

BY AIMEE LEE BALL

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE FINE ART of mentoring that is like the old homily about the price of a yacht: If you have to ask, don't bother. The people pictured here—all significant successes in their own right—have all had or been significant mentors, but none of them could write a syllabus on the subject. Mentoring involves chemistry, serendipity, sometimes reciprocity. What one person seeks out or finds in another is no more easily articulated in work than in love.

Each of these pairings started differently, and in retrospect, each arrangement seems a delicate balance: There often is an unspoken agreement that a mentor will provide a safe harbor—a way to ask questions and make mistakes without being embarrassed or quashed. There seems to be a recurring theme: that a mentor is the one person in front of whom you are allowed to act stupid, to be unformed or uninformed—as long as you are continuing to learn.

Some companies, in an attempt to formal-

ize mentoring, have begun in-house programs (see box, page 142). Some expect executives to recruit and develop their own replacements as they move up the corporate ladder. When a mentor is also a boss, the plot thickens: The protégé may work ten times harder than anyone else for the unwritten promise that she will glean wisdom and experience under her boss's aegis. But when one employee is singled out for a favored role, both mentor and protégé may incur the ill will of others who feel overlooked.

When consciously looking for a mentor, you must single out a kindred soul—for it seems implicit that you can get on only with one whose ethics, values and modus operandi mesh with your own. There needs to be a foundation of mutual respect. The Gordon ("Greed is good") Gekko crowd might inspire their own ilk—but the hope is that they'll all end up doing minimum security at Allenwood.

# MENTORS & PROTÉGÉS: portraits of success

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**Nurturing, inspiration, generosity, even tension—all are qualities that capture the mentor-protégé picture. And in the best pairings, the transfer of knowledge is never-ending.**

A good mentor, as the following profiles express, is more than a good role model. It's a teacher, a sounding board, a cheerleader... a friend. Something to keep in mind, no matter which side of the arrangement you find yourself on.

## THE HUMAN FACTOR FLOURISHES IN THE NEWS BIZ

**Mary Alice Williams, NBC news anchor. Nancy Lane, executive producer, CNN News.** Back in 1980, Nancy Lane was a character right out of a Mary Gordon novel—a young girl from a sheltered Irish-Catholic family in Brooklyn. She knew she wanted to work in television and was dismayed at the message from her Hunter College professors: The only ways to break into the business were “connections” and TV’s version of the casting couch. She managed to land an internship at ABC, but her primary responsibilities turned out to be picking cockroaches out of the Mr. Coffee with tweezers and using a hair dryer to defrost her boss’s office refrigerator.

Then Lane read an article about a fledgling network called CNN and began deluging them with phone calls. Her persistence prevailed: She was told to come in for an interview and was hired as a desk assistant. “At the end of my first week the hostages were returned from Iran. They put me on a helicopter and flew me to West Point to act as a gofer. And there was Mary Alice Williams standing out in the snow, filing her reports.

“I think if you go about asking, ‘How do I get a mentor?’ you’re approaching it all wrong,” says Lane. “It’s really a matter of personalities merging. It’s a click. I was young, I was female and I worked my ass off. She was young, she was female and she worked her ass off. So we clicked.”

Lane progressed from weekend assignment editor to field producer, all the while absorbing the lessons of the news business. “During the Falklands crisis,” she recalls, “I had a horrible assistant who kept coming in drunk. I was working seven days a week, and I was damn tired. I got Mary Alice on the phone and said, ‘If you don’t fire him I’m walking out, and then you’re screwed.’ She fired him. Then she called me in and said, ‘If you ever do that again, you’re fired. That’s not the way to handle it.’

“If I had to pinpoint where she benefited me most, it was in making me more mature, making me realize how my emotions and my bad temper played in and how that doesn’t work in this business.”

All along the way, says Lane, Williams was there for her. “A lot of what I’ve gotten, I’ve gotten on my own—but it’s due to the strength with which M.A. got me out the door and on my way.”

When Lane wanted to move on to producing, Williams had to make some tough

calls. “I had worked on the barroom-rape trial,” says Lane, “and CNN was flying everybody who’d been involved on the story to Atlanta to do a special. I got pulled off of it because Mary Alice needed me to research the New York primary for her—and I was livid. But that was my time to pay back.”

