

Alexis Robertson:

Welcome to The Path and The Practice, a podcast dedicated to sharing the professional origin stories that the attorneys at Foley and Lardner, LLP, a full service law firm with over 1,000 lawyers in 24 offices across the US and abroad. I'm your host, Alexis Robertson, director of diversity and inclusion at Foley. In each episode of this podcast, you'll hear me interview a different Foley attorney. Through our one-on-one candid conversations, you'll learn about each guest's unique background, path to law school, and path to Foley and Lardner. Essentially, you'll hear the stories you won't find on their professional bio. Stories of obstacles and triumphs with some funny moments in between. And of course, you'll learn a bit about their practice. Now let's get to the episode.

Alexis Robertson:

On today's episode, I'm speaking with Von Bryant. Von is a senior counsel in Foley's Washington DC office, where he focuses his practice on corporate transactional matters. Before I had Von on the podcast, I had the opportunity to speak with him a bit about his path to law and his path to Foley. At which point he said to me, "Happy to be on the podcast. I just don't think my background is that interesting." Which I find to be hysterical given that, as you will soon hear, Von could have just as easily ended up in the NFL, as he did end up at Foley and Lardner.

Alexis Robertson:

In addition to discussing this, Von shares about growing up in West Philadelphia, as well as the New Jersey suburbs. He shares a bit about his parents and what it was like growing up as the child of two PhDs. And he also reflects and share some of his personal experiences as a black man in America, and how that relates to the current racial justice movement. I hope you enjoy the episode. Hi, Von. Welcome to the episode.

Von Bryant:

Hey Alexis. Nice to be here.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, thank you so much for joining me. Before we jump in and walk through really, what I'm calling, your professional personal origin story, I want to get you to give that introduction that you give if you're at a networking event or say you were on a panel, and you get that moment, someone says, "Tell me about yourself." What is the intro you give to that?

Von Bryant:

So I say, good afternoon. My name is Von Bryant. I'm a senior counsel at Foley and Lardner in our DC office. My practice is concentrated primarily on mergers and acquisitions, private equity

and venture capital transactions. But I also do some investment management work and pretty much anything generally commercial.

Alexis Robertson:

All right. So our task for the next 30 to 45 minutes, we're going to walk up to this story. I want to figure out how it is that we arrived here today. And I'm going to start with some basics, and then I'm going to kind of fast forward a bit. I apologize the listener. We might not be an exact chronological order. We'll see where our conversation takes us. But where are you from? Where did you grow up?

Von Bryant:

Sure. So I'm from West Philadelphia. Grew up there till about age 10, and then moved to South Jersey. And lived in South Jersey, middle school, high school. But since college have not really been back.

Alexis Robertson:

Okay, so this is where I'm going to say something that's either really lame or what everyone's thinking. When you say West Philadelphia, do you think of the Fresh Prince at all? Do others?

Von Bryant:

Absolutely. Born and raised. That immediately comes to mind.

Alexis Robertson:

That was really what I expected you to say.

Von Bryant:

But I was trying to maintain my professional demeanor, and so did not start rapping the song.

Alexis Robertson:

I had to say what everybody I think would be thinking. But okay, so tell me about that. You said grew up in West Philadelphia. Later moved to New Jersey. When did that move happen? So at what age?

Von Bryant:

Fourth grade. I was 10. So I'm really a Jersey guy, but Philly is my roots. My family's from Philly. I'm a die hard Eagles fan. It really gave me a good perspective into kind of growing up in a more urban environment and then transitioning to a suburban environment. And so kind of having the

benefit of knowing both sides personally is really one of the things that I think about in terms of moving over to Jersey.

Alexis Robertson:

Wow. So that's something I may want to follow up on. Although I am curious because I've not spent much time in New Jersey, but I have some friends from Jersey. Can you name the suburbs you're from, because I think people are going to be curious?

Von Bryant:

Yeah, sure. So it's called Washington Township. It's about 30 minutes east of Philadelphia and about 30 minutes west of Atlantic City. So right there in the middle of between AC and Philly in South Jersey.

