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## Look Up and Around: Musings on Mentors, Role Models, and Professionalism (Revised and Updated)

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# LOOK UP AND AROUND: Musings on Mentors, Role Models, and Professionalism

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In plotting your professional trajectory, be sure to constantly look up and around. Identify mentors, embrace the strengths and qualities of your role models, and open yourself up to learn, evolve, and grow.

BY STEVEN L. SCHOONER

**Some children know what they want to do when they grow up.<sup>1</sup> Some see a clear career path ahead. Not me. I neither perceived nor attempted to follow a clear career map, and, over time, every significant assumption I've had about my professional trajectory (and personal life) has proven inaccurate.**

**Ultimately, we all find our own way.**

When NCMA asked its Board of Advisors to explain how we ended up as leaders in contract management, my immediate reaction was that extrapolating personal experiences into meaningful advice is a dicey proposition. On reflection, however, I offer one overarching suggestion for successful professionals and future leaders: Look up and around. Identify mentors, embrace the strengths of your role models, and open yourself up to learn from others, evolve, and grow.

#### **Father Figure First**

My first and most important role model was my father, Murray. Whether this demonstrated my youthful lack of imagination or logically followed from the fact that everyone liked my dad, the result was the same. I wanted to be my father (just younger and cooler, of course). I emulated his modeled behavior in myriad ways, not surprising within a small family. The lion's share of my youthful activities mirrored his interests and experiences. The high school tennis team and active religious participation at the military base chapel (wherever we lived) were as natural as honing my public speaking skills. High school debate and extemporaneous speaking sprang logically from my father's obsession with, for example, Toastmasters, "a non-profit educational organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills." And military service was a given; not just enrolling in ROTC, but aspiring to serve as the student corps commander in college, parachute school, and landing an active duty Regular Army commission. Of course, my father pinned on my jump wings at Fort Benning, just as he commissioned me a second lieutenant upon graduation.

#### **The College Years: New Horizons and Research**

Even though I had traveled extensively and lived abroad during high school, it was not until college that I began to realize how diverse the universe of career options might be or, in other words, how limited my imagination had been. A steady stream of inspired and inspirational professors changed the way I thought about everything. More important, they not only inspired me, but they instilled in me a love of learning and a newfound level of confidence that permitted

me to rethink my horizons.

During my junior year, I met Professor David Brady (now at Stanford University), who convinced me to accept the challenge of Honors research in political science. Under Brady's tutelage, I studied statistics and became a number cruncher, first serving on a team that predicted the surprising (to others) outcome of the Houston mayoral election that saw Kathy Whitmire become one of the first female mayors of a major metropolitan city. I subsequently collected, concatenated, and analyzed the results of every congressional election in U.S. history (using punch cards, no less), gaining a unique perspective on historical voter trends. The work was hard, but the payoffs were exhilarating. For the first time, a seed was planted that there might be fulfillment in an academic life (but no time soon).

As fate would have it, after my first year of law school, having successfully competed for an Army Judge Advocate General (JAG) summer internship position, I was (apparently) randomly assigned to the Contract Law Department of the Army JAG School in Charlottesville, Virginia. I arrived just as the department embarked upon the updating of the (now-defunct) Army Pamphlet 27-153, "Procurement Law," which consumed much of my summer. For inexplicable reasons, the faculty also tasked me to write and narrate the (epically boring and, in retrospect, somewhat amusing) hour-long training video, "Procurement Law Research." Alas, this video haunted untold numbers of attorneys at JAG School courses as the military transitioned from the Armed Services Procurement Regulation to the Defense Acquisition Regulation and, ultimately, the *Federal Acquisition Regulation*.

Meanwhile, then Major Jules Rothlein (now senior counsel to the Marine Corps) asked me if I would work with him to turn some of his research into a publishable paper. If only because Jules paid attention to me, I jumped at the chance, and soon thrilled to see my first article (co-authored, of course) in print. Even if it was not widely read, it looked great in a frame, and a lifetime of published research followed.

I return to Charlottesville frequently. Indeed, I spent my entire career as a reserve officer teach-



**TOP:** Murray Schooner pins on Steven Schooner's Airborne (Jump Qualification) Wings at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the Spring of 1980. **MIDDLE LEFT:** Professor Schooner poses with five of the first six Murray Schooner Scholars. **MIDDLE RIGHT:** Professor Ralph Nash. **BOTTOM:** Professor Schooner delivers his acceptance speech after receiving the Dana Award at World Congress 2012.