Paying back paid off: Nancy Lane is now the executive producer of CNN News in New York, and her mentor has gone over to the competition: as a news anchor at NBC.

Williams (whose office nickname of “M.A.” sometimes is shortened further to a panicky “Ma”) has the pleasure of seeing her tutelage pay off, too.

Williams says that the most important part of mentoring is just being available—for 2 AM phone calls or five minutes in the ladies’ room. “You try to be as honest as possible,” she says, “but you give suggestions with humility. Or you suggest who else to ask. There’s a phrase to live by: You don’t have to

**Tenacity may have landed Nancy Lane (right) a job at CNN, but much of her career ascent—and especially the personal-growth part—she credits to support from CNN’s then-star anchor Mary Alice Williams.**



to Latin America, booked myself into hotels and started visiting people. I got thrown out of buildings—people thought I was soliciting. I'd call home to Mom, saying, 'I'm in Cartagena, Colombia, and I'm on the sidewalk.'"

The contrast in their styles is never a problem, says Janine. "We have enough mutual respect and appreciation that we can allow for each other's differences. And that's what makes it work."

Valery has had to face the fact that part of mentoring, like parenting, means knowing when to let go, and she's trying to remember that now while counseling her daughter. "I'm having some problems," says Janine, "because I want to have my own sales assistant and the company says no, for all sorts of reasons, although I know there have been men who got one-on-one coverage when they produced what I'm producing. My mother went through a stage where she had a manual typewriter and no assistant. She switched firms and got a corner office and a title. So she's said to me, 'Look at the competition, evaluate your offers, and by all means, if that's what's best, go.'"

Valery remembers tutoring Janine when she was a child. "We would discuss a math problem," she says, "and she might not get it the first time. By the third time around, I would change the numbers, and she would get the answer before I'd even worked it out in my head. That's the feeling now—she's moving up and then she's ahead of me."

It's not a bad feeling for a mother or a mentor. "With children," says Valery, "you have to give them roots. When they're adults, you have to give them wings."

## **POLITICAL PAIR: A WIN-WIN SITUATION**

**Bill Bradley, US senator for New Jersey. Betty Sapoch, executive director of "Bill Bradley for US Senate."** In 1978 Bill Bradley was running for the US Senate, and Betty Sapoch was, as she puts it, "just this precious little Princeton woman—not political at all."

The two had known each other since Bradley's undergraduate days (when Sapoch's husband was on the Princeton staff), and they'd remained friends through Bradley's superstar basketball career—despite the fact that he is a few years younger (and a few feet taller). When he asked for help in his campaign, she casually agreed. "I don't know what possessed me," she says, "especially not liking politics. But I had a lifetime of working for all kinds of organizations and charities. And there is no difference, as I saw immediately, in raising money for bleachers at the high school and doing a political fund raiser. When someone would say, 'Can you get this done?' I would find a way to do it."

