a recalcitrant client that it was time to pay. Dad was my first mentor.

An entrepreneurial opportunity

My first big break came at age 10. My friend Jimmy went on vacation and entrusted to me his *Indianapolis Times* paper route. This led to me securing my own paper route, my first step toward financial independence. During my first year in business, 1963, I sold enough subscriptions to win a trip to Washington D.C. It was my first travel odyssey.

Shepherding two busloads of paper carriers around the nation's capital meant the *Times* had a set program for us. I nonetheless attempted to schedule myself into the White House. I wrote President Kennedy to announce my visit. Kenneth O'Donnell, his appointments secretary, wrote back. He let me down gently, telling me the president would be out of town the weekend of my scheduled visit. He wouldn't be able to meet with me. I went on the trip anyway.

It was my first time on a carrier bus and my initial trip away from my parents. I was assigned to share my first hotel room with two eighth graders. I abused my parents' trust by jumping on the bed, trying to touch the ceiling. My older and more sophisticated roommates defied authority by smoking a pack of cigarettes in the room.

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Dad schools me on getting paid

Paperboys—and papergirls, there were few at the time—were entrepreneurs. We collected the cost of the paper once a week. On Saturday mornings, we met our manager, Mr. Pressman, in the parking lot of Jordan's Drug Store. There, we paid for the papers we delivered from the funds we'd collected.

Our profit was what remained. Any outstanding funds not collected cut into the paperboy's pocket, not the profit of the *Indianapolis Times*. We were thus motivated to “collect for the *Times*,” the chant used when knocking on our customers' doors.

I had a serious drag on profitability one year. One of my customers was a single man who lived a street over from us. Mr. Creek was the ultimate slow pay. When a customer paid, they were given a receipt in the form of a small ticket torn from the page of a book. It was dated and marked “Paid,” denoting the week for which they'd paid for the paper.

Mr. Creek had very few of these receipts in his possession. They resided in my book. Pages of his unpaid tickets. I was 11 years old, carrying my customer's debt.

Jimmy had schooled me in the art of collecting. It was best to appear at a customer's door around dinner time on Friday evening. Many people picked up their paycheck on Friday. Arriving at their front door to collect when they were flush with cash was an early lesson in timing “the ask.”

Mr. Creek, however, professed to never have cash—not on Friday, not on Saturday morning, not on any other day of the week when I caught him at home. He was rarely there. Sometimes he wouldn't answer the door when I showed up. His bill was mounting, and the way the system worked, I was buying his paper for him. I hatched a plan to surprise Mr. Creek to collect what he owed.

The Creek Ambush of 1964

My brother Terry and I were in the phase of playing army in the neighborhood. We owned all the gear.

We had WWII Army surplus store fatigue jackets that were way too big for us. We had helmets, my Dad's canteen from his Marine Corps service, medals for valor, toy guns—the whole bit.

One weekday morning, I got up before 6 a.m. I pulled on my fatigue jacket, filled my canteen, and grabbed my helmet and collection book. It was my best Green Beret look. I lacked only the camouflage face paint. Mom banned the use of camo paint after it was applied to a younger brother against his wishes.

I headed out in the dark to ambush Mr. Creek as he went to his car to go to work.

I arrived at the battleground before dawn. There were lights on in the house. My target was still home. I positioned myself deep inside the branches of a forsythia bush near the sidewalk. I waited. Still. Poised to execute an ambush like the soldiers in the movies Dad took us to watch some Saturday afternoons.

When Mr. Creek walked out his front door, he was confronted by an 11-year-old commando. Armed with my collection book, I leapt from the forsythia initiating my predawn surprise attack. Hollering “Collect for the *Times*,” I charged into the breach, forsythia branches hanging from the camouflage net on the steel helmet, which bounced over my eyes with every step as I ran toward the enemy.

Now I had Mr. Creek! I surprised the hell out of him.

