

Alexis Robertson:

Welcome to The Path and 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 1,000 lawyers across the US and abroad. I'm your host, Alexis Robertson, director of diversity and inclusion at Foley.

Alexis Robertson:

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 background, 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 Senayt Rahwa. Senayt is a senior counsel in Foley's Washington DC office, where she's a member of the finance practice group with a focus on the energy sector. Our conversation begins with Senayt sharing about her parents' journey to the US in the early '80s, leaving Ethiopia to flee from the civil war, and landing in Colorado. Senayt talks about growing up in Colorado and how it was that she decided on college, and ultimately, what took her to law school. We have a really interesting conversation about the difficulty she had adjusting to life in law school. And as she reflects on her own experience, she provides some really great insight and recommendations for law students.

Alexis Robertson:

Additionally, Senayt started her career at a firm other than Foley & Lardner. After the first I think, three, four years of her career there, she actually transitioned in-house. So Senayt reflects on some of the differences between life in-house, life at a law firm, what being in-house taught her and the perspective she's able to bring within her practice, but she also talks about how exactly it was that Foley enticed her to return to a law firm.

Alexis Robertson:

I also have to admit that this conversation is far more the path than the practice. We talk about so many interesting things that I don't want to say I forgot because you'll see we had plenty to say, but I did not get a chance to ask her a lot about her current day job. So I hope that after this, you will visit her bio to learn more about what she does. But I also hope you will heed her advice on charting your own path and remaining your authentic self as you navigate a legal career.

Alexis Robertson:

Hi, Senayt, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Senayt Rahwa:
Thanks for having me.

Alexis Robertson:
All right, we're just going to jump right in. Give me your professional introduction.

Senayt Rahwa:
Well, my name is Senayt Rahwa. I'm based in the DC office, in the finance practice group. I'm a senior counsel and I'm particularly a part of the energy industry team within the finance group. So I work a lot with our team here, and John Eliason, in the DC office and the associates on this side of things. But we also overlap quite a bit with the rest of our team in Milwaukee and LA as well.

Alexis Robertson:
Thank you so much for that. As you know, and I think at this point the listeners know, we will talk more about that, but in a bit. I first want to learn about you before you became a lawyer. So, where are you from? Where did you grow up?

Senayt Rahwa:
I grew up in Denver, Colorado for the majority of my life. And well, my family came to the US in the early '80s. We're originally from Ethiopia. I went to a high school in Denver, went on to go to Washington University in St. Louis for undergrad. And then after that, ended up at Georgetown for law school. So I've been going further and further east, and away from home.

Alexis Robertson:
We're going to unpack all that. You know there's no getting away from this by just summarizing your life in a minute. We are going to unpack all of that. I actually don't know if I realized that you grew up in Denver. I was aware that your family is from Ethiopia, but maybe we could start there. So I'm assuming it's your parents who came over? You said in the ... was it the '80s?

Senayt Rahwa:
Yeah. My dad first came in 1982. He was part of a group of I'd say ... I don't even know, probably less than 100 folks who they were part of the same refugee resettlement program. Well, my dad actually had an option. He had a sponsor who was in LA, and then another sponsor who was in Denver. And then he ended up going with the one in Denver because he

had heard of other folks who were going to Denver too. So he wanted to stay with everybody else. And I was just thinking about how nice it would have been to grow up in a warmer climate.

Alexis Robertson:

Really? Come on, dad. Okay, fine.

Senayt Rahwa:

That's how he ended up in Denver first. And then my mom at the time was living in Italy with her brother. There was a civil war happening in Ethiopia, and so folks were trying to get away, different avenues. So she was in Italy. My dad, after being in the US for probably a year and a half or so, went to Italy. They got married, they had-

Alexis Robertson:

So they knew each other beforehand, though?

Senayt Rahwa:

No. It was an arranged marriage.

Alexis Robertson:

Oh, really? Wow. That's interesting.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yep. So they got married and then I showed up nine months later.

Alexis Robertson:

But they moved back to the States?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah, and then they all came back to the US. So I was probably, I don't even know maybe a year old. It's fuzzy, but I think I was little. So my entire ... what I remember is of Denver. And then both my brothers were born in Denver as well.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, I don't know if this is obvious or not, it's probably not, but so for both your parents, they're through different means, escaping the civil war in Ethiopia. They get to the US, are they restarting life, essentially?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah. It was a really close knit group of people from Ethiopia who came here. We were all probably part of different regions in Northern Ethiopia, but it was very much like start over scenario. And to hear my parents talk about it, I don't think they ever thought that they would stay here forever. It was like, at first it was get our education and maybe we're going to go back home one day.

