As Menlo College is in the process of an aggressive reshaping to become a premier undergraduate program for the study of business, leadership and entrepreneurship, we are guided by the “north star” of Menlo College’s illustrious past: Judge Russell, and the School of Business Administration.

The pride and joy of Menlo College, the SBA flourished for many decades with John D. “Judge” Russell at the helm. A brilliant, caring and indefatigable leader and teacher, Judge Russell served the College with a career that spanned six decades. He worked with the College’s first six presidents, developing relationships with thousands of students who called him father, mentor, friend and, most notably, “Judge.”

Judge’s relationship with the College and its former students dates back to 1938. During his tenure, Judge concentrated on his brainchild, the SBA, expanding it to a four-year curriculum and emphasizing its development as an international school. “Uncle Jack was a real visionary for globalization,” recalled his nephew, Larry Russell. “He believed we would be in a world economy, and that the leaders who shaped that economy needed to be equipped with the skills Menlo College provides.”

When interviewed about his passion for education and Menlo College, Judge responded, “As a teen Boy Scout, I came to realize how few of us develop and exercise our full potential. To be a good Scout I tried to do a little more and a little better each day. As I grew into positions of leadership I encouraged those in my charge to do likewise. When chance brought me to Menlo, I discovered late bloomers—many of whom needed only a challenge and a desire to succeed. I tried to convince them, with very gratifying results. We extended horizons and reached very difficult goals. I found the Menlo College milieu and size uniquely suitable for this.”

When asked about his own life, Judge wrote, “I entered Stanford in 1929 as a college freshman. Two years later, the Great Depression hit my family and I dropped out of college and returned home for a job. In those days, after two years of college, one could enter law school, so I went to night school selling men’s furnishings by day at Meier & Frank’s Department Store. For a variety of reasons, after three years of active law practice, I returned to California to complete some unfinished work at Stanford. Menlo provided room, board and a small cash stipend for services I was qualified to render. Three years later my schedule was interrupted by Pearl Harbor and four years of active duty as a naval officer. Upon my release, Menlo offered me a position. I couldn’t resist the beautiful climate and setting, so I stayed.”

The rest is Menlo history. Judge left an indelible mark on each heart and soul that he encountered throughout his career. His students speak with pride about their relationship with him. He had charisma, was strong-willed, wise, and a dedicated, humble and loyal friend.

When Judge passed away in March 1996, he succumbed to his final battle—complications associated with a tumor on his larynx. But he left a legacy that indeed lights our past as well as our future. —Larry Russell

Menlo Advantage Magazine
Science and the arts support a strong business curriculum at Menlo College.
You Be the Judge

Judge Russell’s Guidelines

1. Attend all classes. Do not cut except for serious illness.
2. Be an efficient adult. Don’t waste working time.
3. Complete all assignments — on time and well.
4. Do all homework, even though it is just a practice drill.
5. Don’t daydream or otherwise waste time while studying.
6. Read ahead so that a lecture or explanation will mean more.
7. Rely upon yourself and your own efforts until you get stuck.
8. Seek help when you don’t understand something.
9. Take good notes to help you in your study.
10. Touch base regularly; communicate freely; don’t hesitate to ask.
11. Utilize available aid and assistance.
12. We’ll both succeed and be proud of your achievements.

Two 1960s Cold Cases Near End

Throughout Menlo College’s 80 year history, many incidents occurred where those involved alluded capture. Although the investigation is not yet complete, Menlo’s own PI is hot on the trail and expects to complete the case soon.

Many years ago there was an animal hospital across El Camino Real. In front of the door was a small statue of a sleeping gaucho and two donkeys with cactus all around. It weighed at least a ton. Every Monday morning without fail, that statue was on the front door step of Mr. John “Judge” Russell — who lived in El Camino North. Every Monday afternoon “Judge” would have to return it to the hospital. The prankster was never found.

The other incident occurred when our Assistant Admissions Director, Mr. Bill Moser, bought a sail boat. Unfortunately, he left it parked on a trailer in front of his on campus apartment. It was an irresistible lure for an anonymous student because it was not long before it was found in the swimming pool.

All these years— at least 40—the culprits were never known.

To be sure, PI Dorothy Skala used some aggressive interrogation techniques to crack these cases. While she has obtained confessions from at least one individual in each case, Dorothy remains convinced that more arrests are imminent. As Dorothy states emphatically, “The size of the heists suggests that there was more than one culprit.” She goes on to say, “It is just a matter of time before I get to the bottom of these cold cases. After the successful conclusion of these issues I may be able to finally put this all to rest and move on with my life.”

To that end, Menlo College is asking anyone who knows about the case to contact Dorothy Skala at 650.543.3930.
Dorothy Skala, Director of Alumni Relations at Menlo College, worked for Judge Russell for many years. Recently, she sat down to reminisce about Judge Russell and the impact he had on his students, as well as on the entire campus community.

