I am honored to write a letter of recommendation for Jessica Dunker’s nomination to the 2015 Women of Influence award. She is my mentor in business and in life.

Jessica was my first boss out of college in 1995. I worked for her at a small software company in Des Moines, and from the first interview, I knew there was something unique about her. It was truly one of the most fun interviews I’d ever had! I immediately knew I wanted to work for her. I worked for her for a year, and learned an amazing amount during that year. She pulled me in to every opportunity she possibly could. She knew I likely wouldn’t stay in that entry-level position for long, so she wanted to expose me to as much experience as she could, preparing me for my next position – whether or not it was with her company. She’s incredibly unselfish that way – always wanting to breathe-in to people regardless of the impact or advantage it will have on her. She truly believes everything happens for a reason, so she wants to give her best and do her best each and every day, leaving an incredible legacy in her path. And it wasn’t just with me – Jessica was that way with everyone who worked for her! I don’t know how she had the time to accomplish all she did and still breathe in to each of us individually, but she did. On a humorous note, those “WWJD” (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets were very popular at the time, and our department jokingly considered buying one for each person, changing the meaning to, “What Would Jessica Do.” We decided that was probably a bit disrespectful, but it well illustrates the level of respect we had for Jessica, the tremendous influence she had on all of us…and how much fun she injected in to work.

After that position, Jessica and I started a non-profit organization together called Ruth Harbor. Again, I was immensely blessed to get to work alongside her. She continued to teach, groom, encourage and push me to try new things, always wanting to help me grow and learn as we built the organization. I watched her cast our vision for this ministry with so many others, and in turn nearly every person she talked with became involved and passionate about Ruth Harbor. It was almost “entertaining” to watch Jessica in action. She was so authentic and passionate, almost no one could resist getting involved!

Jessica then became an instrumental part of my life’s journey in 2001. I was about to become a new mom and had expressed my intense desire to work part-time and/or be able to do PR/Marketing work from home. \*Insert Jessica.\* Jessica was doing contract work for a high-tech PR agency in California and knew they were needing a part-time, mid-level PR person. While I knew very little about the industry, Jessica vouched for my PR skills and ability to learn on my feet, and vowed to work by my side until I was well-trained…and she did. Again, I learned more in the two years I worked with Jessica than I had in the 4 years I had been away from her. I can’t say it wasn’t challenging – it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done – but Jessica equipped and encouraged me every step of the way. She helped me gain experience doing media interviews, manning tradeshow booths, conducting press tours, and so much more. What a gift it was to learn all of those things with Jessica by my side. I knew I could trust her completely, and that she always had my best interests at heart. While she would let me stumble so I would learn and grow, she would never let me fail or negatively impact the clients.

In 2003, I started my own marketing and PR business, again thanks to the experience I gained due to Jessica’s influence. Jessica and I have remained friends throughout the years and worked together on-and-off, but the business lessons she taught me continue to frame the way I do business now. Integrity, honesty, passion and persistence are the cornerstones of my business. I treat my employees the way Jessica treated me – with respect, grace, constant encouragement, words of kindness (even in instances where I’ve had to discipline them), and the desire to always teach and train them to know more, try more, do better and be better, whether or not that will benefit me in the long-run (but I believe it always does in some way!). I show them work can be fun and entertaining, and most importantly, I’m always the same person – I don’t change based on the situation or the company I’m with – another unique characteristic of Jessica’s that I was determined to emulate!

The greatest business-related compliment I’ve ever received (and I do mean ever!) was from a young man named Nick who worked for me for a few years, and then ironically went to work with Jessica at the Iowa Restaurant Association. After spending time touring a few Iowa restaurants with Jessica one day, he said to me, “Now I understand why you were such a great boss – you worked with Jessica! You two remind me so much of each other, both in the way you do business and just who you are.” My heart grew two sizes that day.

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