

Alexis Robertson:

Welcome to The Path & The Practice. A podcast dedicated to sharing the professional origin stories of the attorneys at Foley & Lardner LLP. A full service law firm with over 1000 lawyers 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 in conversation with a different Foley attorney. You'll learn about each guest's unique backgrounds, path to law school and path to Foley & Lardner. Essentially, you'll hear the stories you won't find on their professional bios. And of course, you'll learn a bit about their practice. Now, let's get to the episode.

Alexis Robertson:

Today I'm speaking with John Atallah. John is a senior counsel in Foley's Los Angeles office, where he's a member of the firm's litigation department focusing on consumer finance litigation and consumer class actions. Our conversation begins with John sharing about growing up as a first generation Lebanese-American in Garden Grove, California. John describes growing up in California, but still spending most of his summers in Lebanon, an experience that ultimately left him with a foot in two very different worlds. John also discusses his legal practice, what it means to be focused on consumer related litigation in California. And he also talks a bit about when he's had occasion to use Arabic in his day-to-day practice.

Alexis Robertson:

As usual for The Path & The Practice, this conversation is wide ranging. We touched on a lot of things that I won't be able to summarize here, but I will say interestingly, we got into a bit of a discussion about lawyer identity, and how often lawyers see their lawyerness as a deep part of themselves. But we talk about how important it is for attorneys to also be involved in other things, and to essentially be more than just a lawyer. But also John reflects a bit on this very strange time during the COVID-19 pandemic, what he's doing day-to-day to make it through this sort of weird world that we're all in. And then finally, John gives some fantastic advice to law students about how to find a firm with the right cultural fit. I hope you enjoy our conversation. Hi, John, welcome to the show.

John Atallah:

Hi Alexis. How are you?

Alexis Robertson:

I am excellent. I am a broken record who always says, I'm so excited to have you here, but I am. I'm so excited to have you here.

John Atallah:

And I am so excited to be here. So thank you.

Alexis Robertson:

Excellent. And it's fun. People can't see this, but you have a legit recording mike. So this is just like a super legit podcast right now. Well, let's start by having you introduce yourself.

John Atallah:

Sure. So I'm John Atallah. I am a seventh year attorney, senior counsel at Foley & Lardner, and I work in the consumer class action practice handling a variety of litigation matters.

Alexis Robertson:

And where are you from?

John Atallah:

I grew up in Garden Grove, California. Originally, I'm the son of ... well, my parents are both Lebanese immigrants, and they moved here back in the 80s, but we've lived since then or the family home has been in Garden Grove all these years.

Alexis Robertson:

Oh my goodness. I can't help, but make certain pop culture references when I hear Garden Grove, I think of Sublime.

John Atallah:

Sublime, of course.

Alexis Robertson:

Now, that song is in my head.

John Atallah:

Let's not get into the detail.

Alexis Robertson:

We will not. We will have that out appropriate, but yes, I have a child of, I guess, the 90s having grown up in the 80s. So with your parents being Lebanese immigrants, it sounds like they immigrated here before you were born. Is that right?

John Atallah:

That's right.

Alexis Robertson:

So tell me about that. What was that like growing up in Garden Grove as Lebanese?

John Atallah:

Well, it was a nice place to grow up. The problem was at least back then no one had ever heard of Lebanon or anything. And it was always a challenge trying to relate to people or convey to them where the family's from and all of that. But I mean, on the whole, if I were to be giving Garden Grove a review today, it would have gotten a five out of five stars. It was a great place to grow up. My parents are still there. I think probably in large part because my dad could never leave his garden behind, but that's the way it is.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, and is there much of a Lebanese community in Garden Grove or was there when you were a kid? I want to know more.

John Atallah:

Yes. So there isn't and there wasn't. The closest community, there's sort of like a middle Eastern community of sorts in Anaheim and then in some other parts of Orange County, but there wasn't really a ton of that in Garden Grove. I'm not entirely sure what drew my parents to that.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, that's my next question. How did they end up there?

John Atallah:

Yeah. So here's the deal. My dad moved from Lebanon in the 70s and left ... well, I shouldn't say he moved to New York and lived there for a few years, and then moved to Dallas. And then his brother joined him out there, and they did a variety of things. They were painters and they went to school. And when I say painters, I should say, they painted houses, not the artistic sort of thing. I'm sure they were very artful in their ways. And my dad went to the university of Texas at Dallas out there and got his bachelor's and then his master's, and eventually they moved out to California together. He went back to Lebanon for a little while, and this was during the civil war out there. And that's when my parents got married and they moved back out to beautiful Garden Grove.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. I just had to Google Garden Grove, California, which is that considered like a suburb of Los Angeles? What's the relationship?

