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### Learning from the Master: Things Betty Thompson Taught Me

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**BY DAVID H. SPRATT**  
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## Learning from the master: things Betty Thompson taught me

**A**rlington, Virginia, 1996. I was interested in family law and had sent out my resume. Early one Saturday morning, Betty Thompson called about an interview. I knew nothing about her, so I looked up her profile. She was then 70, and I assumed that she wanted an associate to help her for a few years before she retired. This was the first thing I learned from Betty: **do not judge a book by its cover**. When I arrived at her Rosslyn office, Betty was full of life, dressed to the nines, sharp as a tack, and wearing a white, leather Chanel mini-skirt. Even then, I knew she was extraordinary.

Betty Thompson, the grand dame of Virginia family law, died September 24, 2012. There will never be another like her. I worked with Betty for two years. I now teach legal writing/family law at American University, and much of what I teach came from Betty. Betty was not “warm and fuzzy” or even patient, but she was an inspiration and mentor, two qualities found only in the best teachers. Even if you did not know Betty, heed her words of wisdom. Sit back, raise a drink to Betty (Chivas Regal was her favorite), and take note of some things I learned from the master:

### **Demand perfection (or at least excellence).**

Betty had high expectations of her staff. But she had even higher expectations of herself. These expectations forced most everyone to be responsible for and highly invested in their work product – a great attribute for a successful lawyer, law clerk, or employee, and one that, unfortunately, seems increasingly rare.

### **Litigation is not always the best option.**

Particularly in family law, firms, not clients, benefit from protracted litigation. Betty was never afraid to litigate, and her command of the courtroom was a sight to behold; however, Betty told clients early on that settlement often brought better, more tailored results and allowed families to heal more quickly. There is a time to litigate, of course, but Betty taught me that a well-crafted settlement truly is in many a client’s best interest.

### **There’s something about an old-fashioned letter.**

If I had to guess, I bet Betty still wasn’t fond of email. She believed that written communication should be formal, respecting the relationship between writer and recipient. I discourage my students each year from over-relying on email, as too many times, email is informal, and advice therein given haphazardly. Emails often result in shortcuts, and Betty never took shortcuts in the practice of law.

### **Good lawyers should do more than practice.**

Betty believed that lawyers should serve not only their clients but also the legal profession. As the founding chair of the VBA Coalition on Family Law Legislation – now the Virginia Family Law Coalition – Betty spent countless hours writing and revising proposed legislation and lobbying the General Assembly to ensure the passage of “good family law.” Over the years, she was a leader in the VBA, Virginia State Bar, Arlington County Bar, Virginia Trial Lawyers Association, International Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, and countless other organizations.

### **A person’s word should bind like a contract.**

You always knew where you stood with Betty. She did not beat around the bush, and her word was golden. If she left a settlement conference telling you that a case had settled, the case actually had settled. With Betty, you knew that a handshake had brokered a solid deal.

### **Know the law.**

Betty could spout off case names (including the reporter volume of the case) on any number of topics, family law or otherwise. She was a human search engine, so to speak. She knew the law and used it well to serve her clients ethically and professionally. Although few, if any, have this level of recall, lawyers should stay current on the ever-changing fields in which they practice.

Arlington, Virginia, September 24, 2012: That night, driving through Rosslyn, I had not heard the news of Betty’s passing. For some reason, she popped into my head, and I had planned to call her to schedule a long-promised dinner. I wanted to tell Betty what an incredible influence she had been on me as a lawyer/law professor and that even 15 years later, I strive to practice what she preached. Somewhere in the heavens over Rosslyn, I hope Betty Thompson is reading this column. BT, your words and teachings will never be forgotten. You will be missed. ■



Betty Thompson

Photo: RCL Portraits