Menlo Advantage: How did Judge Russell acquire the sobriquet “Judge?”

DS: It was during the late 1940s and early 1950s, when he taught business law at Menlo. The students in his classes thought the title fit him.

Menlo Advantage: In what ways did Judge Russell act as a judge?

DS: Above all, he believed in fair play and honesty. He was also an excellent listener. He always heard the students out, and he gave kids a second chance.

Menlo Advantage: What was his approach with the students?

DS: He was very hands-on with the students. He and his wife, Lucille, lived on campus for more than 30 years. Because they didn’t have children of their own, they served as “den parents” to many of the students. Many evenings, bunches of students would be gathered in Judge’s and Lucille’s quarters talking and receiving his counsel. And during the day, I never saw as many people in a single office as I did in Judge’s. He truly was a father figure to many students—and not only Menlo College students. He was that way with my kids as well. He exuded a quiet strength and had very high standards, and people naturally gravitated toward him.

Menlo Advantage: What was Judge Russell’s greatest achievement?

DS: Judge Russell was instrumental in establishing the School of Business Administration (SBA) at Menlo College.

He had been talking to Stanford University, his alma mater, about the creation of a business school. Through these conversations, he learned that Stanford had no intention of creating an undergraduate business school of its own. The thought at the time was that Menlo would found a premier business school that would send graduates on to Stanford for their MBAs. That is exactly what happened.

Menlo Advantage: What is Judge Russell’s legacy?

DS: No one helped Menlo move forward more than Judge Russell. He set the bar for excellence. And the proof is in the success of our alumni, hundreds of whom still invoke his name when they’re asked about the greatest influence in their lives.
I came to Menlo after applying to Stanford. When I spoke to Admissions at Stanford, they suggested that I attend a year at Menlo and said that if I solidified my position scholastically, they would consider me. I thought that this had to be good. Menlo’s business school was touted as a great undergraduate education, and I knew that’s where I wanted to be. Since my high school days, I knew, in some grand fashion, I wanted to be a businessman.

Judge Russell, hands down, was my mentor. He was the one who dared me to fail. By that, I mean that he would continuously say, “It’s up to you. What you might want to do with your Menlo experience and your classes are really in your camp. I’m here to support you, but I need to see something coming back from you.”

I didn’t have the skills that I should have had coming out of high school, simply because I didn’t support my scholastic capacities in high school. I was an athlete, and none of my high school teachers engaged me to the degree that they should have. So after a couple of months of marginal scholastic activity at Menlo, Judge Russell took me by the nape of the neck and said, “You’ve got to commit. You’ve really got to get involved here.” To oversee my scholastic progress as closely as he did, on a nightly basis if necessary, was pretty unique. He made me want to succeed. It was a great experience.

I had to leave Menlo early because of a family situation. I transferred to the University of Miami, where I graduated with a business administration degree. I always regretted that I hadn’t spent all of my time at Menlo. I felt that I got more out of my year at Menlo than my two and a half at Miami. It was more personalized. My courses and instruction were almost tailor-made. I remember many evenings when I was struggling with accounting. I just could not get it. I would be tutored by my instructor, not a student. Faculty would sit with me to walk me through some of the challenges I was having.

I feel that a lot of the early successes I experienced came from Menlo. It has been a great thrill to support the College and to have two children earn Menlo business degrees.

My love of Menlo comes from the fact that I feel I came away with an understanding that I could do about anything I set my mind to, because I was encouraged to think that way. For instance, Judge Russell would sit with four or five of us in an evening and elaborate on life. “What do you want to get out of all of this?” he would ask. Maybe we didn’t have a really clear path of understanding where we were going, but we sensed that there were great things in each of us. He would say, “Yes there are.”

I came away from Menlo understanding that I could do about anything I set my mind to.

What I got from Judge was not particular to my situation. A good number of the young men in my classes were experiencing the same thing. He was a very unique human being. I’ve never experienced anything like it since.

A small thing about the Judge that had an incredible impact on my life: Judge Russell never failed to send me a birthday card for as long as he was alive. When he retired and was in an assisted care home, I still received a birthday card with a personal note. He would also follow my career. If there was an article in the local paper about one of my developments, he was on it like a hawk. “Congratulations, I knew you had it in you,” he would write. “I was always a supporter of yours.” Just a line or two.

Judge Russell was not a pussycat, not an “attaboy.” You wouldn’t find him walking down the corridors of our hallowed halls to pump you up in that silly sensibility of, “Hey, you’re doing a great job.” But when he did give you the impression that he was there on your side, you knew it and you worked harder to gain that respect that you wanted so desperately from the man. That was a marvelous gift.

DAVID CARL IRMER’s extraordinarily successful career as a commercial developer began in 1961. Since then, he has built several development companies including The Innisfree Companies. He has three sons and a daughter and resides in Tiburon with his lovely wife Martha.