John Atallah:  
We would take offense in the same way when I hear-

Alexis Robertson:  
I know. I'm sorry. I didn't, I didn't want to offend.

John Atallah:  
I'm kidding. It's the same thing, when the Angels changed their name to the Los Angeles, Angels of Anaheim, it's like, this has nothing to do with Los Angeles, but we're close enough.

Alexis Robertson:  
Is it a surfing? So I see you're not that far from Huntington beach. I'm really just trying to get a vibe.

John Atallah:  
Yeah. I mean, we spent a lot of time out in Huntington growing up and that's the closest beach, so it was a lot of beach-time. And that's, I guess a lot of what the community was about. Before we had like a bunch of families who would leave and go surfing first thing in the morning, and you'd see them hanging their wet suits out to dry at 8:00 AM or something when we'd be leaving for school. I don't think it's as much about that anymore, but yeah, it was that way.

Alexis Robertson:  
That's interesting. I was in Huntington beach a couple years ago for a conference and yeah, I've picked up a little bit of that vibe, but it's just interesting for me because I can't remind you or the listeners enough. I'm very Midwestern. I'm just very Midwestern through and through. So I appreciate when guests to the podcast, well, elaborate a bit on where they're from, and maybe how that was a bit different. But so I tend to jump to the, when did you know you wanted to be a lawyer? Which kind of zooms me straight through elementary school, middle school, high school, but maybe before we get there, can you tell me what middle school John was like, or high school John was like? What were you into?

John Atallah:  
What was I into back then? Computers big time and astronomy. So how does that get us to the law? I don't really know.

Alexis Robertson:

No, but I'm glad I asked. But it's just interesting.

John Atallah:

Yeah. One of my big hobbies used to be, and it's something I still do occasionally, but building computers and programming and that sort of stuff. I just like having projects like that.

Alexis Robertson:

Where did you go to college?

John Atallah:

I went to university of California at Riverside.

Alexis Robertson:

And in college at that point, did you know law school was where you were heading?

John Atallah:

I thought law school would be a good option back then. I majored in political science, international relations, and then did a minor in English as well.

Alexis Robertson:

So that's pre-law. You're essentially pre-law with this.

John Atallah:

We're a dime a dozen.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. Anybody who's a poli sci major is pre-law.

John Atallah:

Where else are you going to go?

Alexis Robertson:

Because the political science and factories aren't usually hiring.

John Atallah:

It's true. They're really cranking it out, but the jobs are tough to come by.

Alexis Robertson:

Go to law school. And then where did you go to law school?

John Atallah:

I went to Columbia in New York.

Alexis Robertson:

All right. So tell me about that. It sounds like you did know law school is where you were heading. As I recall you didn't take time off in between, or did you?

John Atallah:

For a year after college I worked in DC, and I did what was called the, and I think it still is called, the UCDC program as my last semester of college. And so while I was there, I worked in the Senate for Barbara Boxer for a semester. And then tried to get a job in the Senate or the house. And it was in 2009, right at the height of, well, everything that was going on back then with the economy. So those jobs were impossible to find.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. So you said, I'll just go to school.

John Atallah:

Well, almost.

Alexis Robertson:

Okay. Keep going.

John Atallah:

I started with the [inaudible 00:09:05] and prepping and all that, the applications. And I ended up working at a lobbying firm. They hired me on as a temp employee and my temp appointment quickly turned into a pretty permanent position there. And we did some good work for must've been 10, 11 months [crosstalk 00:09:24] there.

Alexis Robertson:

Oh, it's good. Then law school.

John Atallah:

Then law school. So I had to go to New York obviously because my dad hated New York and told me not to go there.

Alexis Robertson:

I was going to ask you, what was the dynamic with your parents, right? You're like now on the other side of the country.

John Atallah:

Yeah. Well, of course it was a tearful goodbye from mom. And then my dad said, okay, well, this is your chance to see what it's really like out there. I mean, I'd been living in Riverside for four years at that point and then DC for a year after that. So I think they kind of got used to the idea that I wasn't going to be at home, but there was still something about going and moving to the big city and all of that.

Alexis Robertson:

I forgot to even ask you why you wanted to be a lawyer. We've established that you did. We know you are. Why?

John Atallah:

It started in elementary school when I was interested in astronomy. Right. I'm kidding.

Alexis Robertson:

I looked out into the night sky and I thought.