Alexis Robertson:

Okay. So I'm going to skip ahead. We may come back to more of this early childhood, but when I asked you to be on this podcast, told you what it was going to be, your first response was along the lines of, happy to, although I just don't have anything terribly interesting about my professional path. At which point, as I do for pretty much everyone, I looked you up on LinkedIn. And I said, okay, Von. Although I've noticed that you went to college at both Duke and the University of Pennsylvania, what happened there? And so I'd like you to answer that again, just on this recording. What happened there? Why? Why did you go two places for college?

Von Bryant:

Gotcha. So I went to Duke out of high school on a full athletic scholarship for football as a running back. And so that's what took me to Duke. And it's also what led to my transfer to U Penn. Because back when I played at Duke in the early and mid 2000s, we weren't as good as they are now. So I was going up and down the East Coast, getting beat up by Florida State and Clemson and all the schools. And then my coach got fired. And that's the guy I knew since I was 16 years old. He gets fired. These new guys come in. They switched me into defense. And after all that, I said, you know what? Penn was always my second choice or my other choice when I had narrowed it down. And being from South Jersey, Philadelphia area, it's like a homecoming. So I said I'm going home. I'm going to go play football at home, go to Penn. And that's what led to me going to both schools.

Alexis Robertson:

All right. So you say this really casual, like really casual-like, that it's completely normal to play football at the collegiate level, but let me back you up a little bit. So you knew your coach at Duke since you were 16. Tell me a bit about that. And also just tell me a bit about Von and high

school. I don't know. I told you previously, I'm not well versed in sports or athletics. But actually let me break this up a little bit. When did you start playing football?

Von Bryant:

I started playing football at age 11. So sixth grade.

Alexis Robertson:

Is that through your middle school?

Von Bryant:

That was the recreational parks and Pee Wee leagues. That wasn't for the school. It was for the town.

Alexis Robertson:

Okay. And at some point between that and likely high school, it became clear that you were kind of good at it.

Von Bryant:

Yeah. I was a little bit of a late bloomer. I was still small and until 10th grade. And then 11th grade, I became a starter. Did really, really well. Made All-State and all that. And then my senior year, I was actually nationally ranked, was number 70 running back in the country. My senior year, I was number one Ivy League recruit in any position. And typically that's a quarterback. But I was number one, even though I was a running back. So that was pretty cool. So I had offers from the entire Ivy League, and then some bigger schools like Duke and Chapel Hill, a few others.

Alexis Robertson:

I need to break this down, back to the person who's not as up on college recruiting. And just candidly, I mentioned this to my husband the other day, and I was like, "Yeah, he was like a draft pick." And my husband was like, "No, no, honey. He was a recruit."

Von Bryant:

Yeah. I was a recruit. I was a recruit.

Alexis Robertson:

Please tell me though to the extent, for the layman like myself, what is that system like to be the number one Ivy League recruit. It sounds like a big deal to me. You say it kind of casually. So I would just love if you could reflect on that and tell me a little bit more about that.

Von Bryant:

Sure. So the coaches were coming by my school all the time. I'd be in class and then get an announcement to my class, "Von come to the guidance counselor's office." And there's a coach, or coaches are popping out of my mailbox. They were just always around, inviting me to campus, showing up at the games.

Alexis Robertson:

And that's senior year? That's what senior year of college felt like?

Von Bryant:

That's what senior year of high school felt like?

Alexis Robertson:

I'm sorry. High school. Yes.

Von Bryant:

Just always coaches, taking trips to visit them with my parents. Sometimes my grandparents will come, and they give you a hotel. And it was fun. It was definitely a fun time.

Alexis Robertson:

All right. I want to tease some things out in that as well, but let's just make it clear. So at that point, you're not like, I'm going to law school to be a lawyer.

Von Bryant:

No, no. So at 17 with scholarships, I'm thinking NFL all the way. Everything is NFL. And then my parents were like, "Okay, that's cool. But you got to go to the best college you can go to since you have that opportunity." So they were totally supportive of it because I'm getting into these great schools because I'm a good student and athlete and scholarship. So I'm thinking NFL. And they're saying, "That's great. Just make sure you graduate on time and do your school work."

Alexis Robertson:

And so I know you mentioned this when we talked before. Your parents were, as you said, ecstatic about the NFL, but they were like, we care about the academics at the school you're going to.

