
Never Take a Short Cut that Compromises Quality: Life Lessons Learned Along the Way

By Harvey Heller

I have used this space to tell stories about who I am and to introduce you to our group. My stories aren't about me, but about those who have had a profound impact on me. This month's installment is about Chris.

The late Doris Van Allsburg was a very visible person in my hometown of East Grand Rapids. She was known as "Chris" for reasons I never knew. She was the mother of Chris Van Allsburg, the author and illustrator of "The Polar Express" and "Jumanji" and I am sure a host of other projects. (This is not why she was known as Chris, as Chris the author and I are just a year apart and his fame occurred after leaving home, and creating for many of us wonderful drawings during our high school years that we all wish we could find!).

My "Chris" the mother, was a wonderful example of principle. She owned the local ice cream parlor, Jersey Junction, and though she passed away years ago, the place maintains her indelible print.

I was lucky enough to help her campaign for city council in the mid 1960's. Her campaign pledge: "No buildings over 4 stories!" When she was about to retire from the council well over 20 years later, I called her to find out why. Her response: "The city of East Grand Rapids is safe; there is no more land to build on!"

How did I become friends with Chris? I was one of the local chubby kids who regularly feasted on her ice cream and spent endless amounts of time listening to her "lessons". My favorite by far occurred on the day she raised ice cream cone prices from 10 cents to 15 cents. It must have been my first experience with a price increase and I wasn't happy given the allowance I had at the time (it was generous, but I loved eating!). When I simply asked her why the increase occurred, Chris did a tight pivot away from what she was scooping for me, looked me sternly in the eye and said: "Harvey, the bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price has been forgotten!" That is verbatim, and

pronounced by her without any reflection or hesitation. It has also stuck with me forever.

While I have wondered why it stuck with me for nearly 50 years, there is really no mystery. She often made me repeat it! Seriously, pop quizzes whenever I saw her for over a decade. Over time though, it resonated. We aren't talking about price here (nor an hourly rate!) what we are talking about is maintaining a high standard of product and/or service quality for people with whom we do business. Whether we are working for free or for a premium, we can never take a short cut that compromises the quality of what we provide. A great lesson and a wonderful memory.

While this experience was mine alone, the value it represents is a centerpiece of our practice group. I am proud to have a partner like David Saperstein who is one of our fine examples. His piece today on our statute of repose for legal malpractice claims is featured here.

As always, I hope this is meaningful to you and welcome your comments.