John Atallah:

Of all the things that I could be. Yeah. Well, it was sort of a mix of things. There was some point in high school or maybe early college that I kind of started thinking about the way the world works. I say that like really generally, but there's something about the framework of the law that I've found interesting for a long time. So I realized that at that point, let's say-

Alexis Robertson:

And go back. So you said high school? So you're contemplating the framework of the law as a teenager. I just want to know.

John Atallah:

I'm not going to pretend that I was addressing this at a high level or anything.

Alexis Robertson:

I was like, slow down. I had to slow you down. I was like, deep thoughts at 16?

John Atallah:

No, that's exactly what I needed. Okay. So let me back up a little bit. My uncle in Lebanon, his name is Rabia, well, he was until I became a member of the bar, the only other lawyer in our family. And he's been doing this for about 30 years now. And growing up, we used to spend a lot of time in Lebanon, and I spent a lot of time at his law office and saw how he helped his clients, the people and small companies in the suburbs of Beirut. He was helping them to overcome the various problems and disputes they had and everything. So I was exposed to that, I think, starting at a pretty early age.

John Atallah:

And I'm not going to pretend that that put me a position to contemplate the law or anything like that in high school. But I thought, Hey, this is kind of an interesting sort of thing to do. And there are different ways that you can approach helping people. Doctors go to school kind of to see the world in terms of the way the human body works. And then to help people using that framework. Engineers go to school to figure out how the world works from a mechanical or electrical or structural perspective. And then they help people like that. So I thought there was a lot to be said about the law school.

Alexis Robertson:

I think that had a push that on your high school self. Because otherwise I wouldn't have caught that connection and the exposure, which I think is interesting for a number of reasons, because I think you just said that you all would visit Lebanon pretty frequently. So one, I mean, that sounds like quite a dichotomy going from Garden Grove, California to Lebanon. And I'm not sure how frequently, but also while you're there spending time with your uncle who's a lawyer. So both of those things are very interesting. Although what was that like? Because for me, I mean, I'm someone who grew up here. I didn't really leave the country until 18 or 20, let alone having that perspective of which I don't know if it's sort of like a foot in two worlds, even if you could elaborate.

John Atallah:

I think that's exactly how I'd describe it. And so from a very early age, so I've got one brother. He's a couple of years younger than I am. From a very early age we would go back and forth from Lebanon pretty much every summer. So we never went to summer camp growing up. I didn't even know what summer camp was back then.

Alexis Robertson:

Right, because you were gone.



John Atallah:

Yeah, exactly. And all the other kids are doing their fun things and playing video games at home, and who knows what else. Meanwhile, we're hanging out with our grandparents and aunts and uncles and everything in Lebanon for maybe six, eight weeks every summer. And then eventually it became every other summer. And then the summers here, we would get on the road.

Alexis Robertson:

The social life starts. And did it hit a point where you didn't want to be gone that long because it was summer or did it just change for other reasons?

John Atallah:

I think it kind of changed for other reasons. The roots eventually grew deeper I think here for my parents, and some of their siblings so my aunts and uncles moved to California and to Texas. And then there was more to do here with the family. We've still got a lot more family in Lebanon now, but the trips, I'd say it's been every other summer for the past several years now.

Alexis Robertson:

That's fantastic. And I can't imagine what it must be like to have that perspective as a kid, frankly. But how much time did you spend with your uncle? I'm curious. I swear everyone, we will move forward, but it's not only visiting Lebanon to see family, but it sounds like you're actually getting little bit of exposure to what he did.

John Atallah:

Yeah. I mean, really what it was was, he had a home office in the same home that he and my mom had grown up in, and that's where my grandma's still is in a city called Antelias. And he's got his home office sort of in the lower level of that house. So it was always like we were playing outside with our cousins, and then he'd come out of the office and we'd spent some time together. And then we might join him in there and just see what he's working on and play with the huge copier that's ... just things that kids do. Right. So it wasn't really that I learned anything like that.

Alexis Robertson:

I know. Meanwhile, I'm like, did he have you read pleadings or what was your experience?

John Atallah:

Yeah, totally. No, I didn't learn anything about the Lebanese legal system other than seeing him dress up and go to court. And some days I went with him just to kind of see what it was like.

Alexis Robertson:  
Really?

John Atallah:  
Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:  
You said that really nonchalantly. That's cool. But also different.

John Atallah:  
It was, what would I compare it to, kind of like a Bring Your Kid To Work day in the sense that I would just go and sit in the back of the courtroom or sit in the hallway or that sort of thing, and kind of see how he interacts with people. But it was more, I don't know, maybe from a very early age, he was trying to push me in this direction.