Senayt Rahwa:

My dad came to the US and he didn't have a high school diploma at the time, because it was interrupted by the war. He was a guerrilla fighter in the war. They called themselves Freedom Fighters. All these different groups in Ethiopia were trying to overthrow the basically, military regime at the time. His particular group was not the one that ended up succeeding, but they all had the same mission.

Senayt Rahwa:

So when he came to the US, he was driving a cab at night, working in nursing homes. He told me he worked at Burger King for a little bit [crosstalk 00:06:42].

Alexis Robertson:

Whatever job he could do, I'm assuming.

Senayt Rahwa:

And basically, ended up putting himself through school, ended up going on to become a pharmacist. And just it was, I don't even know, just incredible to hear his story. So it was always funny, growing up if me and my brothers would complain about anything at school, he was like, "I didn't have a high school diploma when it came to the US. Don't complain [crosstalk 00:07:06]."

Alexis Robertson:

He's like, "At least you get to go to school. What are you doing?"

Senayt Rahwa:

I know.

Alexis Robertson:

Go to your school.

Senayt Rahwa:

We were overwhelmed, and he goes, "I used to drive all night and study in the morning and go to class." So it was just a really high bar, that the idea [crosstalk 00:07:19].

Alexis Robertson:
That brought some perspective.

Senayt Rahwa:
Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:
We will move forward to talk about you, but I do want to hear about your mom as well. So, for her settling in the US, what did she focus on doing?

Senayt Rahwa:
My mom, I think, I feel like my dad was a rare story. I think a lot of Ethiopians came here, would start out going to community college in Denver, and then the demands of life were just what they were that it didn't ... my mom had more kids, and so she didn't get to finish. But she was a housekeeper for about 30 years.

Senayt Rahwa:
She first was at a hospital for a while, ended up being a housekeeper with Marriott and Sheridan. So she was cleaning her whole life. That was how she took care of us, or took care of just ... that was her way of providing. My parents unfortunately, ended up getting a divorce. And it's so interesting because when you talk to Ethiopians back home, the idea of divorce, it was such a foreign concept. But the idea of having to come here and rebuild your entire way of being, I think puts a new strain on-

Alexis Robertson:
Absolutely. You're rebuilding everything.

Senayt Rahwa:
Right, yeah.

Alexis Robertson:
Yes.

Senayt Rahwa:

Then we had other challenges as well, but it was just, I think incredibly difficult for them. And I remember those periods of just, we didn't have a lot. It was what it was, but they were like, "But you're going to go to school, and you're going to get your education, and you're going to do better than what we had basically, than what we have."

Alexis Robertson:

Yes. Well, I've really appreciated you sharing that also, because I just think it's such an interesting and important context, frankly, to who you are. And if I just let you say, "I grew up in Denver, Colorado, and then I went to Wash U and then I went to Georgetown-"

Senayt Rahwa:

That's just the general background information.

Alexis Robertson:

No, no, I know. But for the purposes of this podcast, I obviously have to get you to dig in a little. So I really do appreciate that context. And also, for whatever this is worth, which is not much, so for me, I grew up in the Midwest, in a suburb of Milwaukee. I went to college in DC. And when it comes to black people in the Midwest, you get roots in the south, but not as many recent immigrants. And so when I moved to DC, I was told that I was Ethiopian. I had people-

Senayt Rahwa:

Just talk to you and like-

Alexis Robertson:

Yes.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, yes. And refuse to believe me. And then, "Where are your people from? Where are your parents from?" And I'm like, "South Carolina." "Where are their parents from?" "South Carolina." And I was just like slavery? I don't have anything else to tell you.

Senayt Rahwa:

Right. They were convinced that they knew.

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, yes. But I had a partner because I was an investigative intern at the Public Defender Service in DC, and [Palace 00:09:59] was Ethiopia. And it took me a full two weeks to convince him I was not.

Senayt Rahwa:

That you were not? Yeah. It's a very proud cultural heritage. So when you see another Ethiopian it's like, "Hey, I see you."

