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A mentor is invaluable to young and old alike

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When my daughter was 12 years old, I was convinced I had failed so badly at fatherhood that she could not be rescued.

Since she knew I loved her and was, intrinsically, a decent person, I couldn't figure out how I could have failed so miserably and so irretrievably in such a short period of time. My wife is the consummate mother, so I knew it couldn't be her fault. I later learned that teenage girls are abducted by aliens when they are 12 or 13 and replaced with an exact replicant who is neither biologically nor psychologically related to either parent.

I was despondent, so I called my cousin, Jim Philippone. I have no brothers or sisters, so having a cousin like Jim has meant the world to me. He agreed that he and his wife, who have five great kids, would have breakfast with me and my wife that same morning. When we went on to discuss how worthless my parenting skills must have been, he reverted to an old phrase that he loves to use: "Well, that's how they wrote the book, pal."

I asked him what he meant, and he said that in five years, that means 60 months — start counting them down — she'll be back. You see, no matter what you do and no matter how old you are, when you are perplexed by a seemingly insurmountable problem, find a mentor who is really good and learn from him or her. If you are not lucky enough to have a relationship with that person, at least use them as an example and "model" them. It works.

Almost five years to the day, the aliens returned my daughter and she is one of the finest people I have ever known. The truth is, I have used my cousin's wisdom and gracious generosity on many occasions throughout my life. Since he lived with my parents in a fifth-floor walk-up in Brooklyn while he and my dad were both in law school, I met him when I was only a few hours old. When he would come home from the service, he would wrestle with me and make me laugh when I was about five years old — moments I cherish and will never forget.

Fast forward a few decades to when I was a newly-admitted attorney trying to build a clientele and help my grievously ill father maintain what he had left of his practice. There were days when my dad was home ill, and I would run into Jim's office hyperventilating with dumb questions like, "Jim, the DA said he can only give me a B misdemeanor, and I don't know what I'm going to do on this case."

Jim would tell me to just calmly sit down and proceed to explain to me the basics of negotiating a criminal case. I remember running back into his office and saying: "Jim, you were right. We got the adjournment in contemplation of dismissal." He never asks for thanks.

He is the most superb real estate developer/negotiator on the planet Earth. Last week, my partner, Shelly Boyce mentioned that he had a few minutes to discuss a matter with Jim, and Shelly said, "I knew he was a good lawyer, but I had no idea how good — he's probably one of the best lawyers I've ever met in my life."

He then went on to say that "I'd wish I'd known him when I was younger so I could have mentored with him."

There are many lawyers and judges Upstate who learned more from Jim Philippone than they learned in law school.

There is a now-sitting Supreme Court judge who mentored with Jim because he could not finish law school due to a family illness. There are others whose lives were turned around by Jim because, when he was younger, instead of turning away a client who could not pay he would ask what their training was and what job skills they possessed. He would hire them and, if they did not have any skills, he would make certain they

showed up every morning and worked with others who could mentor them and teach them a particular trade. When the case was over, they no longer were on the dole and had just received the best representation they could have ever hoped for.

Jim would not let me write this column if he knew about it in advance, because he is too modest. He still helps me. On most Sunday mornings, he co-hosts my radio show and provides invaluable insight for our listeners. He has never denied me any reasonable request for help, and I thought it just might be nice to let him know how great it is to have a brother, even though I'm an only child.

Robert L. Brenna Jr. is a partner in the Rochester law firm of Brenna, Brenna & Boyce PLLC, which his father founded. He is president of the New York State Academy of Trial Lawyers and concentrates his practice in the areas of catastrophic personal injury and trusts and estates. Brenna also hosts a Sunday morning radio program entitled "The Brenna & Brenna Law Forum," on WHAM 1180 AM at 8 a.m., online at www.wham1180.com.