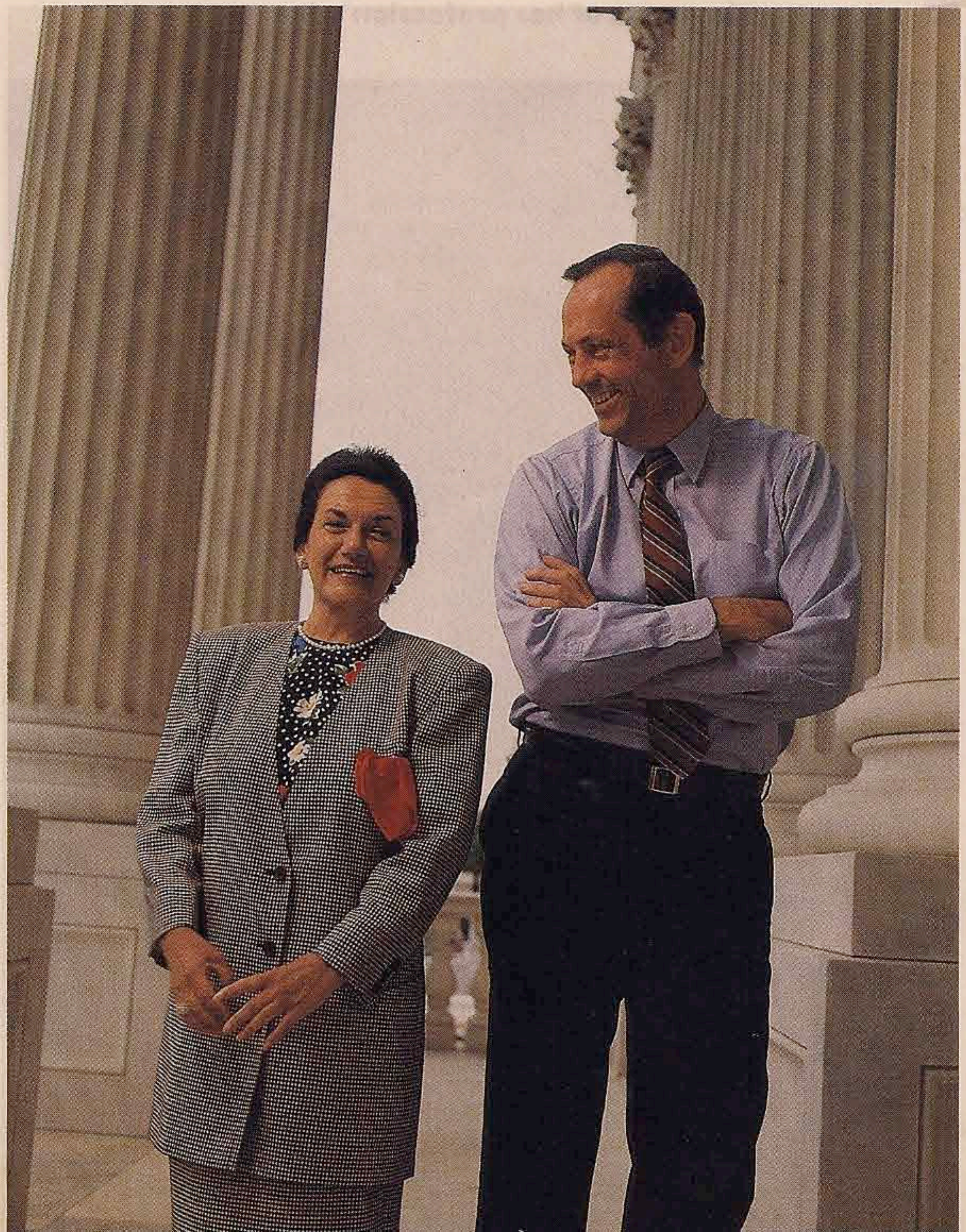
So Betty Sapoch from Princeton ran a satellite campaign office for Bill Bradley, apart from the Democratic machine. And when

Bradley won that first election, Sapoch helped produce a dinner to pay off part of the campaign debt. She went on to create all kinds of fund raisers: a theater benefit, a reception in Frank Stella's loft, a party in the Greek community, women's luncheons. She is now the senator's executive director, and since Bradley has developed a national reputation (some say with an eye toward the White House), her work might take her anywhere in the country.

It would have been far more conventional for Bradley to call in a professional fundraiser at almost every step in his political career. But he saw things differently. "In politics," he says, "the best people to have around are people you've known for a long

# MENTORS & PROTÉGÉS

**Senator Bill Bradley saw in Betty Sapoch skills that even she didn't know she had: the ability to get people involved and to get things done. As he helped her gain confidence, she has helped him win elections.**



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN BORRIS/OUTLINE

# MENTORS & PROTÉGÉS

while, people whose capacity for growth you believe to be significant. Politics is also very much a feel about another person, and I always sensed that Betty could handle things.”

Bradley had observed Sapoch at work in her capacity as a volunteer for various community activities. Once, for instance, when she was program director for a youth center, she asked Bradley (then a New York Knicks star) to address the local teenagers. “There’s a style, a sensitivity and a quiet strength—she’s got a core of steel, but you’d never know that. She has an ability to get people involved, and she’s meticulous in attention to detail. As these abilities were tested, she discovered that they were significant.”