Alexis Robertson:

I'm part of you. It's like I want to participate, but I'm really just from Wisconsin. But thank you so much for sharing a bit about that. But on to you. So you grew up in Denver, Colorado. I am inclined to jump to high school. I might be missing some really great stories about little Senayt, what you were into, but I'm wondering. Actually, I'll leave it open-ended, but I'll give you some direction. Were you interested in the law in early age? And if not, what were you into?

Senayt Rahwa:

It's a really interesting question. And as a child of immigrant parents, I don't know if you've heard this stereotype before, but it was less about what I was interested in and more about you will become something.

Alexis Robertson:

Yes.

Senayt Rahwa:

Either a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer.

Alexis Robertson:

Those were your choices. That's right.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah, those were your choices. And I'd be like, "Well, why are they so limited?" That's three things out of hundreds of different options. How is that limited? You have three choices.

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, three choices.

Senayt Rahwa:

Three solid plans for your life. I spent majority of my life with my dad after my parents split, and he was never that direct. But our community, our elders, it was always very clear that it was like, "You should be a doctor, really." And not because it was just that they felt ... it was the idea that, that's what we need back home. We need you to do this, so you can go back home and you can do something with yourself. Or we want you to make sure that you have the most opportunities possible.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, there's security there in lots of ways. It's a skill that should always be in demand.

Senayt Rahwa:

Basically. I was super driven and super motivated to achieve in school, but it was just like, I don't really know what I want to do. But I know I need to work hard right now.

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, and I need to do well.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah. It was more about that than knowing at the time that I wanted to go to law school. Because I don't think I knew I would until probably later in college.

Alexis Robertson:

And we'll get there too, but that makes complete sense. And it's funny because I only have ... I try to keep all these interviews about 40 minutes or so in a two hour podcast. We would have walked through your life for setups like, what's the question that'll either make her tell me what the deal was? But that makes complete sense.

Alexis Robertson:

And I think for a lot of people, it is like I just knew I needed to do well. I knew I needed to go to college. But then yes, you add on that additional framework of my parents came here just as refugees from another country. So stability and a valued skill set, that's number one. The rest are whatever. Go to school, get a job, doctor, lawyer, engineer. There are your choices.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah, that was it. You're going to college, you need to get a full ride and carry on the torch.

Alexis Robertson:

Right, do the rest. So then, how did you end up going to Wash U?

Senayt Rahwa:

I had never heard of Wash U. By the time my senior year rolled around, I was convinced that I was going to an Ivy League school, or some big name school for the same reason, because it was just like, that's what you do. You know?

Alexis Robertson:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Senayt Rahwa:

This is all part of what it meant to be successful in our community. So my high school counselor, I think went to one of the ... You know they have weekends where counselors come out? She came back from a weekend in St. Louis, and I remember she walked into my English class or something. It was in between classes, and she was like, "Senayt, you're going to go to Wash U." And I was like, "Ms. Henley, what are you talking about? I've never even heard of that. I'm not going to some no name school."

Alexis Robertson:

Period.

Senayt Rahwa:

It's like literally, that was my impression. But anybody who knows anything about Wash U knows, first of all, they have amazing marketing. All of a sudden, I was just on the radar there, and I started getting all of these materials. I had done this program, this LEED program for minorities in business over the summer before my senior year of high school, and I met a good friend there, who, in the fall we just kept in touch.

Senayt Rahwa:

She goes, "I'm applying to Wash U, they have the best pre med program. I'm going to medical school and I'm going to get this scholarship." She knew exactly what she was doing. And I was like, "Man." I was like, "What?" [crosstalk 00:14:27].

Alexis Robertson:

Right. Who knows?

Senayt Rahwa:

Right. I remember, so I applied to 12 or 13 schools and I went ahead and applied to Wash U, because I learned enough about it to know that no, this is a good school and they're pretty solid.

And the fact that Brandi was basically being a cheerleader for them and she got an early admission and then encouraged me to apply for a scholarship that I ended up getting, and it was for a full ride and I-

Alexis Robertson:
Wow, fantastic.

Senayt Rahwa:
So I went out there for a weekend visit and I just fell in love with the school. The culture and the community there was different than a lot of the other schools I had visited. And I felt like it was a place where I was like, I know I'll be able to do well academically, but more importantly, the community aspect was what sold me.

Senayt Rahwa:
And the scholarship, The John B. Ervin Scholars Program was at the time targeting young black students. It was a merit-based scholarship, and that community in and of itself was what-

Alexis Robertson:
Supportive.