Von Bryant:

Yeah, yeah. Both of my parents are PhDs. So education's paramount in our family. It was never, if I was going to college, just where. That's just what you do after high school. That was the whole mindset. And my dad was really big on, "The average lifespan of an NFL career is 3.7 years. You'll be 26. We're going to do the rest of your life?" And I'm like, "I don't know. That's not going to be me. I'm going to play till I'm 40."

Alexis Robertson:

They were keeping it very real as to what to focus on.

Von Bryant:

Very real. So he was hitting me with the stats, the injury concerns. You can't bank on that. Go for it, but you got to have your plan B, you got to take care of education either way. And so that's what I did. So I went to Duke saying, I'm going to the NFL. Never made it to the NFL, but I did get the academics handled.

Alexis Robertson:

And I didn't even get my original question answered. So how did you get connected at 16 with the coach who was your coach for a bit at Duke?

Von Bryant:

Right. So I actually, so the summer of my senior year, so after my junior year, I made All-Conference, All-State and I'm like, oh wow. I'm good. So let me take this really seriously. And then by some family members that have played sports, they're like, "You should go to camp at some schools that you're interested in so you can literally put yourself in front of the coaches." And so I have family in North Carolina in the Raleigh area. So I'm like, okay. I'm going to go to Duke and University of North Carolina's camps. And I went to University of Maryland's camp. I'm going to go to these three camps just to get in front of some coaches, and also to hone my skills and things like that.

Von Bryant:

So I went to Duke's camp. You run the 40 yard dash, just one of the training metrics they evaluate you on. And I ran the fastest time at the camp, and then did the drills for a few days. And at the end of the camp, coach is like, "Hey, we want to talk to you like upstairs." And they were like, "We want to offer you a full scholarship." And so I'm 16. And all I know is I got to talk to my parents. I can't say anything. I'm like, "Thank you. That sounds great. Can I call my mom?" I didn't want to say anymore.

Von Bryant:

And so my mom talked the coach, and then they gave me a campus tour. And then I was plugged in. Then they started calling me on a weekly basis. They started coming to my games. But yeah, I went down to the camp. And I went to three camps, Chapel Hill and Duke offered me, Maryland didn't offer. But I went to the camp and got on their radar. But yeah, so it was just like a tour. I was going to these camps and they were offering.

Alexis Robertson:

And I'm sorry. So at 16, you basically got connected to the coach at Duke. And that's where you then subsequently went. I know you mentioned then he wasn't there anymore so you transferred. But that's amazing. It doesn't sound to me like you were promised to Duke by the time you were a senior, but you'd already had a couple years of a relationship with them.

Von Bryant:

Yeah. So I met them my summer going into my senior year. They offered while I was at the camp. And they were the first offered me a scholarship. And so I always had a special place for them. They were the first to offer me. And then as the year went on, more and more teams started offering, but they stuck with it. And then ultimately I went with them. And yeah, I knew the coach. They were coming to my games, visited a few times. So yeah. That's where I ended up going. And my mom was all for them. Because I got offered by Clemson and a few other schools that weren't as high on the academic. And she was just like, "Not happening. No."

Alexis Robertson:

She wasn't having it. No.

Von Bryant:

No. She was like-

Alexis Robertson:

No.

Von Bryant:

And I didn't understand. I was a teenager. But I know that they have my best interests.

Alexis Robertson:

So you then transfer, like you said, after your coach left to the University of Pennsylvania. And surely at this point, you decided I'm going to law school. Is that what happened?

Von Bryant:

Still no. Still no. When I transferred, my dad was like, "All right, you should go to Wharton because it's the best of everything." And I was like, "No, I want to do African-American studies." And he's like, "I'll buy you the books. If you really care, you can read the books. You should go to Wharton." And he's always methodical. And he's like, "Well, if you can write me an essay about why you want to do African-American..." I was like, "I'll just do the Wharton." So did that. And then still, I want to go to NFL. I want to go to NFL. Because it's possible from Ivy League, although tougher because the competition is not the same. You're not on TV the same. It's still doable. So I still was training night and day, all summer with that mindset. But again, focused on school at the same time.

Alexis Robertson:

Wow. Yeah. You mentioned that to me before how it's possible. It's not as common. And then I want to talk a bit about the transition after college. But I wanted to back up and just can you share for what that's like to be a college athlete while you're also focused on academics and all the training. I mean, you said it was a lot and it was hard, but what is that like?

