

## **Mentoring for Young Lawyers: The Mentor Coin Project**

*By Francine Bailey*

The importance of mentoring has been emphasized and re-emphasized in countless articles, speeches, and presentations. It is, by far, one of the greatest returns on investment that lawyers and law firms can make in a young lawyer's career. Many state, local, and specialty bar associations have created mentoring projects to facilitate mentor relationships between the general bar and young lawyers within their organizations. The State Bar of South Dakota Young Lawyers Section (SD YLS) is no different. The leaders of the SD YLS have launched a new and exciting program, arguably one of the most unique programs The Affiliate has seen.

The SD YLS's project is called the Young Lawyer Mentor Coin Project. The concept is based on the military challenge coin. In the materials written by the SD YLS, the challenge coin "allegedly dates back to the World War I." Apparently, a wealthy lieutenant ordered solid bronze medallions embossed with the squadron emblem for every member of his squadron. Shortly afterwards, he was captured by a German patrol. The lieutenant eventually escaped capture, with only his coin to prove his identity as an American pilot.

The coin saved the lieutenant's life when the French military recognized the insignia on the medallion. Instead of shooting him, thinking he was a German saboteur, the French gave him a bottle of wine. Eventually, the pilot made it back to his squadron, "where it became a tradition to ensure all members carried their medallion or coin at all times."

Today, the medallions are known as unit challenge coins, among other names. The coin represents affiliation as well as the support or patronage of an organization. Coins are used by commanders to improve morale, reward hard work, and foster unit spirit. Challenge coins carry with them certain rules that only apply to other individuals who possess a challenge coin.

### **The Rules**

The holder of a challenge coin may challenge any other holder by raising the coin in the air or tapping it on a table. The challenged individual is required to show his or her coin within 60 seconds. If the challenged individual is able to show the coin, the challenger must purchase them both a beverage. If the holder is unable to produce, then he or she must buy the challenger a beverage. If a coin is dropped and a coin holder hears or sees the coin hit the floor, then the owner must buy a beverage for that person. The most exciting part is that the challenge coin rules can play out anywhere and at any time.

### **Mentor Coin Project**

The South Dakota YLS has taken the challenge coin rules and fashioned them into a mentoring project between young lawyers and mentors in the State Bar of South Dakota. It was launched in October 2009 and already has the makings of a successful program.

SD YLS President Sarah Theophilus has received numerous applications from young lawyers who want to be a part of the program. The first group of young lawyers to receive Mentor Coins included newly admitted attorneys who attended the swearing-in ceremonies around the state. A second issue of Mentor Coins will be forthcoming.

In order to marshal participants in the program, the SD YLD created an application form and distributed it with the state bar newsletter. Interested bar members can then complete the application. In addition, each participant signs a Mentoring Program Agreement. Prospective participants are then matched, based on compatibility. When matching mentors and mentees, the focus is on geography and on practice area.

A goal of the program is to facilitate a relationship that allows lawyers to learn from each other. To build these new relationships, the SD YLS hosts "Mentorship Get Togethers" around the state of South Dakota. The gatherings are an opportunity for participants to begin establishing a relationship with their counterparts. The coins help to break the ice during these events.

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In some circuits, there is no formal group, says Ms. Theophilus, so this program gives attorneys a forum and a venue to come together. One goal of the project is to prevent isolation. These get-togethers are one way that the project assists in promoting that goal. Many different types of attorneys attend, including federal judges, state judges, prosecutors, solo practitioners, and many others.

As part of the launch of the program, the SD YLS received a grant from the ALPS, an attorney owned and operated professional liability insurance provider. The chances of malpractice are often reduced when attorneys form mentoring relationships, so a liability insurer was a great choice for providing a sponsorship. The \$2,000 grant was used to cover the costs of minting the first 500 bronze coins and 20 one-ounce silver coins.

Silver coins are presented to South Dakota legal dignitaries to hold while they are in office. Dignitaries include the State Supreme Court Chief Justice, the State Attorney General, the State Bar President, the Dean of the University of South Dakota Law School, and the State Bar's Executive Director.

So far, the program has been a success. It already has the makings of a yearly tradition at the swearing-in ceremony. And lawyers from all geographic, practice, and age groups can benefit from the program.

"There has always been sort of a disconnect between the YLD" and the general bar association, Ms. Theophilus observed. But this program has put attorneys from all sections "on the same page."

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