Agronomic Science Foundation

Legacy of a Mentor

Have you been lucky enough to have a mentor in your life? More than just answering the occasional question or providing ad hoc help, mentoring is about an ongoing relationship of learning, dialogue, and challenge. I’d like to tell you about three mentors who have made a difference in my life.

Echoing the story of the original mentor, which comes from Greek mythology, Fran Katz, Dr. James Coors, and Dr. John Havlin have helped to shape the person I have become by imparting their wisdom and sharing their knowledge with me. A friend of Odysseus, Mentor was put in charge of his son, Telemachus, and his palace when Odysseus left for the Trojan War. Later, Athena disguised as Mentor encouraged Telemachus to go abroad and find out what happened to his father. Because of Mentor’s relationship with Telemachus and the disguised Athena’s encouragement and practical plans for dealing with personal dilemmas, the “mentor” has been adopted in English as a term meaning someone who imparts wisdom to and shares knowledge with a less experienced colleague.

Fran Katz: Surviving in an Ever-Changing Environment

The legacy of Fran Katz, who passed away in September, will live on in me and many others whose lives she touched. Fran taught me how to survive in an ever-changing environment. Working in the food industry for 55 years, she knew the heads of most food companies. After retiring as vice president of research at American Maize (now Cargill), she was president of Superior Intelligence Publications and director of publications for both the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) and ASA, CSSA, and SSSA. I got to know her at IFT, and so when she began working with the Societies, she brought me in to sell advertising. Just being with her on the road and trying to get together called and kept me on track, even when the going got tough. Fran helped me understand what it takes to compete against other organizations. A survivor of both polio and cancer, she took life one day at a time, always using her amazing ability to solve problems and make things happen. Always down to earth, this MENSA member was even proud to teach high school students how to grow flowers on an Indiana flower farm.

James Coors: Thinking Methodically to Keep Projects Moving

A scientist at the core, Dr. James Coors taught me how to think methodically by using predictable measurements that can keep a project moving within a multifaceted organization. A past chair of the Agronomic Science Foundation and past president of CSSA, he has worked with the International Center for Maize and Wheat Improvement in Mexico and other corn-breeding programs in South America. Dr. Coors, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was a member of UW’s Plant Breeding and Plant Genetics program, where he worked on one of the most successful research programs in corn. He has released novel corn germplasm as part of a research program that includes studies on the domestication of corn. Building on the Golden Opportunity Scholars Institute, he was so instrumental in helping to establish the very best of our current students to pursue a successful career path in agronomy and crop and soil sciences, the institute also cultivates networks so necessary to sustaining the profession.

John Havlin: Facing the Unknown

From Dr. John Havlin, current chair of the Agronomic Science Foundation, I learned not to fear the unknown when I’m going into a situation that may be fraught with unknowns. In contrast to many of his peers, this professor in the Department of Soil Science at North Carolina State University was not raised on a farm, but spent his youth in Chicago. I believe this gave him “street smarts” to assess