Senayt Rahwa:
... pulled me in. It was something where I felt like, if I'm going to be this far away from home, I want to be somewhere where I feel like I can thrive. And that was the biggest factor.

Alexis Robertson:
All right. We're going to keep moving, but I actually want to go back for a moment because I realized I didn't ask this. Denver, Colorado, did it have a large Ethiopian community? And also in terms of your school, was it particularly diverse, your high school or middle school?

Senayt Rahwa:
I would say in the '80s and '90s, it was a small, very close knit community. Now, it's huge. I don't even know how big it is.

Alexis Robertson:
Really? I had no idea.

Senayt Rahwa:

It's huge, it's massive. I don't ... 30,000. I'm just throwing numbers out there, but it's something [crosstalk 00:16:05].

Alexis Robertson:
But it's a large tune?

Senayt Rahwa:
Yeah. My high school was super diverse. It was, I would say probably about 50% African American, and then 50% everything else. The program I was in was not as diverse, but it was a program within a large urban high school. But the funny thing is, by the time I got to GW, which is named the George Washington High School, there was four Senayts there at the same time that I was there.

Alexis Robertson:
Really?

Senayt Rahwa:
Yeah, so it wasn't like ... there were enough Ethiopians by that point, or Ethiopians or Eritreans that it was really common.

Alexis Robertson:
Well, it's interesting and I asked because, so I've actually not ... that's weird to say, but I have never even visited Colorado. But when I think about it actually, maybe it's Boulder I'm thinking of versus Denver. I've heard it's not particularly diverse, so I was just curious.

Alexis Robertson:
Because also that, having for you this diverse experience growing up, or at least those experience where there's like some folks who look like you, and then going to college, that can be an interesting transition. So as you mentioned, to have that community supporting you because there's a little ways between St. Louis and Denver. And here you are, jumping on a plane at some point. Or maybe you got driven out? I don't know, but you're not at home anymore.

Senayt Rahwa:
I think there are definitely parts of Colorado that are very homogenous, but I think Denver itself is pretty diverse. It's a major city. I was actually surprised in a lot of ways at people's misconceptions about Denver.

Alexis Robertson:

I think it's Colorado, but it's funny because in doing this show, part of me is like, "Oh, should I share my ignorance?" But I've decided just to ask because if I have that question, I assume someone else may. But no, I think that's right. That's a really interesting context.

Alexis Robertson:

So you get to Wash U, you've done all the things you need to do. You've gotten the scholarship, you're in college now. At this point, do you have a sense of what you're going for? Or what are we doing in college now?

Senayt Rahwa:

Not I clue. I started out thinking I wanted to do aerospace engineering, which was totally short lived. It lasted probably about a semester.

Alexis Robertson:

That's so wild. It's a solid three, but ...

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah. It was one actual engineering class, and then I was like, "This is not for me at all." I didn't know at all when I got there. I was exploring all the options. I think I took some pre med classes. I was really interested in the African American studies classes. I was all over the place.

Alexis Robertson:

Which is the point by the way, of pretty clearly, the liberal arts colleges. It's like, try some things, take some classes.

Senayt Rahwa:

But you can't tell your Ethiopian immigrant parents [crosstalk 00:18:57].

Alexis Robertson:

No, you can't. No, you can't. You're like, "I'm going to be an aerospace engineer. Leave me alone."

Senayt Rahwa:

From that to undecided, and it was just the biggest kerfuffle at home. So no, I took my time, but I think probably around my sophomore year is when I started taking finance classes and the business school, and realized that this is interesting.

Senayt Rahwa:

It started to more formulate in terms of this is something I feel like I can do and enjoy, at least I thought at the time, and also have a job after I graduate. That was what I was thinking about too was, how can I be employed? I like math, but I don't want to be a, I don't know, math teacher. I was like, "I'm not sure what to do with that."

Alexis Robertson:

What do you do with that?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah. Can I get an application of that? But I was also still really passionate about and found other ways to take Afro African American Studies classes. So I did a fellowship program where it was focused on ... I was able to do research in that area. I ended up being a Spanish minor. So ultimately, I ended up deciding to major in finance and international business. And then it wasn't until probably my-

Alexis Robertson:

With the Spanish? So finance international business with a Spanish minor?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah. And then my junior year I want to say, I think is when I then opened the door to maybe I'll do international law. That would be really interesting.

Alexis Robertson:

Wow.