Alexis Robertson:  
And it worked.

John Atallah:  
It worked. He got me.

Alexis Robertson:  
So we've explored a little bit more about the exposure there. That's really interesting though, to not only be thinking about the legal system, as you said, but I mean, you actually knew that other countries had legal systems and you could be lawyers other places. That's more than probably I knew in middle school or high school, but your pre-law you go to Columbia, sorry. I was going to say Cornell, my apologies.

John Atallah:  
You got it.

Alexis Robertson:  
You're like, Oh, no, Columbia, what's that like? What's law school like for you?

John Atallah:  
Law school was fine, is how I would describe it.

Alexis Robertson:

Fine. There's more words to say then. Tell me more.

John Atallah:

Some people had a really amazing time in law school and they found themselves and all of this. I wouldn't describe it in those terms. It was a challenging time. And then living in New York had its own challenges and all of that. And I was excited to kind of wrap up and then start working and ideally do that in California. So I can't say enough good things about Columbia as an institution and my classmates. It was a wonderful experience in that respect. And I learned a ton, but I don't look back on law school as like this fun, amazing time in my life.

Alexis Robertson:

It's funny. I think I fall midway with the law school talk because as you just, well, I think more than alluded to, some people have this really romantic experience in law school. They're like law school was amazing. I loved it so much. And others are like, no, I went and it's over. It sounds like, I think I'm more middle of the road, but I am curious though, you were in New York. Did you know the goal was to get back to California?

John Atallah:

I think pretty early on, that was my goal. And that was sort of, okay. I was [crosstalk 00:17:58] sort of a light at the end of the tunnel. I was not in this dark place or anything.

Alexis Robertson:

I know. How did you really feel?

John Atallah:

I mean, I grew up in California. I love my parents and my brother, and they were out here and I had all the friends that I'd made in high school and college and everything. So then to go to New York and be in a place where I don't know, it was kind of just like stuck in Manhattan and Brooklyn and all of a sudden didn't have a car and a means to get out and go to the beach or the mountains. It was sort of a bunch of things. I'm just not a city dweller, first and foremost. And I think that had a lot to do with it.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. Well, and I think it can feel depending on your personality and what you enjoy, a little bit claustrophobic from what you're describing, where you're just like, particularly for you. I mean, you grew up next to the ocean essentially to not have access to nature in the same way or even

transportation in the same way. That makes sense. So how does Foley come onto the scene then?

John Atallah:

Well, there's this exciting period in every law student's life called OCI or-

Alexis Robertson:

On-Campus Interviews.

John Atallah:

On-Campus Interviews, yeah. Or by any other number of names, and Foley was one of many, many firms that I interviewed with. And I distinctly remember that interview in a way that I don't remember, I should say, in contrast to how I don't remember many of the others except, well, there are a couple-

Alexis Robertson:

And maybe they're not [crosstalk 00:19:31].

John Atallah:

And for other reasons. Yeah. And it's because of how they went and the sort of questions I was asked. I distinctly remember sitting down with Jaime Guerrero in our Los Angeles office and having just a really good conversation about what I wanted to do as a summer, what Foley had to offer, and both in terms of opportunities as a summer associate and then opportunities for career growth. And I mean, I don't want to jump too far ahead, but I think a lot of that really has come true, and it started coming true from a very early point in time at Foley.

Alexis Robertson:

We're going to get there.

John Atallah:

Yeah, yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

You're not the first person who's mentioned Jaime playing a big role in their decision to come to Foley. So I think that's fantastic. And Jaime Guerrero is a long time partner at the firm. And also he is one of the chairs of our Hispanic affinity group. So your summer associate at Foley, I'm guessing, but was that like your too all summer?

John Atallah:  
Yeah, exactly.

Alexis Robertson:  
Yup. Then you go ahead, you finish law school. We don't need to talk much more about that. But you come back to Foley. And did you know litigation? What caused you to end up in litigation?

John Atallah:  
I think from the beginning, before I decided to go to law school and all of that, it was going to be litigation and advocating for clients in that way. So it wasn't really a decision that I had to make for myself at that point in time.

Alexis Robertson:  
Yeah. So tell me about your practice then. I know you mentioned, did you say primarily consumer? I suppose it's in consumer finance. That's not right.