In his role as mentor, Bradley tried to include Sapoch in any meeting that might prove to be a learning experience for her.

He also saw this as a way to demystify the smoke-filled halls of politics. He coached her before meetings and did postmortems on her performance. According to Sapoch, he also never vetoed any of her “unusual” ideas. “He always said, ‘If you can make it work, go for it.’ There’s a lot of trust both ways, and trust is an unspoken chemistry.”

Occasionally his trust has landed him in some “unusual” situations, like the time Sapoch suggested that they expand the audience for a fund raiser to be held at Great Adventure amusement park by getting people to buy extra tickets for disadvantaged and inner-city kids. Bradley arrived to find much of his audience made up of the Hmong population—the boat people from Southeast Asia (who obviously spoke little English). “Every now and then I do something where I get his ‘look,’” says Sapoch. “His look is: Get me out of here. What has she *done*?”

“I think her career has grown by increments,” says the senator, “by her assuming a new responsibility and meeting it. I’m really lucky. What I get out of this working relationship is enormous satisfaction in jobs well done. It’s great to have her tell me things I should do or haven’t thought of. She’s got that confidence now.”

**Architect Denise Scott Brown (left) takes particular pleasure in having been able to help shape the career of another woman colleague, and Gabrielle London learned the ropes from one of her profession’s finest.**

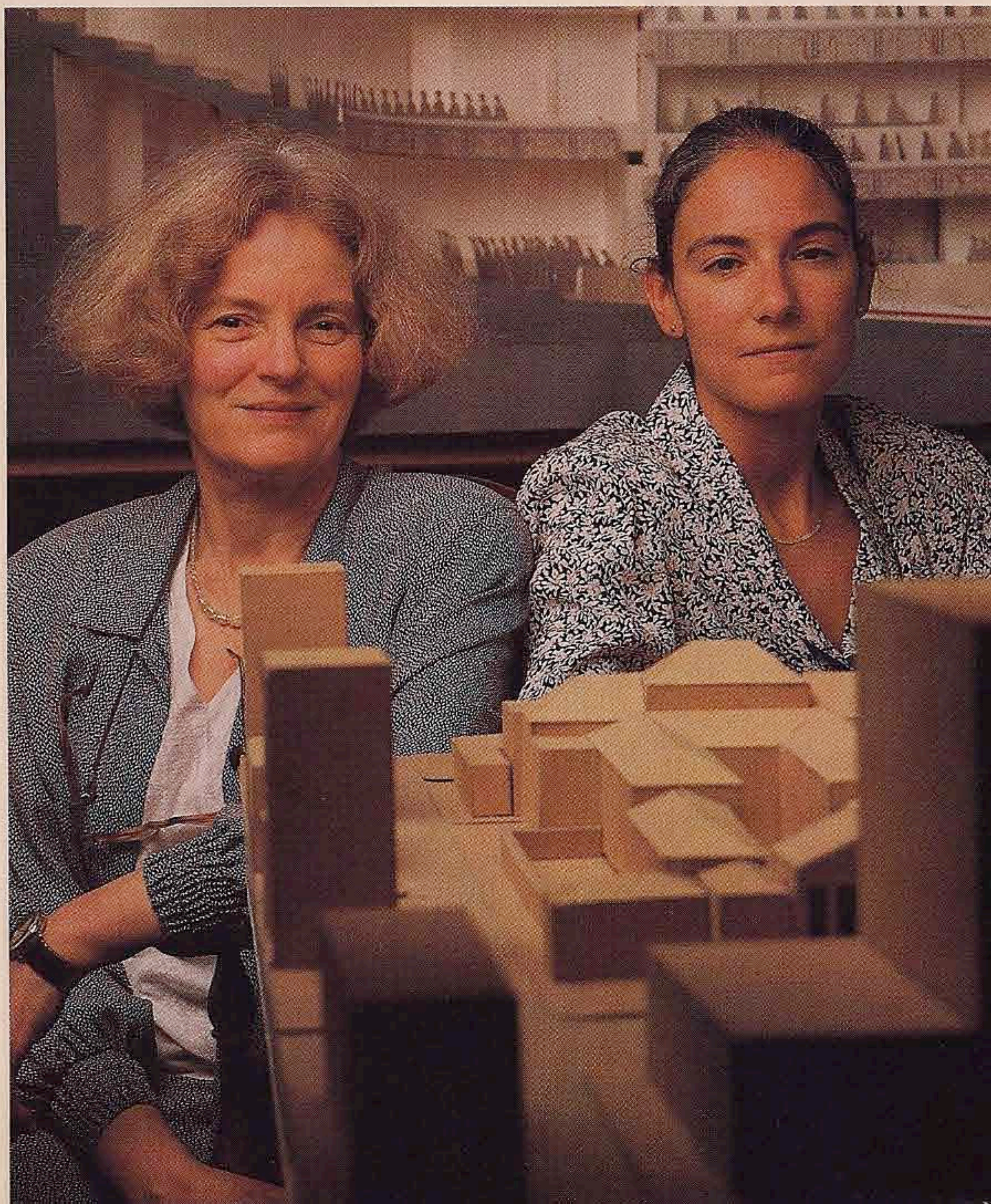
## **BLUEPRINT FOR GROWTH: (NOT ALWAYS) AN EASY ALLIANCE**