Senayt Rahwa:

It was never with the idea that I wanted to do litigation of any sort. It was just being able to come out in a transactional practice and bring that business background to bear. So I think that's when it started to take shape.

Alexis Robertson:

So you knew that transactional practice even existed in college?

Senayt Rahwa:

I knew there were lots of types of lawyers who did negotiations. I don't think that I could [crosstalk 00:20:45].

Alexis Robertson:

That's more than I knew in college, so I'm impressed.

Senayt Rahwa:

Well, because I knew I didn't want to do litigation. I was like, "There has to be other things involved in international law." I think that was my bend, and I think that's what opened the door to looking at Georgetown because they have such a great international law program. So it took me probably about two, two and a half years to come up with that plan into college. But eventually, I figured it out.

Alexis Robertson:

But that's a really solid plan, and hearing you is taking me back. I'm trying to think of what my head space was. I was one of those people who knew I'd be going to law school like forever. So I went to American University for college and for undergrad in DC, and I just knew the business school, whenever I read the descriptions of the classes, I'd be like, "No, I just don't want to do that," which led me to this very pre law, poly-psy, philosophy, things where I could read stuff and comment on it, which I think one can see the starts of a litigator for me. But I think the way you did that made a lot of sense because even though like you said, it caused a kerfuffle, you tried some things until you settled on what most resonated with you. And then law school next?

Senayt Rahwa:

Well, yeah. I took a year off in between to do this fellowship, [De Coro 00:22:01] Fellows Program. It was like a public affairs fellowship in St. Louis, which someone at Wash U recommended to me and I knew a few folks who had done it. I think it was just good. It felt like it was both a leadership training, but it was also like consulting work. So you were able to just see other things along the way. So I deferred for a year and then started.

Alexis Robertson:

Oh, so you applied?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

Got it.

Senayt Rahwa:

I applied in senior year and then just waited a year, yeah. So I didn't end up coming to Georgetown until fall of '08. But I think folks like my family were surprised about the law school thing. I think they were just like, "We didn't see that one coming."

Alexis Robertson:

Were their hearts still set on middle ... oh, no, I was going to say middle school. Sorry, for medical school?

Senayt Rahwa:

I think so.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah, yeah. And they were like, "And you're at Wash U? It has a great pre med program." All of a sudden, they knew all about Wash U. But it worked out the way it was supposed to be.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, still, was Georgetown the ... that was the top choice?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

When you were deciding?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yep. Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

So you go to Georgetown, and then what?

Senayt Rahwa:

I came to Georgetown in fall of '08. That first year was rough, I'm not going to lie. It was a shock to my system. It was the opposite of my experience that Wash U was in terms of this warm, fuzzy community and support systems. Everything just was very jarring, I would say. And I think

I had this mentality that if you work really hard and you study really hard, and you just do what you're supposed to do, that you'll get good grades and you'll do well.

Alexis Robertson:
That's funny.

Senayt Rahwa:
I remember that first semester, I was in the library all the time. I would go to social events, maybe, but I was just so determined to figure this out. And then I got my first semester grades back and I was like, my feelings were so hurt. Like hurt. I was like, "Wait, this is the first time in my life where hard work did not equal success."

Alexis Robertson:
Right. You were like hard work, studying equals good grades.

Senayt Rahwa:
Equals the outcome that you want. And I remember thinking, how backwards? And then I would also see people who I know, I was like, "I know you weren't as stressed out as I was, and you were like you had time for intramural sports and this and that, and you were living your best life. And you got amazing grades. What am I doing wrong here?" I think the funny thing is that's when I met ... So Lauren Champaign and I were in the same class.

Alexis Robertson:
Oh, really? I didn't know that.

Senayt Rahwa:
So we met that first year and then there was [crosstalk 00:24:41].

Alexis Robertson:
But let me say, by the way everybody, Lauren Champaign is episode two. But anyway, go on.

Senayt Rahwa:
So we met, but she always made fun of me. She was like, "I would always see Senayt. She would have her backpack on and she would be going to the library. She didn't have time to talk to anybody." It was like this running joke all of first semester.

Senayt Rahwa:

And then I was like, "You know what, this is not something I can go at alone, and I don't even want to." And that wasn't even what I was trying to do. I had this in my head that it's like everything else. It's like every other type of education you've gone through.

Alexis Robertson:

Put your head down, yes. Study.