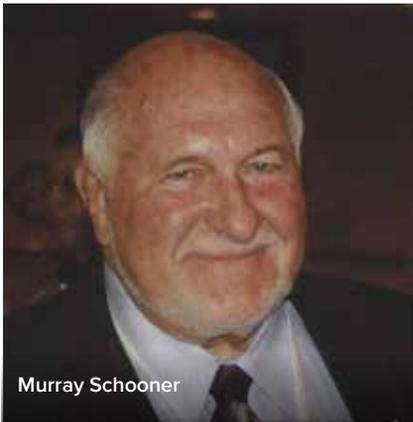
The Hon. Ruth Burg



Prof. Schooner and Don Gavin



John Pachter



Murray Schooner

ing in the Contract (and later Contract and Fiscal Law) Department at the JAG School. These visits remind me how fortuitous it was that a random assignment led to a uniquely intensive learning experience, created extraordinary opportunities for a “mere” summer intern—publishing an article, narrating a training video—and opened my eyes to an exciting career field at the intersection of the business of government and a never-ending stream of amazing technology, “things that go boom,” and complex bargains that impact the ability of the world’s most important government to do business.

A professional lifetime of exposure to transactions involving everything from food service, cutting-edge IT delivery, Kevlar body armor, machine-gun grenade launchers, logistics, private security in unstable environments, management of nuclear waste, and nuclear submarines, to carrier-based stealth attack aircraft has maintained my interest and enthusiasm for our profession.

**Networking, Professional Development, and the Tools of the Trade**

During my second summer in law school, while clerking at the Armed Services Board of Contract Appeals (ASBCA), I was caught off guard when Judge Ruth Burg came to my office with rather direct advice. First, she directed, it was imperative that I become a student member for the American Bar Association’s Public Contract Law Section. Second, I must write an article to compete in the Section’s writing competition. I did what I was told. And, along with a generation of government contracts practitioners, I benefited from Ruth’s mentorship. I won the staggering sum of \$300 in the writing competition (which I remind our students today, when they compete for the current \$5,000 prize). More important, I began meeting the community of government contracts practitioners—experts, mentors, colleagues, and friends—with whom I would interact for the duration of my career.

During the same summer, (then Major) David Houpe (now the retired long-serving general counsel of the ASBCA) began a multi-year tutelage, preaching the gospel of clear, efficient writing. David introduced me to two tools, now old friends: William Strunk and E.B.

White’s *The Elements of Style* and Webster’s *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition* (considered more proper than the more modern, popular substitutes). We spent hours with Richard C. Wydick’s *Plain English for Lawyers* (at the time, a novel concept); William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well*; and even H.W. Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. David’s belief—which I came to fully embrace—is that if our profession revolves around and depends upon words, we could not think enough about (or practice) honing our craft. David’s lessons and his example have served me well.

**Jumping In, With Both Feet**

Looking back, I am still surprised that I decided to pursue another graduate degree, at night, less than one year out of law school, while working full time. I remain grateful that I took the plunge, because opportunities to do so seem to decrease with seniority and competing life demands. But, in trying to recreate my decision-making process, only two rationales—consistent with my theme throughout this piece—resonate:

1. Many of my mentors (including my first private practice mentors and role models, John Pachter and Don Gavin) had earned this credential; and
2. Ralph Nash and John Cibinic seemed larger than life in our profession—as thought leaders and commentators on the law, policy, and practice of procurement, and so the opportunity to study with Professors Nash and Cibinic proved irresistible.

I’ve never tried to quantify what I learned in the classroom during that period, and, today, that seems irrelevant. (I must have learned something, because, concurrent with completing my degree, I passed the CPCM exam.)

As I expected, working for (and later with) Ralph and John proved instructive. During his lifetime, John proved an exacting taskmaster, demanding the highest standards of quality in the classroom and as a scholar.