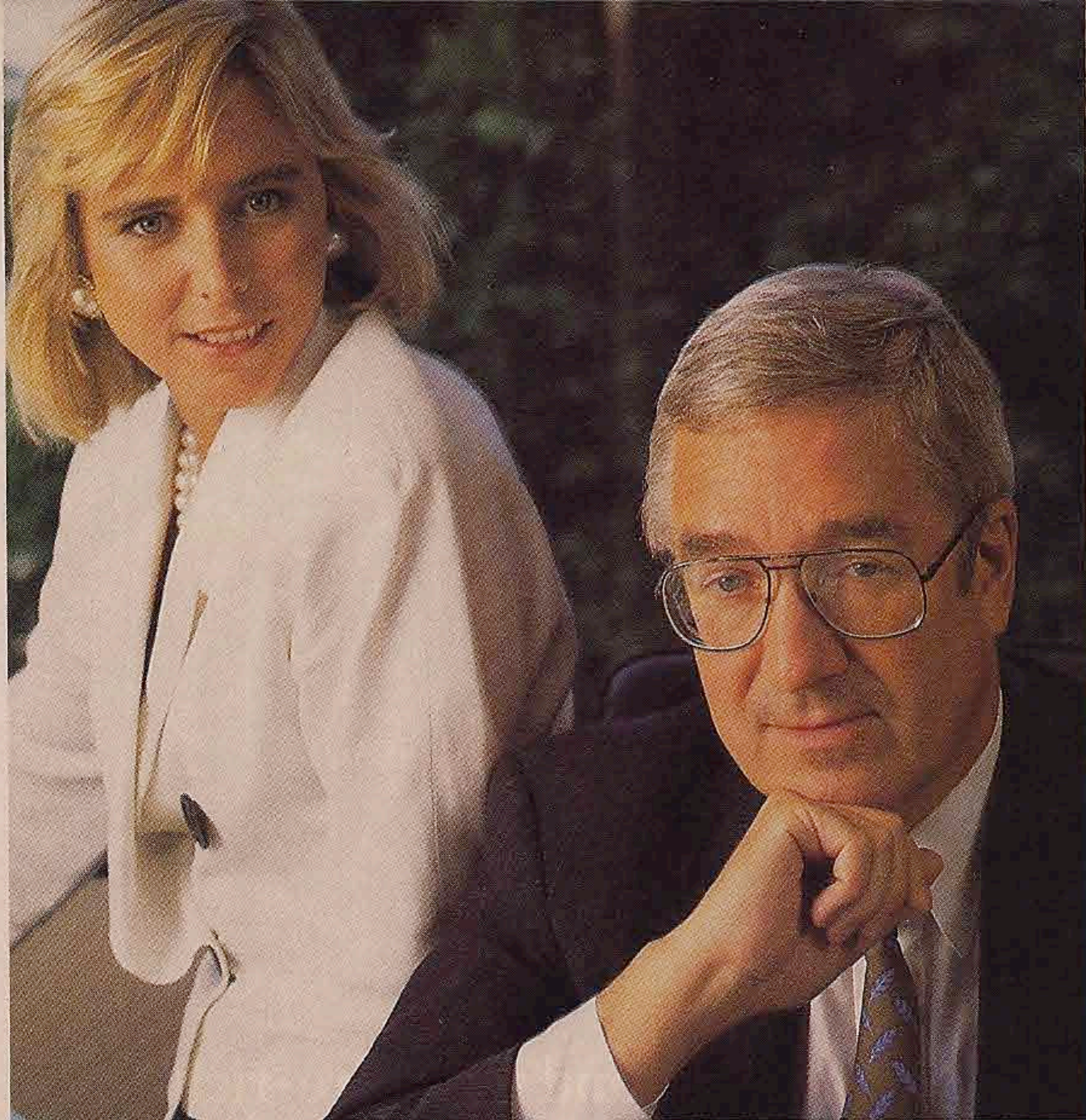
**Denise Scott Brown, principal, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates. Gabrielle London, architect.** It can be inspiring to work for people whose position and responsibilities convey their excellence at work. It can be downright intimidating to find yourself working for one of the icons of your chosen profession. When Gabrielle London joined the Philadelphia-based firm of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, she became a member of a renowned team whose work in architecture and urban planning she’d studied in graduate school. Robert Venturi has created seminal works of architecture, and his partner (and wife) Denise Scott Brown has inspired many women to brave her overwhelmingly male profession.