John Atallah:  
Well, it is in large part consumer finance and then sort of under the umbrella of consumer class actions more broadly. So my practice has sort of morphed over time from what I would call general commercial litigation to an increasing involvement with clients who operate there, primarily consumer reporting agencies. And so they regulated under the fair credit reporting act and a number of States and federal statutes that kind of operate in parallel. So I've developed a practice in this space with Christi Lawson out in the Orlando office and a couple of other Foley attorneys who do this sort of work. Another big part of my practice has to do with consumer class actions broadly. And that could be food labeling, products liability, really any number of things. And then I do some insurance brokerage work on the side and that's really like broker negligence actions.

Alexis Robertson:  
I did that in a former life.

John Atallah:  
Yeah. Yeah. And there's something that's interesting about it. And I've found that to be really a pretty fruitful area of the law.

Alexis Robertson:  
Yeah. Alleged broker negligence. Well, depending on who you're representing.

John Atallah:

How could I even say it without using the word alleged.

Alexis Robertson:

That's right. Well, and can you tell me just a little bit more about the first year with the consumer finance. Is litigation arising out? And I get the class actions, although I probably should have you say a little bit more about that because not everybody necessarily will get what that means day-to-day in practice for you. Is there sort of the counseling aspect as well as when someone's sort of suit is filed under a given statute or act or [crosstalk 00:22:48]?

John Atallah:

Year, absolutely. Well, maybe we could talk about the consumer finance aspect of it, and then to the class actions just because, I don't know, I kind of think of them logically in that order in terms of my own progression. The consumer finance work, and this gets back to the fair credit reporting act and all of that, basically we're dealing with lawsuits where a plaintiff alleges that a consumer reporting agency inaccurately reported information on their credit report or some other form of consumer report, or that the consumer report was provided to a third party without a permissible purpose, or that a dispute regarding the accuracy of the information on the consumer report wasn't handled properly. So those are by and large single plaintiff lawsuits. And we handle them, Christi and I, together sort of on a national basis. And we've got a bunch of them going at any given point in time. Yeah. And then that sort of dovetails, I think, into the class action work where we've had a few in that space, but more of it has to do with, like I said earlier, product labeling, product safety issues.

Alexis Robertson:

You're in California.

John Atallah:

Yeah. So we got-

Alexis Robertson:

So California has some I'd say particular laws that you may not see in other places.

John Atallah:

It's true.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. That I could have, sorry, I just had this flashback, and I will repeatedly say I try not to talk a lot about myself, but I have to sometimes, so sorry listeners, as a former employment lawyer, I knew enough to know that when stuff happened in California to go get a California employment lawyer because there's particular rules in California that ... and the thing is, when you're in a large law firm and you have a nationwide practice and you're commonly under federal law, these things don't matter as much, but California's a jurisdiction that I learned to assume I didn't know what was going on. And that's what I know.

John Atallah:

And it's because we're special out here obviously, and all of that now, but California is really big on consumer protection in a way that many other States are not. And so we've got a whole slew of consumer protection statutes. And I think that would include what you're talking about on the employment front, as well as sort of some substantive laws like prop 65 about products that contain allegedly carcinogen.

Alexis Robertson:

Alleged things.

John Atallah:

Yes, exactly. And then it gets to the procedural aspects as well of bringing a class action and how the courts have jurisdiction to deal with these issues and all of that. But altogether, I think it's a sort of a different landscape than what we've seen in other States.

Alexis Robertson:

And so also tell me what about you, John, because you've just done a great job at explaining, I think, the breadth of your practice, but I imagine you're balancing it along with other things in your life. So how have you found working at a large law firm, and also as you mentioned, like your own family, what is life like for you? It's a really broad question, but I want to know more.

John Atallah:

Yeah, I know. Right. And maybe I should give some context and share that, I mean, we're recording this podcast or is that what we're calling it?

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, it's called a podcast.

John Atallah:

Well, we're recording this podcast in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. So lately life has involved a lot of time at home and then little adventures where it's just me and my wife and maybe we'll go drop in on my parents or her parents or something like that. But what could I say more broadly if we set aside the past five, six months?

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. What was it like? Because I think now that you're, you said you're seven years into Foley. You're senior counsel at the firm. It's this mix of ... this podcast to me has two main aims. We get a lot of people, of course, from the firm listening. So it's a great way for people to just learn about you, but then also we are getting law students starting to listen. And I think that one, there's a couple of things that come to mind. Whenever it comes to, how do you balance your life? How are you a whole person outside of work? A lot of times those questions are only asked of women, just being honest with you.

Alexis Robertson:

So I'd be interested to hear what it has been like, because of course it's no small feat to be a senior counsel at a large law firm. But I also find that at Foley, a lot of people really do have outside interests and still stay in touch with family. So we may have to talk a little bit about pre pandemic life. And I know you mentioned that it sounds like you're into music given that you have this awesome microphone in front of you. I was trying to get a further broader sense of you.

