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Giving the gift of service to another can provide a lasting impact

The holiday season is again upon us. It is a time of festivities, warmth and good cheer. It is also a time for reflection and for giving thanks for all the blessings and good fortune we have experienced this year.

It is also important to remember those who may not be as fortunate as we are and to consider how we can help them.

We must do our part to make a positive difference for those who due to financial means, health or other circumstances are unable to care for themselves.

As I reflect on my own life, I feel very fortunate and grateful for a number of people who have been a positive, meaningful force for me.

As with many people, the holidays are a time of mixed emotions for me. I cannot help but remember the Christmases of my youth, when my parents, brothers and I got together with extended family and friends to bring in the new year. Those days were filled with excitement, laughter and happiness.

I learned at a young age that the best things in life are to be cherished and often disappear well before we are ready to let them go.

Many friends and loved ones are no longer living, including my mother, who died unexpectedly of complications from diabetes when I was 16.

This experience forever changed me. The moment she died, I was thrust into an existence where my life was not to be enjoyed but, rather, to be survived. I was baptized into adulthood in the most abrupt, painful way imaginable.

Over the ensuing days and months, there were a number of

people who played a significant role in helping me to move my life in a positive direction. My father and my brothers gave me the strength, support and courage I needed to graduate high school early, find my first job and begin college at a school I could afford to pay for on my own.

Money was such a fundamental issue for my family, and understanding how dire my circumstances were, my college adviser helped me to find the scholarships I needed to be able to both start in a timely manner and stay in school.

I loved my college classes and eagerly prepared for a career in engineering.

One morning, an alumnae of my college spoke to my safety engineering class and discussed her job responsibilities, which were a fascinating combination of engineering and the law.

At that moment, I decided that I would pursue a law degree. I never saw this woman again, but she completely changed the course of my life in the span of 15 minutes.

Since that spring morning nearly 23 years ago, my life continues to be blessed by many people whom I have met.

From the financial aid officer who made it possible for me to attend my first-choice law school, to the professors whose classes opened up a whole new sense of curiosity and wonderment about the law, to the employers who took a chance and offered me jobs during law school, I know that I would not be where I am if it were not for their generosity, commitment and kindness.

To this day, nearly 20 years into my career, I remain fortunate to have colleagues, clients, friends and family who continue to mentor, contribute, challenge and sup-

PARADIGM SHIFT



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port me.

You may ask why I am sharing this story with you and what, if anything, this has to do with being a lawyer and the holiday season.

I ask you to consider the story I just shared, and to acknowledge that there are many people around us — more than you re-

alize — who have life stories not all that different from my own.

There are so many — young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated — for whom we can all make a meaningful difference.

During this season of giving, I invite you to think about what you have accomplished this year and what you may have left undone. For example, consider whether there are pro bono cases you may want to take on in the new year that could help an individual or group in need of some type of assistance.

Perhaps there are young students, or even rookie attorneys, who would benefit from meeting with you occasionally to discuss their potential career paths.

Maybe there is a charity or organization that could greatly benefit from a donation of your time or money. Perhaps it is taking time to visit a sick or elderly friend or family member or to wrap and deliver Christmas presents for children whose families cannot afford to buy them. The possibilities are endless. Whatever you choose, know that your efforts and dedication do indeed matter.

As humans, we tend to believe that others are doing just as well, if not better, than we are. We often minimize the importance of the contributions we can and do make to others and to society. As lawyers, we are in a unique position to help people in ways that others simply cannot.

Whether we are helping the wrongfully convicted, mentoring future lawyers or providing financial assistance to the needy, know that anything we do for another person, either big or small, can have a profound impact and can change the course of lives.

What better gift is there to give or receive?

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