Senayt Rahwa:

And I was just way off. There was a few other young black women who I think all of us, I'm pretty sure, all of us were first generation law students trying to figure this out without any roadmap. We banded together and created our own little support system, and I think things started to change that second semester. I got more plugged in with an organization like the Black Law Student Association, and the mentors that they offered. And finding a community and building that community along the way is what I think turned it around for me, because otherwise, I was just like ...

Alexis Robertson:

I'm curious, what did you find? I know this is years later, and like I said, we have some law students starting to listen, so this may or may not be relevant to their experience. But obviously, there's a disconnect like you said.

Alexis Robertson:

I knew the recipe, it was study, put your head down, hard work equals good grades. I get my grades, that is not what happened. What changed for you? And I get that you plugged in, but did people give you more advice on law school exams? What was the factor there?

Senayt Rahwa:

That's a good question. I think the idea that you can just read these cases and pull out from that, that you should intuitively know what that case was relevant for, and what was the takeaway from that case, as somebody who's never read cases, being able to just identify that yourself, I think is very difficult. And I think the idea that you should be out there ... what was it called? Not outlining. Is that what it was called, outlining cases? I don't even remember anymore.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, outlining. Or you get summaries of cases and stuff. It'll tell you what the seminal [crosstalk 00:27:01].

Senayt Rahwa:

But you know what? I didn't even do that. I didn't even know to do that. That's how just ...

Alexis Robertson:
Because who ... right.

Senayt Rahwa:
I don't know.

Alexis Robertson:
But some people know and it depends on [crosstalk 00:27:09].

Senayt Rahwa:
It was an assignment.

Alexis Robertson:
Yes. Well, and that, that's really interesting you say that though, because so law school, I adjusted to law school just fine, I guess. But I'd read a book about taking law school exams and I did have those friends who would say that thing where they're like, "Oh, I found an outline online, or I'm reading," I don't know even if they're called hornbook. But they have names for all these things.

Alexis Robertson:
I don't remember, but if you're an island, though, and like you said, I knew the recipe, but the recipe, it's like a different recipe for law school, you don't realize there's actually certain smarter ways to work versus harder. And then it's also really easy to get in that stressed out one L mindset in law school, too. And that becomes a spiral. It's just like-

Senayt Rahwa:
Exactly. So I think that was a game changer is just like, understanding that this is teaching you a different way of thinking and learning than you have ever had to do before. And it requires a retraining of how you viewed like yes, they give you a syllabus and then tell you to do these readings, but that's just the first part if anything.

Senayt Rahwa:
And there's all these other things that maybe people are not telling you to do that need to be done so that you can get where you need to go. And then it's not a shortcut to yes, read the case. But it's also a good idea to have a two L's notes from that class so they can help you, so

that you're not spending all of your time trying to distill something that has been distilled 10 times over. So that was huge and I felt-

Alexis Robertson:

You're giving me flashbacks too.

Senayt Rahwa:

Oh, my God. I just remembered the shift so clearly. And it was also like, it helped me be happier in law school because I was like, I feel like I actually do have time to do social activities and get involved and get into organizations, which is the stuff that I love to do anyway. But I was like, "I'm reading thousands of pages a night. How do you do that?"

Senayt Rahwa:

It became more evident to me because I had a really close friend whose parents, she was not black, but whose parents were lawyers. And I remember I would go to two L and she was the one, and watching her go through that experience was so eye-opening because it was like, what she was doing, her writing, she had someone to bounce things off, but it wasn't in any way inappropriate. It was just a resource where you're like, "Man, that's what that looks like." That's what it means to have someone who's gone through this before be able to tell you that legal writing is very different. Just even big picture of like-

Alexis Robertson:

Context. They're giving any context you can get. And what's funny is even when the professors try to give you context, it's not quite ... I didn't understand civil procedure until we were done. And even that, I didn't understand. It was literally me being like, "Oh, these are the rules that the federal court uses?" I sat through three months of someone teaching me rules.

Alexis Robertson:

I'd like to think I'm a reasonably intelligent person, but my brain for whatever reason did not see it that way. So if I could have called in ... the funny thing is my mom did go to law school, but she never practiced. So if I could have called my mom and she'd be like, "Honey, those are the rules they use in federal court," I'd be like, "Oh."

Senayt Rahwa:

I don't know. I think the analogy that I used it was like, if we're talking about football, that everybody else had this playbook. And if somebody yelled snap, and they all knew where to run or where to go on the field, and I was running in circles. That was how it felt for a while.