John Atallah:

Yeah, no, I think that's a good idea. Where could we start?

Alexis Robertson:

It sounds like there's a lot. I like that sigh.

John Atallah:

Okay. I'm a guy who has a lot of hobbies. I like making music. I like building computers and playing video games and going on adventures and taking photos and all of this stuff. So I don't think of myself as being defined by this career or this role necessarily. So beyond-

Alexis Robertson:

I can pretty much relate to that by the way. Go on.

John Atallah:



Yeah. Awesome. Okay. So I'm glad to hear it because beyond those hobbies and things that I like to keep myself busy with, I've got a busy family life and my parents are here and my in-laws are in Las Vegas. And then, we've got all the family and Lebanon and everything. So there's a lot to kind of keep up with and spend time on. And then I have to figure out a way to make that work with my obligations as an attorney.

Alexis Robertson:

We've stumbled into a very interesting area here, which is, I think a lot of times being a lawyer very much defines people. And so for you to say, Hey, there's a lot of things that I'm into and being an attorney its great, but it's not all there is. It's actually a relatively profound statement. I don't know if you knew that, but it is.

John Atallah:

Hey, glad to hear it. That's what I'm here for, right?

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, it really is. And I can relate to that because I'm someone, depending on the context in which you meet me and of course within the firm and on LinkedIn, it's very much director of diversity and inclusion, former lawyer, but photography is fun. I get very into wellness and wellbeing. So some people just know that I'm also a certified whole30 coach. They have no idea that I went to law school or I do this whole day job thing. So I can identify with what you're saying.

John Atallah:

And I'm glad you're sharing this because, I mean, you're right, it's not necessarily a common thing in the profession or in this line of work more broadly.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, and it's funny. It is, but it isn't. I do think there's something about the personality types attracted to law school that tend to be a bit more type A. Going to law school is a tremendous investment, particularly if you're at a large firm, it is also a tremendous vote for your time.

John Atallah:

Absolutely.

Alexis Robertson:

So it's no surprise to me that it can have that additional tie to identity, but as we are navigating these just, I mean, I took all of these strange times, these uncertain times, all these cliché things

right now, I think we're all really having to consider a lot of aspects of self, I suppose would be the general way to do it, but also finding so much more time at home right now. And I don't know if you've had more time to build computers or less time, or which of your hobbies you've leaned on more. I'd be interested to hear about that though.

John Atallah:

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I'll say I have had more time. The challenge now has been figuring out a way to sort of leave the home office and know when to kind of just close the laptop and be done with the day. But once that happens ... not getting stuck in traffic every morning has made a huge difference. So that means like an hour and a half, I get back. And then not doing all the other things I have to do to get ready in the morning, and then go have lunch in the office and all of that, not to say, I mean, I do miss those things in a sense. And I look forward to the time when I can do some of that again.

Alexis Robertson:

I do miss the change of scenery in my day. And I actually went into the office for the first time in five months just last week. And in Chicago, they've renovated and we all have new offices. So I walked into a different floor and a different office and I was so grateful to not be in my house. It's like, this is amazing. And I saw a handful, there aren't many other people around, of course. And you just have that kind of wide eye over your mask where you're so happy to see that.

John Atallah:

I know. Right?

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. But I do think it's important because this is actually something I haven't had a chance to talk about on the show is navigating the current environment. And I think so many of us we really are having this collective experience that's so similar, which doesn't happen that often to just hear that, here's how I'm navigating it. Here's the pros. I've saved an hour and a half a day in traffic, but here's the cons.

John Atallah:

Yeah. It has been a lot of time at home no doubt. But I think, I mean, you just figure out a way to find your flow, right, during this time, figure out a way to set a schedule that works for you.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, and you also said, knowing when to close that computer, and I think that's also very hard.

John Atallah:

It is, especially in the evening where maybe don't feel like doing one of those other fun things and you want to just catch up, get ahead for the next day. At least that's the feeling that I get a good part of the time. So sometimes I will just sit down and finish editing that brief that needs to go out.

Alexis Robertson:

Because you're here, the computer's there, it's already on.

John Atallah:

Exactly, yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

I find I don't turn my computer off. And obviously it's very different what I do than practicing, but just the fact that it's always on, I can just run upstairs, log in, do whatever at odd hours of the day. And I do think it's tough learning how to modulate that, but it's important. Although John, and maybe one of the roughest transitions we could make. I actually want to go back a bit to being basically first generation American. And I'm not even quite sure what my particular question is. I'm just going to talk, and we're going to see what you pick up on.

