

Women's History Month: Build On What Makes You Unique

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About six months ago, I was preparing to face the most important interview of my career thus far—my partnership interview.

For the interview, I knew I needed to prepare a short “opening statement” about why I should be made partner. I met with three of my very close and career-long mentors to discuss how to best present myself in order to convince some of the top trial lawyers and litigators at my firm that I should join the partnership. I drafted some ideas and somewhat cliché opening thoughts that I would state as soon as I walked into the room, but everything was falling flat.

After some brainstorming, one of my mentors reminded me that I wasn't telling them anything personal or unique, encouraging me to reflect on my career and how I got to where I am today.

I was born in Dallas to parents who emigrated from Iran. As may sound familiar to other children of immigrants, my parents told me I had three career choices: I could be a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer. I know now, as a parent, that they said this with love. They wanted me to have what they considered to be a better life than what they had. With their goal in mind, they set me up for success by providing me the best opportunities, including sending me to a well-known college preparatory school in Dallas.

With my parents' requirements in mind, I became interested in becoming a lawyer although we have no lawyers in our family. My parents sent me to a legal summer program in Washington, D.C., where I met different lawyers working in different areas of law. I visited with a patent litigation firm and knew that I wanted to combine the interesting areas of science and technology with a legal career. I took a computer science course my senior year of high school and knew that it was something I was interested getting a degree in during college.

I ended up graduating with a computer engineering and math degree from Southern Methodist University, then went straight to Baylor University for law school. After my 2L summer, I did a summer clerkship at Fish & Richardson, when Tom Melsheimer was the managing partner of the Dallas office. It was during that summer that I learned that

Tom's wife was one of my high school teachers. That experience, unique to me, helped build a natural connection between myself and Tom, which is something that I am grateful for.

Right after law school, I clerked for the Hon. Kimberly Priest Johnson. I was lucky to have her as my first boss working as a lawyer. She cares so much about development and mentorship, especially those who are young female lawyers. She also had a wide variety of experience, working in Big Law, for the government as a prosecutor, and in her own firm, showing me that your career does not necessarily have to follow what is considered a traditional path to succeed.

It was through my experience during my clerkship that I learned that I wanted to do everything I could to be in the courtroom. A group of lawyers at Fish & Richardson, including Tom, opened the Dallas office of Winston & Strawn in the middle of my clerkship. I joined them after my clerkship, hoping to get the trial experience I desired.

But of course, it is no surprise that a junior associate at a Big Law firm does not get first chair experience right at the get go. So what did I do? I leaned into my unique background to get the experiences I wanted. Baylor's law school is known for their intensive mock trial program. I used this experience to get stand up opportunities as early as I could. I got involved in pro bono cases and got to sit second chair in a federal trial my third year at the firm. I reminded others of my computer engineering background to take or defend depositions related to technology that I could quickly pick up. Judge Johnson's husband, Brett Johnson, is a fellow partner at Winston. We developed a close relationship during my clerkship through Judge Johnson, and he has been one of my biggest champions since day one at the firm. I am lucky to work closely with him on many different matters at Winston.

These are just a few things that are unique to me, but have impacted the direction my career has taken. Everybody has different hobbies, expertise, and life experiences that make them who they are. Some are obvious, such as the fact that I am a female lawyer with an engineering background. Others seem simple on the surface but can open doors and opportunities you would not expect, such as my high school connection to Tom. It can be a previous job, an expertise, or some other personal experience. Whatever it is, do not forget to give credit where it is due—you never know where it can lead you.

So about that interview. I walked in starting off the interview telling them about that personal story about the three choices my parents gave me. The fact that I did two out of three made my parents proud, but also helped me find a career that I was passionate about. This not only got some smiles and broke the ice in a somewhat tense environment, but it also gave the panel a personal view into my history and background that no other partnership candidate would have.

Of course, I still had to work hard to develop the necessary legal skills to make it where I am today, but there is no question that my history, including my upbringing and educational background, truly set me up for success to ultimately being invited to join the partnership last fall. But it doesn't stop here. I will continue to find ways to connect with others in this same way. I hope this lesson can inspire others to remember to celebrate their qualities when trying to achieve their goals, whatever they may be.

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