Von Bryant:

It's pretty tough. I mean, college athletes don't want anyone to take out a violin and sing them a sad song. But it's like having a full-time job while going to school. I mean, pretty close to 40 hours because you got, you're practicing in three hours a day, you're traveling once a week. You don't get anything school-wise done on game day. If you're injured or have a nick or bruise, you got to have rehab and treatment. You got to watch film. You got to go to study hall. You there's so many things. Everything revolves around the sport. And you're even picking your classes based on which ones don't conflict with practice and things like that. You're doing everything for the sport.

Von Bryant:

So definitely felt like a full-time job, but something that I was passionate about and loved doing. But it really did make it tough to do extra studying and study groups, and kind of other extracurriculars because the team is not letting you study abroad. You can't leave campus. They don't want you to go home in the summer.

Alexis Robertson:

Your time is accounted for.

Von Bryant:

Yeah. You got to show up on time every day. Even in terms of the class, they send people to the class, at least at Duke and Penn, they don't do that every school, to see if you're in class.



And if you're not in class that day, you can't practice that day. And then if you don't practice, you might not get to start if you were a starter. There might be some penalty on you cause you didn't go to class. Which is, again, not boo-hoo, I had to go to class. But in college you might sleep in sometimes. You might blow off a class. But during the season, you got to go to class because they send their grad assistants around, checking in with a little check board. Somebody pokes in and checking the box to see who's supposed to be there, and then they leave. And then if you weren't there and you show up at practice, they're like, "What are you doing here? You can't practice today."

Alexis Robertson:

Well, not to kind of bury the lede or my intention, but with this podcast and with your walking through your professional history, I am going to imagine, and we'll talk about it in a few moments, there are some parallels there. You got prepared early to work really hard. And it's different because it's physical. But often within large law firms, we talk about the demands of being a lawyer. And so it's just interesting for me to kind of tease out some of the things likely that on your journey to where you are now were probably pretty helpful. Maybe that you would have never guessed it.

Von Bryant:

Right. Right. You never done well. Yep.

Alexis Robertson:

So what happened? You graduated from college, and then what?

Von Bryant:

So I graduated from college, and then I was still training to try to be a professional. So I was doing these various combines and workouts for NFL. And back in mid to late two 2000s, there was this league called the Arena League, which is basically the minor league of football. I was doing things for them. And so I actually I did the Arena League combine in New Orleans. And then I came home, I got a call from San Jose SaberCats. And they were like, "Hey, we want you to come to training camp." I'm like, "Oh, yeah." So keep training. I go to camp, and I was playing defense there. Then they said, "You look great, but we think you need a year in our developmental team in Memphis, Tennessee," or something. And I'm like, okay, so I'm already not in NFL. I'm in Arena. And then Arena is saying, "Hey, you got to go to our farm club for a year." I'm like that's too far going in the wrong direction from NFL as a Wharton grad. So that's when I hung up the cleats after-

Alexis Robertson:

That was it?

Von Bryant:  
That was it.

Alexis Robertson:  
That was two years though, you said.

Von Bryant:  
No, so I was with the team for a month. I was with the team about a month.

Alexis Robertson:  
Oh, got it. Okay, okay.

Von Bryant:  
I was with the team about a month. So I get home, it's October. And I'm like, all right, what do I want to do? New plan. I'm at home. So I start studying for the LSAT. I decided I wanted to go to law school.

Alexis Robertson:  
So where did that come from? Had there been inklings there? Was that what you decided in that time after graduation?

Von Bryant:  
So I kind of figured out towards the end of school that I knew I wanted to get another degree. And I really had narrowed it down to either law school or business school. And I started looking at the requirements to get in top business schools and the requirements get in top law schools. And one of the big distinctions was that most of the top business schools want you to have a few years of work experience to get in. And I'm like, ah. I wanted to just keep it going.

Von Bryant:  
And that with law school always, just growing up even as a kid, wanted to be a lawyer. Saw the Jerry McGuire movie. I found out sports agents were typically lawyers. I was like, all right, I want to go to law school. And so I immediately, after football ended, started studying for the LSAT. Took it. But then there was still a lot of time before... You got to go through the application process and stuff. So I started working in Philly for a marketing company. I worked in marketing for maybe eight months before law school while doing the admissions process.

