



WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE'S MENTORING MOMENTS

Episode 03: Tami Kirby and Walter Reynolds

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Intro: This is Molly Crabtree and welcome to Porter Wright's Women's Leadership Initiative's Mentoring Moments. Today Tami Kirby interviews her mentor Walter Reynolds, and they discuss the importance of how knowing that someone is standing behind you, and supporting you, makes all the difference in the world.

Tami: My name is Tami Kirby. I am partner in charge of the Dayton office of Porter Wright and chair of the creditors rights practice group. I've been at Porter Wright my entire legal career, which began in 2004. But I also clerked at Porter Wright, with none other than who I'm here with today Walter Reynolds who interviewed me remember, Walter?

Walter: Yes, I do.

Tami: It was a minute ago, wasn't it?

Walter: Yes it was.

Tami: Walter has been my key mentor my entire legal career. So he's a great person to join us today to talk about mentorship. And thank you, Walter, for joining us.

Walter: Well, thank you, Tami. My name is Walter Reynolds. I've been with the firm. All of my legal career which spanned a little bit longer than Tami, I clerked here in 1977. And so I've been here for almost 45 years. I've enjoyed my legal career, and I'm wishing that I had a little bit more time left in a tank.

Tami: I don't think anyone loves the practice of law, like you do Walter, to be honest. So I think you'll always be practicing in some respect. But I guess if we were to look at the history of your career, I'm curious who you found to be a key mentor as you've been to me, as you went through the ranks?

Walter: Well, Tami, I think that with respect to my mentoring, I think there were three people in my life that were mentors to me, two of whom had nothing to do with the career in law. I lost my father when I was 15 years old. And so at that point in time, a coach of my high school football team, he became a surrogate father, a mentor and a very important person in my life. He was the one that encouraged me to go to college. And when I got to college at Wilberforce, Dr. Howard Tolley was the head of the political science department, and he took me under his wing. He was the one that encouraged me to write for the sports page at Wilberforce. I had a column called Reynolds Wrap on that, and then he encouraged me to go to law school. And then at law school, I met the managing partner of the firm called Estabrook, Finn & McKee, which was the

predecessor to Porter Wright. John Henry was the managing partner, and he was the one that talked me into coming down in interviewing in May of 1977, as a summer law clerk. And I was hired there and so I learned, basically, mentoring from those three people who basically were my mentors.

Tami: And how do you think, Walter, from when you started out at Estabrook, Finn & McKee mentorship's change from how you view it now?

Walter: Well, I think that political correctness was not an issue. John Henry, basically identified certain deficiencies that I had. And so one of the things that he encouraged me to do, well wasn't encouraged. He said, you will enroll at Sinclair in a writing class because you'll never be the lawyer that you should be until you learn to write the Kings language. He also felt that I was a wallflower, and he encouraged me, or demanded, that I take a course Dale Carnegie course, on How to Win Friends and Influence People there. So when I would, I would work a full day, and then at night, I would three nights a week, I would go and attend Sinclair. It helped to improve my writing. It helped to improve my ability to communicate with folks, to relax around people. And I remember the firm being very disappointed in my performance. And I was placed on probation, six months' probation. And the problem with being placed on probation is that you're so nervous, that you really can't do your best job. And John Henry came to me and he says, you have one person to prove that you can do that, do it here. And he said, That's me. If I believe you can do it, don't worry about anybody else. I will be beside you. And that was a fundamental issue because in mentoring, no one really cares about how much you know until they know how much you care. And so John Henry was showing me that he really cared about my success. But he did say something that was really interesting. He says that if you can't make it, you won't be here, but we'll still be friends, you just won't be here. So, you know, I was encouraged because I knew that he had my back. If I did what I knew I could do given time, I will be able to run as fast as the other attorneys were running in the office to do the types of things that they were doing. So that was very important to me to have a person who cared enough to spend a time. And the other thing he did at lunchtime, we would go over to the senior citizen center, and we would sit down for an hour, and he would ask me about what was I doing, how I could make it better. But it wasn't like, I mean, if I was not doing what he thought he would let me know. Immediately he would yell, he would curse. But because he had built a foundation that I, I knew that he was doing it, not to make me look bad, but to make me be better. That made all the difference.

Tami: So Walter, did you view it as, I want to say constructive criticism, right? That it may be the messaging wasn't the best back in the day, but it was all designed to help you become a better lawyer.