At first London was hired as an extra pair of hands for a “charette”: the deadline crunch before a presentation to a client—the architect’s all-nighter. But Scott Brown happened to be looking for a project manager to oversee a rejuvenation project for downtown Memphis, and London was signed on. “She’d seen enough of my work at the office to know that I was productive and that I learned things pretty quickly,” says London. “She felt that she could teach me.”

“I moved into practice in my mid-30s, having spent much of my career as a professor,” says Scott Brown, “and my own role models have been, in the main, academic rather than from the business world.” Her original mentor, back in her native South Africa, was her mother, a woman who had

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW ECCLES





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**Even at their first meeting, Nancy Alspaugh felt that she had found a simpatico soul, and Derk Zimmerman sensed the kind of creativity he wanted on his TV-production team. His job offer put her on her chosen career track.**

dropped out of architectural school for lack of money but who, after marrying, commissioned former schoolmates to build her first home. "When I saw all the men in my first year of architectural school," she says, "I thought: 'What are *they* doing here? This is women's work.'"

Scott Brown came to the US to study at the University of Pennsylvania and joined the faculty upon graduation. "During one faculty meeting," she recalls, "I made an impassioned plea for not tearing down the Furness Building [the fine-arts library on campus]. At the end of the meeting a young man came up to me and said, 'I agree with everything you said, and my name is Robert Venturi.'" It was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration, both personal and professional.

Scott Brown's particular genius is in reconciling the aesthetic concerns of architecture with the grittier needs of middle-class society—she sees important information in the public taste for a Levittown or a Las Vegas. Yet hooking up with a brilliant practitioner doesn't necessarily mean benefiting from that expertise—some gifted men and women are too busy (or too ungenerous) to impart their wisdom. But London lucked out.

"It was truly a mentor situation," she says, "particularly in the beginning. As I showed I was learning things and could take on more, Denise didn't need to check up on me—partly because she knew that if I ever had questions, I'd come to her."

London also learned the skill of delegation. "When you're a perfectionist," says London, "it's hard to accept that someone else may do it just as well but differently. But

Denise allowed me to do things that she could have done more easily herself."

Scott Brown had certain criteria for a protégé. "The thing that stood out is that we had an agreement about the level of work necessary to get things done. Some people find me persnickety. I think I'm right. But there are some people who have dry-biscuit minds and red-wine-rich intellects, and Gabby's one of those."

Part of Scott Brown's pleasure in their relationship was being able to transmit her knowledge to another woman—and see her take off on her own. (London has since left the firm and hung out her own shingle.) She knows only too well the pitfalls for women in her profession and is fond of a feminist axiom: "For a woman to succeed in a man's field, she has to work twice as hard and be twice as good. Luckily this is not difficult." But Scott Brown was not an entirely benevolent booster. "I once heard a sermon preached: 'I will be the congregation's mentor and, on occasion, their tormentor,'" she says. "I think there is a dimension of that in a good mentoring relationship—that you have to face certain unpleasant truths, and you grow by facing them."