Alexis Robertson:

The calculation you made of what schools can I go to directly from college? I definitely did the same thing. It was very clear to me that I wanted to go to law school. But I remember even, I mean, for me, this is, oh my gosh, how long ago? 17 years ago, 16? Is that right? 2005. I graduated in 2005.

Von Bryant:

Okay. I'm '06.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. But I was thinking about this while in college. And I remember seeing that more and more people who wanted to go to law school were starting to take time off. And I was like, no. I have to go straight through. Please don't make me. And of course I feel differently now, but I totally understand what you mean there. And you did mention that as you were growing up, you had considered the law a little bit. So the seed was there earlier on. That's really interesting. Okay. So then where do you go? What happens next? Where do you go to law school?

Von Bryant:

So interestingly, so I applied to a bunch of law schools. But also, whatever law school gave me a free application, I was like, well, why not fill out, right? So I got a free application from WashU, Washington University in St. Louis. I had never heard of the school truthfully because I'm an East Coast person. And really, because they don't have sports. They have small time sports. They're not on TV. They're not on ESPN. So I didn't really know about them.

Von Bryant:

But I applied. And so I get in. And I'm like, oh, whatever. I was waiting for whatever the next best thing should be. The girl I was dating at the time, she's like, "You got in there?" I'm like, "Yeah." And she's like, "Do you know about the school?" I'm like, "No." And she sends me a US News and World Report link to the ranking. And I click it, and it's like number 18 school. And I'm at work in my little cubicle. And I'm like, oh my gosh. I'm like, I have to walk out of work. I'm like, "Be back in 15 minutes." And I leave. I'm like, "Yes, yes. Oh my God. Thank you, God." And I was so excited. And I called my mom.

Von Bryant:

So I didn't know. I didn't know. And then I was enlightened. And so then right away, I'm like, well, that's where I'm going. That was it. I mean, I flew out to St. Louis because I had never been, and checked it out. And it looked eerily similar to Duke, the campus. It was Gothic and

manicured and super nice. So I got great vibes there. I was like, oh yeah, yeah. It's kind of like Duke-light.

Alexis Robertson:  
That's hysterical.

Von Bryant:  
Yeah. And so then I was like, yeah, I'm going. They gave me a little bit of scholarship or whatever. So it worked out.

Alexis Robertson:  
I want to pause here for a second and talk a little bit about your parents. Because you mentioned earlier, they're both PhDs. They were focused on academics. I almost want to ask. Maybe they're not these types of people, but was there any, I told you so sort of moment when you decided to go to law school. And they were like this is why you should have focused on academics. Do you think they felt vindicated?

Von Bryant:  
No, because I was always listening. So I don't know. They were super supportive and were excited for me.

Alexis Robertson:  
Well, and I also want you to tell me a bit about them. Because when we talked before the podcast, you told me a bit about your dad and his path. And I would love if you could share. And of course there may be more things about him or your mom, but I'd love for you to share a bit about what you said about your dad to me previously.

Von Bryant:  
Yeah. So one of the cool things about my dad, he didn't have a traditional path through school like me. He actually dropped out of high school because he was in the 1970s Philadelphia gang scene, and he was on the streets. So he dropped out of school. And then he first got his GED, and then began working as a construction worker. But my mom is at the same time in parallel knocking out degrees. And she's a social worker, and then she becomes a therapist. And she's just doing that and he's doing to construction. And he's like, I don't like this. And so he applies to Temple, the master's program based on his life experience, which I didn't know you could do. So he doesn't have a bachelor's.

Alexis Robertson:

Wow.

Von Bryant:  
Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:  
That's amazing. You didn't mention this before. I wish people could see my face. I'm like, whoa. Okay, go ahead please.