Walter: Exactly. And I knew that you know that he had his rough edges. But I knew that deep down, he was interested in my success. And so therefore, he could say things. It's almost like Tami, that, you know, sometime in your mom and dad can say things to you, that if other people were to say it, but you know that, I'm going to use this word, that they love you. They want you to succeed. So, cut off the foolishness, come to work, get the job done, and don't complain about it. And that was what he did. But the first thing he did is that he proved that he cared about my success.

Tami: And how did you view, because in the 80s, the early 80s, the role of women and African Americans in the legal field was completely different than it is now, although we're still struggling, I think in those areas as a whole society. Did that impact your mentorship with John Henry?

Walter: Yes. One of the things that John Henry was insistent upon is that the firm reflect the community that we serve. And the firm that I was originally hired, it was called Estabrook, Finn & McKee. And Mr. Estabrook did not believe that women should be in law. He didn't believe that African Americans should be in law. He died in 1975. And out of respect for his wishes, the firm had never hired a woman never hired an African American. And John Henry told me frankly, they would never have hired a woman or an African America, if Mr. Estabrook was still alive. So once he passed away, they hired their first female. Her name was Donetta Weithe and she was a graduate from the University of Cincinnati. She was a year ahead of me. And then I was the first African American that they hired there, but it was very difficult, because. We called her Nettie; Nettie had no role models, there was no females, no female partners, no female. So she was the first one. The good thing about Nettie is that her father was a coach of the Cincinnati Bengals football. So she had grown up around guys all the time. And she was rough and tumble, and she could give it as good as she got it. So that was very good on that.

And with respect to me, no one in my family had ever gone to a law school. But the thing that I had, I had a person, John Henry, who was the managing partner, who says that look, this firm has to reflect the community that we serve, we need to have more women and we need to have more African Americans in this firm. And so the people in the firm knew that if they didn't get along with the program, they was going to have to fight with John Henry. People chose not to fight with him and so as long as he was on my side, anybody else could be against me. And I knew I was still going to be here. And that's the way he was about Donetta on that he basically felt the time had come to make a change. And if you have a powerful person like that, Tami, it's amazing how doors will open for you.

So being here was just not enough. He would insist that the work would flow, the quality of work would flow and that we wouldn't just be sitting in a back room. He insisted that clients were, they were going to meet us, and that when he brought you into the room, and he put his imperato on you. You immediately had a sense from the clients that hey, if John Henry thinks that this guy can do it, my work then he can do my work. So he introduced me to all of his clients, I worked on matters for him under his supervision. But the important thing was that by putting his arms around me introducing me to the clients, that was a signal to them, that it's okay for Walter to do your work.

Tami: And as you know, now, Walter, at least at Porter Wright, we assigned mentors rather than kind of that organic process that we had that Mr. Henry had. What do you think of the assignment of mentors? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Walter: Yes, I do. I look at it as if, if you have nothing better, then that's assignment is better than nothing. But true mentorship, I think of it as like a contract. When we talk about contracts, we talk about an offer and an acceptance on that, and people understand those people that they come in contact with, and they care, that person has a better chance to be a mentor, because the mentee is more accepting. So we can have assignments, and the young associates, they won't reject it. But I don't think they get the true benefit out of it. Unless there is a use the word buy in, that they again, they know that the person who has been assigned to them really cares about their development, will basically work with them, introduce them to the clients, run interference with them, and basically know that that person cares about their success.

Tami: I feel like our relationship it's been through the years, Walter, I consider you a member of my family, as you know. So it's, yes, been a very successful mentorship.

Walter: I think that you're the only one, Tami, in the in the firm who's ever met my sister. We went to Atlanta together and my sister that basically I'm the closest one with, I introduced you, I think when you're first a second year when we went to Atlanta together.

Tami: Yes, yes. I remember that. I remember meeting Cora. So she's wonderful, by the way. But it's definitely I think through the years, it's been a natural. It's been one of the highlights of my legal career. Walter has been working with you in your mentorship through the years. Have you ever had a mentorship not pan out.

Walter: Yes. Without calling any names, there was a young attorney who worked here when she was a second year law student. And so we needed a person to work in a specific area, she had been a clerk with one of the judges had worked in a small firm. And so I thought that she would have the energy and the commitment to work. At Porter Wright, it became obvious that she had develop habits that were different than the habits that are necessary to be successful at Porter Wright. And bad habits are hard to change, not impossible, but they're hard. And but you've got to want to change those bad habits. And she did not want to change those bad habits. So I said to her, Look, you're never going to be successful here if you're not willing to do that. So you make the decision, don't let the firm make the decision for you. If you're not happy, you make the decision to leave. And ultimately, she made that decision. I told her, you know, we'll be friends, but you know, we just won't work together. And I was very happy that she made the decision because it was not working out for her.

