

Mentoring With Arugula

By **VICTORIA THOMAS**

CLUTCH the pearls: I read about the planned closing this month of Harris Shepard Public Relations in Century City with a pang. While Harris Shepard adores Doris Day, he more resembles Mary Poppins: mysterious beneath the obvious rigor. In the official press release, Shepard states: “When I started my agency, I really felt like the stars and the planets – and lots of hard work – came together to make my group successful from the beginning – and now I feel it’s just the right time to leave.”

Harris Shepard ruled the fickle realm of West Coast beauty PR with an iron (though manicured) fist for 27 years. He was my mentor and one of my greatest teachers. The enduring lesson he imparted, in business and in life: “Put on some lipstick and get over it.” Harris, in fact, might have sort of a thing for lipstick. This seems reasonable, since beauty brands were his agency’s bread and butter, and he traces his family history tangentially to that of Max Factor.

Harris scooped me up when I was a little down on my luck as a writer – let’s just call it my Santa Fe period. I was in the process of finishing my first book, which, thus far, has turned out to be my last. The gig was past deadline and unpaid. (Yes, I did it for the glory, which has yet to materialize.)

I might call that experience thankless, except that it led me to Harris Shepard.

Of course, Harris knew my publisher. In fact, he knew everybody. His power-Rolodex – and he insisted on a typed, hard-copy Rolodex in those days – was legend. Even mean girls at the beauty

magazines would take his calls. Harris met me for lunch at the Ivy and told me he needed someone fast on the keys. His usual bevy of junior account executives – Mimi, Fifi, Gigi, Muffy, Buffy and Shoshanna – had quit, leaving the Chief, as I came to call him, holding the bag.

“But, dear, dear ...” His voice trailed off over an impossibly high-priced chicken salad. “Dear, dear, and I say this with love ...” He gestured weakly in a vertical motion, rendered close to speechless by my road-kill fashion statement: waist-length hair, heaps of Navajo turquoise, denim jacket, velvet hippie skirt, well-worn red cowboy boots, nary a speck of makeup. “You’re a little light on lips.” He chewed, pensively. “In fact, dear, and this is said with love, you look like a Russian folk dancer. I feel like you could throw me over your saddle and ride off with me!”

Well, he was right. I cut my hair, bought a red Chanel lipstick, and wore a suit and killer heels for the next several years as HSPR’s senior accounts manager. But when the weeks got really long, I’d revert to my unkempt ways (ponytail, Birkenstocks). My rationale: Most of our long days were spent in the office.

Care, effort

“Harris,” I remember saying peevishly, “clients can’t see us over the phone!” Ever dapper himself, he gasped, genuinely taken aback. “Oh, but dear, dear, actually, yes, they can!” he protested, without a whiff of irony. Of course, what he meant was that clients can tell if you care and whether or not you’re making an effort. Harris always cared and always made the effort.

The other truth from high atop Mount Shepard is that not only is the customer always right – she or he is always, always a “T.D.” (T.D. = Total Doll). This goes double for the high-maintenance divas, narcissists, prima donnas, steel magnolias, wannabes, lost souls, attention whores and all of the other people who want to be rich and famous.

And this largesse spilled over onto us. One morning, anticipating a client coffee meeting at the office, he sent a particularly rusticated assistant out into the shopping mall for pastries. Being a Brooklynite, I understood that when he asked for “a rugelach assortment,” he meant plump crescents stuffed with poppy seeds. The assistant returned with two heads of salad greens. These were tactfully tucked away, and never the wiser, the clients happily sucked on the Mrs. See’s butterscotch lollipops that Harris always kept in a jar on his massive desk for us, his “beez and geez” (Bs and Gs = boys and girls).

I left Harris for money. One rain-soaked night as I languished at my office desk, a sly acquaintance phoned me out of the blue (I hadn’t even been looking) with the proverbial offer I couldn’t refuse. The new boss turned out to be an infamous bellowing trans-Atlantic harridan who did not pay the bills or the staff. Both clients and team soon bolted, and the agency imploded. I remember thinking of Harris as I stood in the deserted Venice office space and handed over the keys to the building manager.

Dear, dear, and I say this with love — you were right all along.

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