Ralph’s knowledge, analysis, discipline, work ethic, and energy continue to impress me to this day. One of the joys of meeting alumni at law school functions is hearing former students

describe the doors that Ralph and John opened—intellectually and professionally—for them. Over time, while I worked in private practice, defended the U.S. government’s interests at the Justice Department, and juggled complex issues at the Office of Federal Procurement Policy, Ralph and John’s influences were omnipresent. Since I joined the faculty at The George Washington University, Ralph and John’s success in advancing the academic discipline of government contract law, their impact on the professional trajectory of many leaders in our field, their guidance to innumerable procurement professionals on everything from source selection to understanding and allocating risk, and their influence on the law and policy of procurement serve as the touchstones by which I judge our success in continuing their legacy at George Washington. They set the bar quite high.

### Modeling Character and Happiness

All of which bring me back to my father, but only as a prototype of what various mentors knowingly or unknowingly taught me. For each professional trait I gleaned from my dad, the role models I previously mentioned, and the many other mentors—formal and informal—who guided my path, an equal or greater number of life lessons were also imparted. I realize that, as a group, the people I’ve tried to emulate were not just exceptionally successful, but, more important, they were genuinely happy. In part, this is what made them true professionals; not only a commitment to their work, but a love of confronting a challenge, a pride in craft, and the satisfaction that follows a job well done.

I also came to see that—individually and collectively—these were genuinely interesting people, with fascinating, fulfilling lives beyond the office. It took me some time to recognize that “other interests” were not distractions but complements or fuel that animated these people as they lived their professional lives. As I’ve come to know these mentors as people, colleagues, and friends (rather than, initially, supervisors, teachers, or mentors), I’ve enjoyed witnessing their animated descriptions of their expertise, interests, and commitments to, among other things, books, children (and grandchildren),

fly fishing, food, kayaking, music, opera, photography, pottery, tennis, theater, travel, and even wine. Not surprisingly, successful people live interesting and fulfilling lives.

### Coming Full Circle: The Glass Half Full

Granted, my father was the happiest person I’ve ever met. And one of my father’s legacies—and the primary reason I chose to write this piece—brings me back to the contracting profession and NCMA. I remain amused that a random summer job assignment (as I previously described), rather than following my father’s footsteps, led me to government contracts. Later, when I pursued graduate studies in government procurement at The George Washington University, I chose the law school, whereas my father had chosen the business school many years before. However, I joined NCMA because my father recommended the organization, the concept, and, most important, the people. I loved attending NCMA meetings, dinners, and programs with my dad, and we both enjoyed those occasions where we shared the podium, typically offering opposite sides of a social or policy issue. We both took great pride in being the first pair of father-son NCMA Fellows, and I wish he had been alive to see me receive NCMA’s Charles A. Dana Distinguished Service Award—it would have made him immensely happy. My family was touched and pleased to continue the tradition when the Washington DC Chapter of NCMA invited my elder son, Thor, to introduce me (in my father’s honor) as the dinner speaker at a DC Chapter Fellows Night a number of years ago. And, while it was a labor of love to raise the funds to endow the Murray J. Schooner scholarship at GW Law School, it warms my heart each year to witness exceptional students earn the privilege of joining the impressive cadre of former Schooner Scholars. My dad would have loved to meet them and, frankly, bask in their

reflected glory.

All of which brings me back to the two most important lessons my father taught me. Together, they are as important as any career advice I can offer. First, the easiest way to deal with people is to simply be nice to everyone. Simple, but true, and easier said than done (although my father exemplified that advice every day). Second, the hypothetical or proverbial “glass” is always half-full (rather than half-empty). Optimism inspires, and pessimism defeats. Armed with a warm smile, a welcoming embrace, a hearty laugh, a sunny disposition, and a perpetually positive attitude, the path to professional success and personal fulfillment seems smoothly paved, straight as an arrow, and more-than-a-little downhill. Good luck! **CM**

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- ▶ Previously served as the associate administrator for Procurement Law and Legislation, Office of Federal Procurement Policy.
- ▶ Received NCMA’s Charles A. Dana Distinguished Service Award in 2012.

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 In the context of this piece, and discussing professional development generally, I encourage students and young professionals to think in terms of what they want to do, instead of who they want to be. I find the difference significant. For example, a young person who wants to act (or perform) might (with some luck) enjoy a lucrative career, but with preparation and training, likely will enjoy opportunities to participate in community theater (or, today, create programs viewed on YouTube). It is far more difficult to meaningfully mentor a young person who wants to be a movie star.
- 2 My students frequently hear that honing their writing skills (or failing to invest in this discipline) will open professional doors (or potentially derail available career paths).



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