Tami: I was very happy as well. So I didn't have to make the other decision. So which is probably a little bit. I don't know, not best, but it was for me. Yeah. Because no one wants to make those hard decisions, right?

Walter: Those are hard. Those are hard. But she had develop habits that was inconsistent with what it takes to be a successful attorney at Porter Wright. And my fear is that those habits, even in a smaller firm, are not necessarily conducive for success.

Tami: So yeah, I agree with that. Well, I think while they're through the years, you've done a lot of mentoring and coaching of younger attorneys to try to help them as they're navigating the complex world that we live in and the practice of law. How much of the mentoring and coaching you've done has been able to facilitate other relationships? And I think you've had a lot of relationships based on mentoring, but I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

Walter: Yeah. I'll share one of the things Tami that just recently happened. As you know, every year the firm participates in the Law and Leadership Program. And that is a program designed to basically reaching down to high school students, encouraged them to go to college, and then ultimately to go to law school or at least pursue it a career beyond high school. And there was a young lady who spent two years with us, Skye. And she ultimately went to Denison undergrad. And just recently, she asked me to write a letter for her, she was going to Harvard Divinity School to seek a master degree in religion. And she just last week told me, the good news is that she has a full scholarship there. And just a wonderful young lady. She's a young lady whose mom was having some very difficult times, she did not know, or have a relationship with her dad. So, those are the type of people that I like to spend time with. Because as I said, somebody did the same thing for me.

And one of the things I just recently told Skye, so if you ever want to know why I do the things I do, I said, there's a song that was written by Tim McGraw. And when you get to the almost to the last stanza, of that, he says that, when you have been successful, because other people

have helped you don't forget to turn around and help the next person in line. And that's what I've always tried to do. I think, Tami, with respect to what I gave to you, I hope, is exactly what John Henry and others gave to me. And the reward is to basically to be able to see all the wonderful things that you have done. And the only regret I have is that there are going to be so many other wonderful things that you will do that I probably will not be here to experience.

Tami: Oh, Walter, you're gonna make me cry. Geez-o-pete. You're gonna have to edit that. But by far, Walter, you know, you don't know, I know this. But I know that there was a single mom who went to law school. And I know you gave her a loan to take the bar, you've done so much for so many people. I apologize. It is just amazing to me, and you do it with no expectation of any credit, and a lot of it anonymously. But that one I happen to know about. And it just shows your giving back. Right. It's pay it forward. And I hope that I pay it forward as well, as you did for me. So I appreciate that.

Walter: Yeah, I'll share one last story about John Henry. A lot of people don't like to share this, but I think it made me a better lawyer. When I took the bar exam, the first time, I didn't pass. I didn't have the money to set for the bar exam the second time. And the person who wrote out the check, so that I could take the bar exam was John Henry. And he insisted that I would take a live course up in Cleveland. So for six weeks, I spent time in Cleveland, and the firm during that period of time, I received a paycheck each and every week on that. So how can I not do things to help others because as I said, I have been blessed by having so many other people in my life, that I would be really, a very bad person, if I didn't try to pass it on to others.

Tami: Thank you Walter for your time, as always, and discussing mentorship. You know how much you mean to me and my family. Thank you, I wouldn't I would never have been at Porter Wright as long as I have if you weren't here. So I appreciate that.

Walter: Thank you, Tami. And you are appreciated. You know, see the all the things if you have done to beat you know, we talk about this, in terms of women in our profession, one of the great things about our profession. Now, when I started, there was only one if you look around in our office now, only one female when I started look around in our office now, the majority of attorneys are females, and they are excellent attorneys. And I think our profession is better. There's one thing that I would like to do, and as I give my time on matters, is to do those things that will make our profession better than when I started in it. And one of the wonderful things is to see the number of female attorneys that we have in our profession that are doing such wonderful things there. It's only made our profession much better.

Tami: I think as a woman to look back and see the challenges, not just for women but for diverse attorneys all together, and to be able to overcome them, Walter is just amazing to me. Because I'm not sure if I started practicing when you did I would have been able to be honest. So kudos to you for being able to step up and persevere, I think with Mr. Henry but also your own abilities I think to be able to do that.

Walter: Thank you.

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