

Honoring the Heroes Among Us: Robert C. Decker, Esq. Paying It Forward As a Mentor



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Growing up in a sleepy Nebraska town, Bob Decker had no idea what the world had in store for him. His parents preached the importance of education and instilled a strong work ethic, which remains with Bob to this day. While the support, wisdom and guidance of his parents were integral in his success, Bob was also the beneficiary of numerous mentors as a young man, both while in the U.S. Marines Corps and in practice as an attorney. The man that Bob is today is a product of those who took the time to guide and mentor him.

With that same giving spirit, Bob has chosen to be a mentor himself. It would be impossible to calculate how many lives Bob has touched and how many people he has influenced, but one thing is clear – Bob imparts the legacy of service to others by his quiet leadership.

As in most small towns, your neighbors become your friends. And that was no different for Bob. Well, maybe slightly different. You see Bob's neighbor, and one of his first mentors, was Tom Osborne, then an excellent high school and college athlete who later became the famed football coach at the University of Nebraska. As a rising athletic star and later in the coaching ranks, Tom Osborne had plenty of reasons to focus on his own career. However, Osborne knew the importance of mentoring and took a personal interest in Bob. When Osborne treated Bob with respect and humility, he was sowing a seed for future generations. Osborne always had time for Bob and was generous with his scarce time. Osborne also shared the importance of a strong work ethic and education. While Tom Osborne's story played out in packed stadiums full of football fans across the country, culminating with three national championships, Bob moved on to new challenges.

After his small town days in Nebraska, Bob embarked upon college, law school, and the Marines Corps, where he was also fortunate to have mentors guide and support him along the way. He then settled in the St. Petersburg area where he began his legal practice. This chapter of his life was no different; he can recall many attorneys who helped mentor him. Bob recalls being amazed by the selflessness of Louie Adcock, who never stopped giving of his time and wisdom. Anthony Battaglia was another mentor who always extended the highest level of respect to Bob early in his practice. Bob also recalls the countless acts of the late Roy Harrell, George Wilsey, and the late Joe Reynolds, who all led by example and offered both their time and guidance.

While serving as a member of the board of trustees of Eckerd College, Bob came to know John Galbraith (one of the founders of Templeton Funds) and admire his sincerity and humbleness. It did not matter to Galbraith whether you were the CEO of a successful company or the bellman at a hotel; he would always take a personal interest and extend the same dignity and respect. As a result of his observations, Bob adopted this same sense of concern for his fellow man.

During his involvement with the St. Petersburg Downtown Partnership, Bob came to know Dr. Peter Betzer, the current dean of the College of Marine Science at the University of South Florida. In the late 1980s, Dr. Betzer sought the assistance of the Downtown Partnership in relocating the United States Geological Service to USF in St. Petersburg. In spite of the stiff competition from many other schools, including Duke University, Dr. Betzer believed that USF would be awarded the relocation. Bob recalls how Dr. Betzer's enthusiasm



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and belief in the program was contagious. As a result of Dr. Betzer's work, USF was chosen as the site for the USGS relocation. Even now, Bob recalls Dr. Betzer's infectious positive thinking.

As the beneficiary of such amazing mentoring, Bob felt the need to pay it forward and mentor younger attorneys. As a seasoned attorney at Fisher & Sauls, Bob came to know a younger associate there by the name of Rick Baker. Bob immediately saw great potential in Rick. He felt a duty to cultivate Rick's talent and help him grow as an attorney and as a leader in the community. Whether it was a long chat after hours in the office, advice on how to effectively resolve a dispute, or an encouraging word after a victory, Bob was there as a mentor and a friend. Today that young associate is The Honorable Rick Baker, Mayor of St. Petersburg.

Bob also has fond memories of mentoring another attorney, Jean Galanos. For over eight years, Jean worked with Bob. Currently, Jean is general counsel for The Sembler Company. What stood out to Jean was that Bob took his role as a mentor very seriously, and not only with attorneys he worked with, but even with opposing counsel. Bob imparted the importance of quality of life, always stressing that family should be the number one priority. Bob, a dedicated father, religiously attended all of his children's sporting events, making a strong impression on Jean. Additionally, Jean was impressed the way Bob led by example and how he was not afraid to roll up his sleeves up and dig into the work. She recalled many complex loan transactions that ended up closing early due to the diligence and foresight of Bob. To this day, Jean appreciates how Bob challenged her to be a superior attorney.

Today, Bob continues to mentor others as a member

of Decker Beeler, P.A. His practice focuses on commercial real estate acquisition, development, leasing and sales. Additionally, Bob has been active in numerous committees and on several boards, including All Children's Hospital, The Florida Bar, St. Petersburg Bar Association and the St. Petersburg Downtown Partnership. However, Bob's first priority remains his wife Carol, their three children and four grandchildren.

While things are different now from his small town roots and talks with Coach Osborne, Bob acknowledges the value of those who took the time to mentor him and hopes to continue to impart that legacy of service that began in a sleepy town many years ago. While Bob won't admit to being a hero, those whom he mentored would surely disagree.

Charles R. Gallagher III is the founder of Gallagher & Associates Law Firm, P.A. in St. Petersburg, where his practice includes insurance litigation, business/real estate litigation and consumer law. Mr. Gallagher is a graduate of Rollins College and Stetson University College of Law. He is presently on the Rollins College Alumni Association Board of Directors and is the chair of the Gulf Beaches Relay for Life.