Von Bryant:  
He applies to the master's program based on life experience, literally. I'm a construction worker. I did this. He, at one point, owned a small ice cream shop. He owned the apartment building that we lived in. Even doing business stuff just with his GED. So he gets into the master's program in education based off life experience. Gets his master's. And then he transitions from construction work to white collar work. He starts working in HR at, back then was called CoreStates Bank. So CoreStates became First Union, which became Wachovia, which became Wells Fargo. But he starts doing white collar downtown. And then from there eventually then applied to the PhD program. He does the same type of work that you do, Alexis. He was a diversity professional. His PhD was in philosophy with a focus on organizational development. And then he was a diversity and inclusion specialist. That's what he did in his later years.

Alexis Robertson:  
That's amazing. And you can't describe his story without saying the same tagline or quote that you said to me that he will share.

Von Bryant:  
"I'm from the streets. And I'm the only one I know that's gone from GED to PhD." And he's very proud of being from the streets. When we would go back to Philly, people would be like, "Hey, Dr. Block. Hey Fred, Hey, what's up? What's happening?" And all these people. I'm like, "You know that guy?" And these are his childhood people.

Alexis Robertson:  
That's amazing. That's an amazing, amazing story. Amazing perspective. There was no way we recorded this without you saying that out loud. So I'm glad I got that.

Von Bryant:  
GED to PhD.

Alexis Robertson:

So I'm going to take us back. You go to law school. How's law school? Did you like it? How was it?

Von Bryant:

I loved it. I loved it. And kind of piggybacking on the football theme, I felt super prepared because I was used to spending all day doing stuff in a structured way. So when class would let out, I would just go downstairs to the library for three or four hours. I'm like it's just like practice. It's the same thing. Just class is over, okay, now you got to do the next part. And so it was pretty seamless because it was replacing all that football time with studying. So it's not like I had more time, but I was used to using all my time in kind of a constructive way. And so kind of seamless. I mean, nothing prepares you for reading week and doing outlines and all that. But the day to day, going to class, read your cases, outline, I was ready for it.

Alexis Robertson:

Wow. That's interesting. And you didn't go directly straight through, but it was close. It was a year in between?

Von Bryant:

Yes. Because I did a fifth year of college because I redshirted at Duke as a true freshman. Which when you don't play, you just practice, lift weights, and go to class. So I had this extra year of eligibility. And so I did five years for college.

Alexis Robertson:

Okay. That time you were in the marketing and the month in the Arena-

Von Bryant:

Yeah. That was like a year. Basically, we'll call it a year.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. That was about a year. So how do you decide what practice area you want to be in? Did you have inklings by the time you were in law school?

Von Bryant:

No. I thought I wanted to be a litigator, but all lawyers want to be litigators, right? Because that's what you're taught.

Alexis Robertson:

That's what they teach you. Yes.

Von Bryant:

And so I'm interviewing for OCI, and I'm like, "I want to be the next Johnny Cochran. I want to be a litigator." And the people were like, "Really? You went to Wharton. Okay. If that's what you want to do." So that started to be my first indication of like, hmm, am I doing this the right way?

Alexis Robertson:

There are other things I should be considering here perhaps.

Von Bryant:

So then my summer, interned at Foley Hoag in Boston. They encouraged you to take assignments from every practice group. And so I did that. And definitely liked the corporate assignments more. And got some great advice from some mentors they were like, "Look, if you like this kind of work, you can leverage your undergrad. Clients are going to really like knowing their lawyer went to Wharton. That's an easy sell." And I'm like, "Yeah. It is, right?" And so I didn't know what venture capital was because I grew up in a working class family. If you didn't have enough money to do something, you just-

Alexis Robertson:

You didn't do it.

Von Bryant:

You didn't do it.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, you're not getting money from anyone else.

Von Bryant:

No, no, no. You have an idea and you go see a venture capitalists, and they will give you the money to do your idea. And I thought that was so cool to work with people doing that. So yeah, that kind of took me to corporate law. And then I made sure my two and three L years to take M&A, contract drafting. I started kind of focusing on corporate business law once I kind of figured it out.

Alexis Robertson:

That's really smart. I know for me when I was in law school, just like you said, the focus is litigation focused. And you kind of have to go out of your way a little bit, at least then, to get

some of that corporate structure. I was also the opposite in that I was like, ooh, this is corporate. I could never do this. But so you figure out corporate is the path. I know you mentioned you summered at Foley Hoag, and I know you started your career there and subsequently joined Foley and Lardner. So it is funny that you're at both of these Foley firms. But just tell me a bit, I know you did the shorter elevator pitch thing earlier, but just tell me a little bit more about the day-to-day issues that you focus on as a senior counsel at Foley and Lardner.