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Despite the precision of my planning and flawless execution, I didn't get paid. Mr. Creek performed his well-practiced pocket shuffle. It was the same act he'd perfected on me during daylight hours. He patted here and there. He turned the pockets on his trousers inside out. He opened his wallet to show me it was empty.

He thoroughly frisked himself in the dark but turned up nothing. Not a dime. Once again, I came up empty. Dejected, I retreated to base camp, our house on Durham Drive, to get ready for school.

The counterattack

When I got home, Dad hadn't yet left for work. As he ate his Rice Krispies, I shared with him the details of my failed ambush. He knew of my struggle with getting Mr. Creek to pay for his newspaper. He'd left me to my own devices in my effort to get paid.

Mom and Dad often allowed us to sort things out on our own, stepping in when they felt the timing was right. As Dad and I strategized over our breakfast cereals, it became clear that the failure of my pre-dawn collection effort was the last straw for Dad. He told me he'd now help me collect from Mr. Creek.

I'll fix your wagon

Without offering any detail, Dad said he would "fix his wagon." Though he had no way of knowing, this was ominous for Mr. Creek. When Pop threatened to fix your wagon, what followed was never good.

The phrase was trotted out only when a transgression needed a response via some form of discipline. As children, Dad routinely fixed our wagons as part of our upbringing. The wagon fixing was often accomplished by a sentence to manual labor: painting the fence, weeding the rose bed, or worse, picking up Skippy's dog droppings in the backyard. Having Dad fix your wagon by being grounded was preferable to the latter.

Seen from Dad's perspective, he was helping us mend our ways. But you never wanted Dad to fix your wagon. Mr. Creek was going to get it.

We waited until Friday evening and the prospect that Mr. Creek had been paid for whatever he'd been doing all week. Near dark, Dad went with me to collect. When we arrived at the Creek residence, I could see through a window that a party was going on. A couple of well-dressed women were sitting on the couch holding drinks and smoking cigarettes. The small living room was filled with people.

At Dad's prompting, I banged on the door and shouted, "Collect for the *Times!*" The party chatter stopped. Everyone was looking at me, standing there with my collection book full of their host's unpaid tickets. Mr. Creek came to the door.

Before he could speak, Dad stepped up behind me and said loud enough for all the partygoers to hear, "You need to quit stiffing this kid. Pay him what you owe for the newspaper right now."

After many months, I'd finally caught Mr. Creek with money in his pocket. He pulled out a fat wallet in front of his guests. I've long forgotten the amount, 10 or 20 bucks—a lot when the paper cost about 75 cents a week.

The next day, I told my manager that I'd finally collected from this guy. As Pop suggested, I also told him that I'd no longer deliver Mr. Creek's paper. I fired him as a customer. Mr. Creek paid me and within 24 hours had his newspaper cut off. Dad fixed *his* wagon.

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Saying thanks

I hope I thanked my Dad for his lesson on being paid for my work. We chuckled many times about him fixing Mr. Creek's wagon and other family lore. Dad remained a trusted sounding board well into my career as a lawyer. Fortunately, he quit fixing my wagon. Good mentors leave us good memories and a story or two.

Years passed before I realized the value of the help some of my early mentors gave to me. I'm sorry I wasn't as observant at age 21 to see that, by not promoting me, one of my first bosses helped me avoid diverting from my plan to go to college. I never thanked George for *not* giving me a position that would have interfered with my education.

I'm grateful I had time with my first two mentors in the legal profession before they passed on. We became friends after first being my boss and mentor. I let them know I was appreciative of the opportunity and guidance each of them gave to me and for their friendship. I had great chats with each of them after I no longer worked for them, which I recall fondly.

After they left us, I shared with some of their family members how important their dad or husband was to my development as a lawyer. They were moved to hear me tell them what their lawyer family member meant to me.

No matter how far along you are in your career, you won't regret making a call to someone who helped get you to where you are today. Thank the people who looked out for you. They'll be flattered that you remembered their contributions to your success.

If your mentors have moved on and can no longer be reached, telling one of their family members how important their loved one was to you and your career will make their day. It will make yours as well.

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