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### Recommended Citation

Jessica L. Roberts, *How to Be a Mentor in Three Scenes*, 22 J. Health Care L. & Pol'y 159 (2020).  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/jhclp/vol22/iss2/5>

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# HOW TO BE A MENTOR IN THREE SCENES

JESSICA L. ROBERTS, J.D.\*

Karen Rothenberg is one of the nation's—perhaps the world's—foremost authorities on genetics and the law. She has served as Senior Advisor to the Director on Genomics & Society at the National Human Genome Research Institute, participated in numerous commissions and committees, and testified before Congress. But what may not be apparent from her lengthy list of accomplishments is the guidance and support that she has always offered new scholars as they embark into the largely uncharted territory of this novel legal field. Among her many distinctions, Karen Rothenberg is also a source of mentorship and inspiration. While I could have written about any number of our interactions, I draw here from Karen's love of the theatre and present you with three (perhaps slightly dramatized) vignettes.

## SCENE 1

A twenty-something academic hopeful sits nervously at a trendy, bustling New York restaurant tucked away in Morningside Heights. She is in the second year of a teaching fellowship at Columbia Law and has decided to change her scholarly focus from employment discrimination to health law. The development that prompted this new direction was the recently passed Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA), a federal statute prohibiting health insurers and employers from discriminating on the basis of genetic information. The young woman hopes that by writing about a new statute she might carve out an academic identity for herself. She's already written one successful article about GINA and is working on a second. In the course of her research, she discovered that one of the legal experts whom Congress consulted when drafting the legislation—a highly distinguished health law professor—currently happens to be a scholar-in-residence at Columbia. The fellow reached out to share a draft and was surprised when the professor not only agreed to read the paper but also suggested that the two of them meet up for lunch. The green academic worries that she will not make a good impression. However, any anxiousness melts away as soon as the professor arrives. Despite her extensive experience and expertise,

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\*Leonard Childs Professor of Law and Director of the Health Law & Policy Institute, University of Houston Law Center. Thank you to Dave Fagundes and Leah Fowler for their comments.

she is dynamic, warm, and engaging. She puts the new scholar at ease by talking about their shared interests and listening attentively to the young woman's ideas. They even split their entrees. "Doesn't splitting food make you feel like old friends?" the professor asks. "Indeed it does," thinks the fellow.

#### SCENE 2

A few years later the aspiring academic is an assistant professor and part of a nationally renowned health law program. She is still writing about GINA and now teaches a course on genetics and the law. The distinguished professor is in town to give talks that combine her shared passions for law, genetics, and the theatre. She is working on a series of scenes designed as learning tools for exploring various bioethical dilemmas. During the visit, she hosts her mentor for a lively lunch talk about how drama and narrative structures can influence our understanding of law and legal scholarship and she acts in one of the professor's scenes in front of an audience of medical students. Later, the junior faculty member drives the professor to her hotel after a sushi dinner with a mutual friend and an impromptu trip to the mall to buy shoes. They have spent the past two days together—one day longer than anticipated because the professor's flight home was canceled due to weather. On the way to the hotel, they talk about a variety of topics both professional and personal. The young woman feels proud of what she has accomplished since the two first met. She has become a well-respected member of her faculty and is making a name for herself as a genetics and the law scholar. The young scholar outlines her current research projects—gaining valuable insider knowledge on Congress's intent when passing GINA—and shares that she has recently started dating another legal academic but that the two teach at different schools, located in different states. The senior professor offers advice and a sympathetic ear. When they reach the hotel, they hug goodbye and promise to keep in touch.

#### SCENE 3

Even later still, the once inexperienced scholar is now a tenured associate professor, directs her school's health law program, and plans to go up for full professor in the coming year. She and her beau solved their two-body problem. He became both a professor and the research dean at her law school. They are married and expecting their first child. Coincidentally, GINA is also celebrating a major milestone, as the statute's ten-year anniversary is impending. To commemorate GINA's coming of age, the not-so-young-anymore associate professor is helping organize a session at the legal academy's annual meeting. While her mentor cannot participate in the panel, the two use the invitation as an opportunity to catch up on the phone. The associate professor sits in her home office and dials the number. They had intended to talk for only thirty minutes, but the call lasts almost two hours. As usual, they cover a lot of ground: GINA's

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legacy as a statute, the future of genetic privacy in the United States, their scholarship, and academic pregnancy and motherhood (and grandmotherhood). The established professor is just as warm and comforting as ever, assuring the expectant mother that academia is excellent career choice for parenthood and that work-life balance—while elusive—is nevertheless attainable. After they say their goodbyes, the associate professor puts down her cell phone and leans back in her desk chair. She pauses to reflect with gratitude on how fortunate she is to have forged their relationship so early in her career and how much has changed since their lunch together in Manhattan so long ago. She hopes she has made her mentor proud.

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It is hard to believe that I have now known Karen for over ten years. As I hope these vignettes have established, she has been a pivotal figure in my development as an expert in genetics and the law, as well as a member of the legal academy. I am now the Leonard Childs Professor of Law and the Director of the Health Law & Policy Institute at the University of Houston Law Center. My daughter Lucy is nearing two years old. In 2015, I was named a Greenwall Faculty Scholar in Bioethics and received grant support for my work on legal rights in genetic data. I regularly teach Genetics & the Law, which is by far my most popular course. Every year I assign one of Karen's scenes when we cover incidental findings. Not only does it offer an extraordinary experiential learning experience—and ranks among the highlights of the semester as the students test out their acting chops—but it also gives me the opportunity to fondly remember my time with Karen during her whirlwind visit to Houston in 2013. And so, Karen can never truly retire. She will continue to guide and teach not only by virtue of her innovative scholarship but also through those of us who have had the privilege of being her mentees over the course of her thirty years in law teaching. Congratulations on your retirement, Karen! We look forward to sharing in the next Act.