Von Bryant:

Sure. I guess I'll think about just what I'm doing now. Yesterday, helped the client close the acquisition of a small company in Virginia. We're negotiating the terms, we're doing due diligence. Are they in compliance with regulations? Have they paid their taxes? All that. So love M&A. Great work to do. But my true passion is the venture capital stuff because, I don't know, it's more exciting to me seeing companies kind of literally grow after they get the money, and then eventually to an exit. Whether that's an IPO, or they sell out, or they merged with someone bigger. So I'm working on three financings right now, representing a healthcare VC, putting in money into a health tech platform.

Alexis Robertson:

That's so interesting though. Also the VC focused and how you tied it back to earlier when you were like, where I'm from, if you didn't have money, you just didn't have money.

Von Bryant:

You just didn't have it. So worked on that. And then a couple of other financings. And then one, my personal client, just got a term sheet for a \$5 million investment. And he has a health app. And so I'm working with him on structuring that. Obviously he wants the money, but he needs to maintain corporate control and the ability to run the company the way he sees fit. And so, they're paying me, but I like to think of it as I'm helping people. I'm helping people do what they want to do.

Alexis Robertson:

That's fantastic. And I'm going to switch gears a little bit because I think given the time that we're in, and for those who listen to this podcast well into the future, it's early July of 2020, right? So we've dealt with, and are still in the midst of coronavirus and now are, what I'll call, this new racial justice movement. I'm talking to you Von as a black man in a large law firm. So I'm just curious if you have any commentary on what it was like navigating particularly law school as a person of color. And I ask you this as also a black woman, diversity director at a large law firm, any reflections you may have on your experiences up until now. And that may be really open, but I'm just curious.



Von Bryant:

Yeah. It was really great in law school at WashU because of the curriculum. So I took intersectionality of race, law, and gender. I took classes at the School of Social Work, because we were allowed to do that, on racial inequality. Took slavery seminar. Wrote a thesis on the black community's ability to petition the UN against the US for reparations based on UN law, and the definition of a nation and all of that. That's in my bag in terms of what I think about. My dad was a diversity guy.

Von Bryant:

At law school, you're with kind of the right people to treat you the right way. I mean, that doesn't mean it's always going to go that way at all. There's blind grading so that's helpful for some biases. But I think one thing that resonates with me is while there, I've had multiple interactions with police just because I'm black man and I'm not a small guy. So I won't say I get stopped by police all the time, but let's say a dozen times in my life, I've been-

Alexis Robertson:

A dozen's a lot. That's a lot.

Von Bryant:

Every other year-

Alexis Robertson:

Every other year.

Von Bryant:

... some cop is stopping me for something. And so I'm at WashU. I'm going to class. I'm on my way to the dry cleaners. So I have a trash bag full of laundry because I didn't have a laundry bag. So it's in a trash bag. I'm riding a bike, have a hoodie on, maybe some Timberlands, trying to paint a picture. I'm riding my bike. And then I hear, woo, woo, woo. And I'm like, oh man, that stinks for someone getting pulled over this early in the morning. That's going to be a rough start to their day. And I keep riding my bike.

Alexis Robertson:

You had no idea it was you.

Von Bryant:

And then U-turn. "Freeze. Drop the bag." And I'm like, what? I'm on a bicycle. I didn't even know cars could pull over bikes as a concept. But so I get pulled over on my bike and I drop the bag. But I'm a 1L, I'm in crim law at the time. So I'm like, "I know my rights." And I'm like, "Why did you stop me?" And the guy's like, "Show me your ID." And I'm like, "No, I didn't do anything wrong. You have to tell me what I did wrong." And he's like, "Well, you don't know your rights because I can throw your ass in jail if you don't show me your ID." And I'm like, "Oh." Because I'm like that sounds [crosstalk 00:33:58].

Alexis Robertson:  
Oh my gosh.

Von Bryant:  
So apologies for using a profanity. So anyway, I show him my ID. And I don't give him my license. I give him my WashU law ID. And he's like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. You'd be surprised how many people try to pose a students in this neighborhood." Or they are the students. "And there's a bunch-

Alexis Robertson:  
Because he didn't think you were a student at first. That's for sure.

