



Michael T. Stephenson

Dear colleagues,

Twice in the past four months, I have addressed student groups about a mentor of mine named JoAnn who helped me through my first semester of my undergraduate studies. Had it not been for JoAnn helping me integrate into the institution, I would have left. I lived off campus in a small trailer park, had few friends, and I kept to myself. My persistence that first semester of college was a result of JoAnn's encouragement as she helped me navigate new and unfamiliar waters where I often felt isolated.

The irony? I never properly thanked her for all she did to keep me engaged and enrolled.

Two weeks ago, almost 30 years after I last spoke to her, I decided that had to change.

I did a quick online search and found a landline phone number for JoAnn. I knew she had retired and relocated to South Texas, but web searches are hit-and-miss, as are their accuracy. Having nothing to lose, I dialed the number, it rang, and my mentor from long ago picked up.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hi, JoAnn, this is Mike St..."

Before I could get my last name out, she finished it for me. "Oh Mike, how are you? I haven't seen you in ages... probably the early '90s."

I was surprised. How could she possibly remember me? She had mentored and recruited thousands of students during her career in higher education. I just happened to be fortunate enough to be enrolled in her first-year experience course in leadership. And three decades later, she remembered.

We traded stories and caught up on life. She told me she is 89 years old, that she wears a sweater and jeans every day, that she attends the local Methodist church, and that she is the self-proclaimed "Queen of Puttering." We talked about people we both knew and the students she had kept up with over the years.

Then, it was my turn.

I reminded her that I had a rough start my freshman year, and without her encouragement, I probably would not have stayed in school there. I thanked her for connecting me with a student organization (the Wesley Foundation) and the local church where I would eventually direct the hand bell choir and lead the youth group. Mostly, I thanked her for being a friendly face, always welcoming me into her office when I'd show up unannounced, and for allowing me to get to know her sweet Yorkie Sam.

Our conversation came to an end after 15 minutes or so.

But the primary takeaway is this: while hearing JoAnn's voice was the best surprise, it was most important to me that I was able to tell her thank you after all these years. This alone was a balm for my soul, and I think she appreciated my long overdue phone call. I regret waiting three long decades before I reached back out to say thank you.

In the event you are waiting for that nudge to share a word of thanks, I hope this provides the encouragement you need. And if you are a tired mentor, remember how often we as mentees forget or put off telling our mentors how grateful we are to them. You make a difference more than you may ever know.

This week, as we briefly pause academic operations, we have been given the gift of time. I hope you will reach out and express a word of gratitude to someone who made a difference in your life. Let me know if you do. I would love to hear your story.

With gratitude,

Michael T. Stephenson
Provost and Senior Vice President



JoAnn Gibson, on the right, receives a lifetime recognition award from ENMU Chancellor and President Patrice Caldwell. Image from the Greyhound Gazette.

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