Alexis Robertson:

But I've definitely heard about some sort of uniform experiences for first generation Americans. Whether it be whatever country they're from in terms of whether it be familial expectations, parenting dynamics. I know it wasn't ... your parents maybe weren't thrilled for you to go to New York, but they got you back. But then also that experience, like you said, going back to a foot in two worlds, do you still have that feeling now that you're practicing? Or do you feel like there's any sort of uniform experiences that first-generation folks have in large law firms? Or maybe even a lack of representation?

John Atallah:

Yeah. I don't know how much I can generalize about this based on my own experience.

Alexis Robertson:

Oh absolutely. Yeah. That's super true. So thank you for saying that.

John Atallah:

At the same time, I'll speak on my own behalf, I find that I have an easier time relating to people who've had sort of a similar experience in this sense, or who have found themselves kind of with

a foot in two worlds, like you've said, because it is kind of a different way of living to know that every day I spend here, I've got dozens and dozens of family members all the way across the world, living a different life, 10 hours ahead of me. And we talk when we can, and we visit as often as we can, but it's a different culture. It's a different way of living. And I think it had a lot to do with my upbringing, and then just a lot to do with the way that I see the world. So there's a lot-

Alexis Robertson:  
Your perspective.

John Atallah:  
Yeah. I think there's just a lot to be said for having a lot of family in a different part of the world and knowing that life is happening for them all the time just like it's happening for us here, but it's a different life. And I can sort of plug myself in and unplugged from that on demand once every year or two.

Alexis Robertson:  
My diversity and inclusion professional hat that I wear, I still have it on, I guess when I'm doing this show. But I also just ... I'm very interested in sort of the cultural competencies as well that people have as a result of having exposure to a variety of things in their life, but also what we'll often get called, I believe its unconscious competence. Right. So that being able to navigate whether it be here in the US or in LA or in the office, and then as you mentioned, spending so much time in Lebanon and being able to presumably go to Lebanon and navigate the world there as well. I think for someone like myself who hasn't had that experience, I don't have the kind of two different cultures that I can equally navigate in. And so I just find that very fascinating.

John Atallah:  
Yeah. I find it fascinating as well and sort of troubling at times what I'm forgetting a word in Arabic that I know and that sort of thing. So it may have been easier in a sense when I was younger to navigate the two cultures, and now I've grown more in this direction of course, but it's still, I think, a really important part of who I am.

Alexis Robertson:  
Have you been able to use Arabic at all in your practice?

John Atallah:

So from time to time, yes. And so part of it has been with pro bono clients, and I do immigration work for a few families on a pro bono basis where we help them out with any number of things. And then there have been other clients who've come along, fashion industry and other industries as well, where our primary contact there is from the middle East or speaks Arabic, but lives here in the US. And we've connected in that way. So I think it's been helpful in many ways, and perhaps there are other opportunities to build business and build relationships more broadly in that way. But part of what that's going to involve on my part is brushing up on business in legal Arabic, which I have no command over. And it's more the colloquial stuff that lay people about.

Alexis Robertson:

Right. I'm sorry, that just reminds me many years ago, as advice to law students that was like, if you are conversational or proficient in another language certainly put it on your resume, but do know that if you don't know certain legal terminology, you may need to brush up on that, because I've heard of people who are like, yeah I'm 1000% fluent in X, and then they meet someone else who truly is also in the professional context and they don't know keywords.

John Atallah:

Yeah. And it really is sort of a problem. I mean, I can offer a little bit of a story here, actually.

Alexis Robertson:

Oh my gosh, please tell me. You have to tell me.

John Atallah:

So growing up, I was fortunate to go to a school where we started learning Spanish in it must have been second grade or so. So we had several years of instruction in Spanish for all of elementary school and middle school and high school. And then also in college. I don't know what that brings us up to in terms of years of Spanish education.

Alexis Robertson:

It's a lot.

John Atallah:

Yeah. I would not consider myself a fluent speaker at all, but I can understand and speak enough to be dangerous. The problem is when you get into a matter that's really, and I'm talking about a legal matter, that's really heavy on review of documents that are primarily written in Spanish and not lay people Spanish, but part of the language that really concerns what we're

doing as lawyers. And it is incredibly difficult to understand if you don't have that background. So I quickly figured out that that probably was not one of the strong suits in my own practice.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. When we get those occasional emails that go far and wide that are like, is anybody fluid in name X language, maybe you wouldn't have raised your hand before, but you're like, I definitely roll now.