Von Bryant:  
... there's been a bunch of burglaries. You fit the description." Dah, dah, dah, dah. And I'm like, "I had a trash bag. What could I put in this trash bag? Is it a bag of jewels? What can you steal from a house in a trash bag?" And so he lets me go, but essentially told me I should thank him for keeping the neighborhood safe from people that look like me. And it was just nuts. And another layer of irony on it was I was going to the dry cleaners, which you don't do much in law school, was because I was getting ready for OCI, to go interview and get a job, and work hard, American dream stuff. I'm literally on my way to do that, drop clothes off at the cleaners for job interviews, before I go to class. That happened to me. His hand's on his gun. He didn't pointed at me or pull it, but it was kind of scary.

Alexis Robertson:  
A whole nother thing you dealt with that a lot of other people don't have to deal with it.

Von Bryant:  
They don't have to deal with it. I gave him the ID, but it's like, what if I didn't want to. I went a different direction, then he could have a different direction.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, absolutely. And like you said, when you've had a dozen run ins over many years. In the current moment, you can't help but reflect in various ways. It's just real. It's super real. And then I want to be mindful of our time so I'm going to switch topics a little bit. But it's clear to me, we could have a much longer podcast than we're going to have today.

Alexis Robertson:

But I think the great part about having you on is that I hope your podcast gets shared not only with people, employees at Foley and Lardner, but more widely. The hope is there's law students, or maybe even kids, who could listen to this one day and think, I'd like to follow Von's path. And so I just wonder if you have any, whether they be reflections or recommendations for somebody who's like, I would like to be a corporate lawyer who focuses on M&A and venture capital? I don't even know. When you look back on your career, what would have been helpful for someone to tell you.

Von Bryant:

Great question. The cliché things, some of them are true. I mean, you got to get the best grades you can at undergrad. But don't be discouraged at what undergrad you go to. It can be the small school no one heard of. If you get a 3.7 out of there, you leveled the playing field. So just do the best you can do. Then with law school, it's super expensive. It really is. But if you want to stay in your local area, your local school is probably okay. But if you want to go to a different city or any city, you should probably go to the best school you get in, even if it costs you the most money. It gives you the most flexibility. And so, that's another kind of strategic point. And then in terms of trying to get that kind of work, when you're at school, do your research. I mean, I have heard stories of people just cold emailing attorneys and asking them to take them a coffee. And then that turns into another thing to, well, why don't you come to this-

Alexis Robertson:

Some sort of mentorship and to a job, and to something else.

Von Bryant:

And then they get a shot. So it takes a lot of work, but do it. And just have no fear. A lot of people will fake it like they have it all figured out, but they likely don't. So just go for it.

Alexis Robertson:

That's fantastic advice. And I've been sitting here thinking about how this podcast, we're not going to have any sort of subtitle name for each episode, but I almost want to call it Von Bryant, from football to Foley and Lardner.

Von Bryant:

Okay. I like that. I like that.

Alexis Robertson:

Which I won't do because why was started at a different Foley, but we're focused on the current Foley. I think with that, I just want to thank you so much for coming on the episode, Von. I think the final thing is if someone wanted to reach out to you, had questions for you, what would be the best way for them to get in contact with you?

Von Bryant:

Well, thank you, Alexis so much. I had a blast doing this. This is great. And can't wait to see you again in person one of these days. I am reachable at V, like victory, Bryant, my last name, @foley.com. Vbryant@foley. I'm on LinkedIn. You can Google me. Happy to chat with anyone, and looking forward to it.

Alexis Robertson:

Thank you so much, Von. Thank you for listening to The Path and The Practice. I hope you enjoyed the conversation and join us again next time. And if you did enjoy it, please share it. Subscribe and leave us a review because your feedback on the podcast is important to us. Also, please know that this podcast may be considered attorney advertising and is made available by Foley and Lardner, LLP for informational purposes only. This podcast is not create an attorney, client relationship. Any opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of Foley and Lardner, LLP, its partners, or its clients. Additionally, this podcast is not meant to convey the firm's legal position on behalf of any client, nor is it intended to convey specific legal advice.