I have just retired after nearly half a century of being a faculty member in the University of the Philippines. I have been fortunate in having mentors at each stage of my career but since there is space to introduce only one, I will focus on my first mentor, Dr. Abelardo “Bel” G. Samonte. Bel had an illustrious career at U.P., starting out as an Assistant Professor of the then College of Public Administration or UP-CPA (now the National College of Public Administration and Governance), until becoming the first Chancellor of U.P. Los Baños, the post he held until his untimely death on Christmas Day of 1978.

I first knew Bel as a parishioner in my father’s church, the Citadel, in Project 4, Quezon City. The whole church celebrated when he placed in the bar and left a few years later for his doctorate at the University of Michigan. I heard no more from him until I reported for duty as a part-time research assistant at UP-CPA in 1960. He was not my direct boss but he sometimes dropped by my desk because he was editor of an issue of the Philippine Journal of Public Administration, for which I was then checking references and proofreading.

Before the second semester started, the whole College was a-buzz with excitement since several big research projects had just been approved by the Rockefeller Foundation. I remember Bel going to my desk and asking me to follow him to his. He was unsmiling and I feared that I had made a huge error in the manuscript I had just submitted to him. He motioned me to a seat, walked around the desk a few times, and then popped the question: “Would you like to work full-time in the Government Corporations Research Project?” and then mentioned a salary at the level of a regular instructor. Would I! But I demurred and reminded him I was still an undergraduate and should not receive full-time pay. “Nonsense,” he said. “You will do as much work as any bachelor’s degree holder so you should get equal pay for equal work.” Bel would later be known for this dictum.
throughout the civil service as an expert in personnel administration and government reorganization, but I was probably the first formal recipient of the bureaucracy's equality doctrine.

It was an exciting job. I had to learn all about public enterprises from the Spanish times until the Diosdado Macapagal administration. Bel took me to all his interviews of government corporation executives and board members. Before each meeting, I gave him a capsule biodata of the interviewee and a list of questions we should explore with him. I was so happy when he used most of my talking points and did not make any corrections on my notes. When I gave him my list of questions for the fourth or fifth interview, he sprang me a surprise. Instead of commenting on them, he asked, “What are you planning to wear tomorrow?” “A skirt and blouse like this,” I replied. He responded with a loud “No!” It was the first ‘no’ I had heard in the three months of working with him. He suggested instead that I wear a pencil-cut skirt, lipstick and high heels.

He was still a bachelor then, thirteen years my senior, but it was the first time I had heard him say anything personal and it alarmed me initially. Actually, he was not out of character. He was sending me off to my first solo interview with a well-known private sector executive, no less, and he wanted me “to look older than that.” He said about a month later that I had passed the test with flying colors.

Another wonderful part of working with Bel was that I got full credit for my work. I hoped at best that there would be a footnote appreciating my services as a research assistant. That was the norm in the College during the period, but Bel would not stand for that. So it was then that I had my first publication, “The Sale of the Maria Cristina Fertilizer Plant”. It was the only article on Philippine privatization for about the next thirty years, according to Leonor M. Briones, Public Ad's current guru on the subject with no less than Abelardo G. Samonte, my mentor, as senior author. Bel was just as happy with my by-line as with his; he called everyone's attention to my name, as my twenty-year-old heart glowed. And so I have paid it forward. Throughout my life, anyone who works with me on a paper gets the Bel Samonte treatment.

Bel sent me off for graduate studies abroad after a year. When I returned in 1970, he was already Vice-President for Academic Affairs. A week into my report for duty, Bel called. “Because you are already a PhD, have you forgotten your first boss?” I had not, but had thought
he was now too high up to see me. “Not so,” he insisted. He invited my husband and me to lunch with him and his wife and then they took us on a tour of their house that was still under construction. It turned out that we got to be one of the first to ever see it.

Bel hardly gave instructions, but he imparted many lessons. He always treated me like a colleague, not as a subordinate. Making sure I called him “Bel” indicated that. By trusting me with difficult interviews so early in my career, he taught me to embrace challenges. He made me grow up fast by believing in me and making me responsible for my performance. He was generous with benefits, whether it was pay or authorship. He was blind to my age and gender—negatives, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Would that more people learned from Bel’s arsenal of human resources development and practiced them, like he did.

[The late Ledivina Carino was Professor of Public Administration with the National College of Public Administration and Governance (NCPAG) of the University of the Philippines, Diliman.]