Jeff Kennington

Mentor Supereminence

In the words of those he mentored...
It was my singular honor to be Jeff Kennington's first PhD student back in 1974. I am happy that he honed his mentoring skills on me, initially guiding me through a PhD and subsequently through the academic minefields to tenure. In those years he and I had a good deal of fun working together on a book, computer codes, and publications. He was always the man with the plan, displaying unflagging optimism and good humor. I am forever indebted to him.

-Dick Helgason
When I entered Marston Hall in August 1974, Jeff offered hospitality, like the hospitality of the earth. We walked over to the computation center, he obtained a system manual and an FTN (remember that?) manual. I was set for my first assignment to write a generator for multi-commodity network models which I completed sometime in October. When I asked him for my next assignment, he said, quite simply, "Get some As." I knew then that I would have to graduate with a 4.0 to meet the bar he set.

Jeff would offer course corrections with his inimitable manner: Always gently forthright. He asked me for my vita one morning and when he found me typing it out on the office typewriter when he returned from lunch, he said "Hmm. I will ask Millie--the then department secretary--to write your FORTRAN code." Which I internalized as a directive to spend my time using the skills God has given me. The unstinting generosity Jeff offers is like that of the generosity of the rivers. I am proud to say that I learned under his tutelage.

-Iqbal Ali
The teaching aspect of being a professor is the one area for which we receive no formal training. We normally don’t take any education classes to help us learn how to be a teacher, even though we’re expected to be able to do this at the highest education level. So, we rely on having good role models to learn from. While I no longer teach, there were 3 key takeaways that I recall from my time with Jeff that I still find valuable:

1) Be open to questions. If someone asks a question that you don’t know the answer to right away, jot it down, find out the answer later and communicate that back to the student. They will appreciate not only learning the answer, but that you took the time and effort to follow up. Also, you’ll learn something new.

2) Have a positive attitude. Your colleagues will want to spend more time with someone who makes that time enjoyable.

3) Be prepared. Know the material before you present it so that you can feel comfortable no matter what questions are raised.

Jeff’s service as a role model allowed me to learn these lessons, apply them throughout my academic, business, and personal life, and achieve much more than I expected prior to my education at SMU.

-Bruce Patty
Dictionary.com defines **mentor** as: (1) a **wise** and **trusted counselor** or **teacher**, (2) an **influential** senior **sponsor** or **supporter**. Jeff Kennington has been all these things for me.

I first encountered him as a **wise teacher**. In 1975, during the final semester of my senior year, I took an elective course in Operations Research which Jeff taught. He made the subject come alive and I was hooked. Although I graduated and went on to work in my major field for five years, I always harbored the desire to learn more about OR.

So Jeff became a **trusted counselor**. He influenced the course of my career by encouraging me to commit to full time graduate school in 1980.

At that point he became an **influential sponsor** in my life. He facilitated and supported my decision to return to school by offering me an assistantship in his department. He coached and advised me throughout the five-year process, even serving as my dissertation advisor. And he later hired me to teach courses in his department. The trajectory of my life would be very different if Jeff Kennington had not been my mentor.

I remember wanting to take a course which was in the catalog but which wasn't being taught. I asked Jeff if he would consider allowing me to take it as a directed study. After thinking about it, he approached me with a plan: He would direct my independent study of the course, and here's how it would go. He had some colleagues who had recently written a book. It had not yet gone to print, and it could use a good proofreading. Each week of the semester I was to read one chapter, finding and noting every typo and error along the way. Then I would deliver (to Jeff) a 1-hour lecture on the material. This turned out to be a brilliant approach. It was a win-win-win. (1) I learned the material well enough to teach it. (2) His colleagues got a list of hundreds of typos and errors in their manuscript. And (3) Jeff didn't have to prepare any lectures or tests!

Jeff was always an **influential supporter**, but I especially remember a semester when I was earning my assistantship by teaching a freshman course. During the final exam I observed two students in the back cheating. There were several complications, but ultimately the father of one of the students went to the dean over the issue; he was apparently a donor to the school. As a graduate student, I was a little concerned about what might come of this. I remember Jeff came into my office and said, “I have only one question for you: Are you absolutely sure?” I told him I was, and he replied, “That's all I need to know.” He went to the dean, and the issue was resolved. I never heard another word about it. Now that's an **influential supporter**!

If Dictionary.com is correct when it states that **supereminence** implies **worthy of note above others**, there’s no question Jeff Kennington has been a **Mentor Supereminence** in my life.

- Ellen Allen
I recall at least 2 instances when I was about to quit my Ph.D. education. Jeff drilled some sense into my head and brought me back on track. I owe him a great deal of debt for my professional and personal success. I have always wanted to be like Jeff Kennington - a great scholar, an inspiring teacher, and a wonderful person. Well, I am still working on it; the bar is so high that I am not sure if I will even reach half way.

-Bala Shetty
To me, a mentor encourages, educates and guides someone in achieving a goal that benefits the one being mentored. Jeff Kennington has done all of these things for me in both my educational and professional life.

As a student, whenever I had a question about something theoretical and complex, I would ask Jeff because he has a rare ability to make something complicated seem simple. In doing so, I learned from him to explain things starting with the simplest case possible. Even today in my professional life I always appreciate his help on projects because he is able to look at a problem and zoom in on the one key aspect that is causing trouble.

Jeff encouraged me in my education. I distinctly remember talking with Jeff outside of [the old] Caruth Hall around 1988 when he was trying to persuade me to work on a doctoral degree. "Take a few courses, write a report, take an exam and you'll be done!" — another example of his ability to make something complex sound simple. In my case, though, it worked!

He also guided me in many ways at work. When I became a manager I asked his advice on how to be a good manager. His response was simple - "Take care of your good people." When I was looking for a different job he sent me a help-wanted ad for a position I eventually got and thoroughly enjoyed. He also unknowingly helped me get my current job in Verizon's O.R. group. When I first met my future boss and the rest of the group I mentioned I got my degree from SMU. They asked who my advisor was and I said "Some guy named Jeff Kennington." They all started laughing uncontrollably — "Some guy!" — as if I had referred to Thomas Edison as "some electrician." My future boss then explained that she had used much of Jeff's research in her dissertation and that Jeff was a big name in O.R. It's funny how he never let that secret out. And finally, like anyone who has emailed Jeff, I've been taught the value of brevity in communication!

Jeff invests himself in people under his care. From inviting graduate students to pizza and Uno parties at his house to explaining complex algorithms, he forms a lasting bond between student and professor. You always know Jeff has your back. If there is a problem, he'll either have a solution or will help you come up with one. Much of the success I enjoy today is due to Jeff's influence. I cannot imagine anyone more deserving of the Mentor Supereminence award than Jeff Kennington.

-Dave Allen
Jeff is one of a kind. The first time I taught a course at SMU I got the lowest evaluation grade in the department. Jeff stood by me and gave me a second chance. With his help, patience, coaching sessions and remarkable example as a super teacher himself, I finally got it, and somehow managed to double my ratings the next semester and years later made it to the list of excellent teachers twice at the University of Illinois.

His sense of humor is memorable. Sometime in 1983, he was back from a fishing trip and had a picture of a fish he caught. The class was broadcast on the TAGER system. To our astonishment, Jeff put the picture of the fish on display and kept asking the clueless network operator to make the fish bigger. I cannot forget the class' reaction.

Jeff’s kindness, big heart, work ethic and fairness earned him a big place in the hearts and minds of all of us who were lucky enough to study under his guidance.

-Hossam Zaki