John Atallah:

Exactly, I roll now. Exactly yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, okay. So as we're wrapping down our time here. Wrapping down, I think that is not making any sense. As we're winding down our time here, I have to ask you the question that I ask all of my guests, which is advice you have insights you have on your practice. So whether you would want to style it as advice you could have given your 18 year old self who's about to head off to college and then head off to law school, or just direct advice to law students. And I leave this broad because I find that people actually have something that they actually really want to share. Whether that be advice on how to navigate legal or things you wish they knew about this firm. What are your thoughts?

John Atallah:

Yeah, I think this gets back in part to that discussion we had earlier about On-Campus Interviews and what I alluded to, which were some other memorable interviews. There's one of them that comes to mind. And I walked in the room, and I handed, there were two partners from a law firm, and I handed one of them this package with my writing sample and transcript and whatever else. And he took a look at it. And the other partner in the room starts asking me what I think about this painting on the wall. And so for 20 minutes, we talked about a painting on the wall and I noticed at some point they're making sort of these hand gestures at one another. And it was probably clear to them that this wasn't going anywhere, but rather than kind of respecting my time and allowing me to respect theirs, we kept having this conversation about a painting.

John Atallah:

What this brings me back to is this notion that the most important thing to do in the course of those interviews, in the course of the work you do to try to find a firm to work at or an organization to work with is, make sure there are good people who are working there. And by good people, I mean, friendly people who are respectful and straight forward with you, because that has made all the difference. And I've seen how many times many of my classmates from

Columbia have moved from one law firm to another, to another or quit the practice entirely. And it has so much to do with the people they've worked with or tried to work with, but couldn't be reckoned with, I think. And I've found in my time at Foley that what really makes this firm great is the great team of people we have here. And it's so readily apparent from the very beginning. So keep your eyes open for those differences is what I would say in law school at least.

Alexis Robertson:

That sounds like a sort of painful 20 minutes talking about a painting on the wall.

John Atallah:

Yeah. I remember it not being very fun. And then I was not surprised when I got the letter in the mail after that.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. Okay. I rarely do this, but I'm just going to mind a little bit more from you on this. Do you have any other recommendations on how to know if there's good people? So of course, it's that, do you get that? Do you connect? Do people seem honest, candid, real during OCI? Do you have any other recommendations on how to tell if the people are good?

John Atallah:

I mean, you can tell-

Alexis Robertson:

And feel free just to say no. And then we'll just end this show.

John Atallah:

Yeah, exactly. Done. A lot of it has to do obviously with your own intuition and seeing how people are acting and all of that. And I'd say it goes beyond the On-Campus Interview. And if you find yourself in a law office for callback or whatever other onsite interview you can see, are the doors open or are they closed? Are people raising their voices? Are attorneys treating administrative professionals including their own assistants with respect, or is there something demeaning about their tone? And these are things that you can just kind of pick up on in passing and make little mental notes of, because those are the things that make a really, really big difference on a day-to-day basis. And you can bet that if doors are closed and if people are raising their voices with one another, that that's going to end up translating to, I think, a less positive experience overall.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, as usual, I'm glad I asked that follow up question. You didn't know where it was going to go, but I think that's really good advice. Follow your intuition, but also pay attention to all those things when you're looking at a firm. And with that, I'll just have to say, John, thank you so much for taking the time to join me on the show.

John Atallah:

Thank you so much for having me.

Alexis Robertson:

And also the way I every show, if somebody had questions and wanted to get in touch with you, is it okay if they find you on Foley's website and reach out?

John Atallah:

Absolutely. Please do.

Alexis Robertson:

All right. Thanks so much, John.

John Atallah:

Thank you.

Alexis Robertson:

I don't normally record custom outranks for this podcast, but I did want to take a moment to follow up on a question that I think many of the listeners may have after John's episode. For those of you who are aware of that massive and horrific explosion that occurred in Beirut in early August of 2020, I did not get a chance to ask John about whether his friends or family were affected by that. After the podcast, I'd had a chance to follow up with him and I inquired. He'd said that his grandmother lives a number of miles outside of Beirut. She had experienced some broken windows, but that overall his friends and family are doing okay. So in case anybody was curious, I wanted you to know that. And once again, thanks so much for listening today.

Alexis Robertson:

Thank you for listening to The Path & 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 note that this podcast may be considered attorney advertising and is made available by Foley & Lardner LLP for informational purposes only. This podcast does not create an attorney-client relationship. Any



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