One of the truths she helped London face was a tendency to diminish herself. "Bright women who are threatening to people often learn a skill that goes, 'It's just little me over here,'" she says. "Maybe Gabby needed to do that, but it wouldn't work around me, so there were times when she needed to learn to confront. Then I wouldn't necessarily agree with her, and she'd have to learn that, too. Gabby has learned survival skills for being around strong personalities. In fact, there were times when I began to feel, 'Gabby's getting awfully bossy.'"

## TV PROS: ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH

**Derk Zimmerman, president, Group W Productions. Nancy Alspaugh, executive producer of *This Evening*.** Nancy Alspaugh has done almost every job in

television except hairdressing. She was a camera person, an audio engineer, a master controller. But what she wanted to do was *create* television. "It was difficult finding somebody to encourage me," she says. "The standard path in television, which is to go up the management ladder, does not have the creative input I was seeking."

Then Derk Zimmerman became president of Group W Productions, the company that owned the Boston station where Alspaugh was working. "He called me out of the clear blue, hearing that I had developed some ideas for programs on the local level," she says. "I met with him and told him of the dilemma in my career path, and he really reinforced that I should go for my dream." When the company decided to develop a national version of her station's *Evening Magazine*, Zimmerman saw the chance Alspaugh had articulated to him, and she moved to San Francisco to create and produce *This Evening*.

Alspaugh and Zimmerman matched up in personal demeanor as well as in professional goals. "He has a very direct style," she says. "I guess to some people it might come off as abrupt. He can walk into a room full of people, and if he wants to talk to me, he'll say, 'Nancy, come for a walk.' Some people can be turned off by that. But I think there's a chemistry. After our first meeting, I was on a high because I felt I had met somebody I

connected with. He kind of gives me his gut instincts, and I've picked up that gut-level management style from him. There's a lot to be learned there."

Zimmerman was willing to invest his time and attention in Alspaugh because he sensed an enthusiastic professionalism and a no-nonsense intellectual honesty—"and you can't preach that," he says. All he did, he modestly states, was "define the mission—who we are, what we're trying to do—and provide the environment in which to take risks within certain parameters." He also provided his home phone number and the go-ahead to call "anytime, day or night—except when I'm watching a Bulls game."

Zimmerman always has sent out a clear message to other people in the company that he supports Alspaugh and has a strong faith in her contribution. "There's a lot of including me in important decisions," she says, "even on issues that don't pertain to what I'm doing but have larger implications to the company. It makes you feel important, part of a bigger process, and it gets you excited about growth potential. You see the realm of possibility."

Occasionally Alspaugh gets more than she bargained for. "I might be a little nervous about going into a room full of people I've never faced before and having to perform and impress, but I don't want to look bad for him."

Sometimes that kind of mentoring can engender jealousy among other people in the company. "Oh yes," says Alspaugh, "you get feedback. There are remarks like, 'He adores you—you'll be fine.' That's something every woman with a mentor and a special relationship has to face. You can't let it get in the way." You also can't beat the relationship's caring quality, like when Zimmerman finds Alspaugh still at her desk at 10 PM and issues a stern lecture about "you gotta have a *life*...." But there is a favorite expression around the studio, according to Alspaugh: "Derk knows that every day we leave a pint of blood at the doorstep. He feels that he will get that from me—also, my undivided loyalty."

If you're such a valuable employee, and your boss is the one you consult about your career ladder, could he ever let you go—perhaps to the competition? "I don't know—I think he would," says Alspaugh. "If he saw there was no growth opportunity for me within this company, he would say, 'It's time for you to move on.' But in subtle ways he tells me that there will be rewards for me here. Sometimes he'll call at just the right moment and say, 'You're my pick of the week, kiddo.' It's nice that he's a phone addict—he's always staying in touch." ■

AIMEE LEE BALL is a frequent contributor to WORKING WOMAN.