Alexis Robertson:

That gives me a flashback to my experience playing freshman soccer in high school, and I have no athletic ability. It was the first time I'd ever played organized sports. I get to games or whatever, practices, I didn't realize everyone else had been playing soccer since they were four or six. So when someone yells, I think the term is square, meaning kick, I'm over here, kick. I don't know what that means.

Alexis Robertson:

But it's a similar analogy, and it's great that you share that because as law students listen, I think it can be affirming to hear that if you are floating, and a lot of law students just started and they're starting remotely, this ideal, don't be an island. Ask for help, ask for people to give you context. Some people already have a lot more context than you can imagine.

Alexis Robertson:

And of course, do your best and find things that you like, but I just think that's really important because it can be really disheartening. And I'm sure it felt that way for you when you were like, "This is not clicking for me. What is going on?"

Senayt Rahwa:

Yep, yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

All right. So law school gets better. You get plugged in.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yes.

Alexis Robertson:

Eventually, you graduate. But during that ... I don't know, I want to call it that matriculating process, but at some point, did you know that more of a corporate transactional practice was for you? Or how did you decide on your practice area?

Senayt Rahwa:

I think I knew that pretty early on. So I did both summers. The first summer, I did a summer associate position with an international firm in Beijing because I felt that I wanted to do international law, I realized quickly that I don't like being ... and this is a theme in my life, I don't like being apart from a community 12 hours away from family and friends, calling people at midnight.

Senayt Rahwa:

It sounded a lot more doable. And then when I had to do it for a whole summer, it was just like ... Of course, I made new friends and it was fine, but the idea that I wanted to be rooted closer to home, I think became pretty evident.

Alexis Robertson:

And where were you at that summer? Geographically, where was that?

Senayt Rahwa:

It was in Beijing.

Alexis Robertson:

Was it still in DC? Oh, you were literally in Beijing?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yes, I was in Beijing.

Alexis Robertson:

I just decided it was a satellite office. Oh, no, sorry.

Senayt Rahwa:

Oh, no. It was a Chinese firm in China.

Alexis Robertson:

Wow, that's an amazing opportunity, though.

Senayt Rahwa:

It was. It was very, and I'm glad I did it because it showed me this is awesome. And I don't necessarily want to be abroad. I don't want to stay somewhere where I can call my family during daytime.

Alexis Robertson:

I'm going to drive the law students crazy. We're not going to go down the rabbit hole of how you got it because they're just going to email you directly to find out.

Senayt Rahwa:

It was good.

Alexis Robertson:

Because that's not the point. We're going to keep moving. Well, you realized what you didn't want to do. So then I assume your second summer?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah, my second summer, I was a summer associate here at a firm, another firm in DC. They had a really awesome community development. Then there was a practice that I was particularly interested in, doing tax credit finance and syndication work.

Senayt Rahwa:

This was also happening in the aftermath of the '08 recession, so I was one of the very fortunate few who actually was able to keep a job. I was deferred for six months after I graduated, but was able to start in the group that I wanted to. And I ...

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, so you summered. It was that summer 2011?

Senayt Rahwa:

Summer of 2000 because I graduated in [crosstalk 00:34:03].

Alexis Robertson:

2010?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

You were supposed to start fall 2011?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah, and I started spring of 2012.

Alexis Robertson:

And then for those who don't know, I think everyone's heard of The Great Recession. I was like the first year class starting around The Great Recession, that 08/09, but the effects of that lasted years. And I can't remember if it was the class of 2010, or even your class that almost had this last generation. It might have been you actually.

Senayt Rahwa:
I think it was our class.

Alexis Robertson:
You're nodding, yes.

Senayt Rahwa:
Yeah, I think it was our class. I think there was a large portion of my graduating class that was unemployed at the time.

Alexis Robertson:
Yep. So a lot of good fortune there. So you deferred, but the good fortune that you did start?

Senayt Rahwa:
Yeah. So I worked doing new market tax credit lending, which is I would say a form of community development lending for a while. And also-

Alexis Robertson:
I appreciate you saying that because I have no idea what that is.

Senayt Rahwa:
Yeah, I know. I had never heard of that actually, the tax credit before I did it. But then that was probably half my practice, and the other half was doing renewable energy finance. So I did that for about four years.

Alexis Robertson:
And then it looks like you got the opportunity to go in-house?

Senayt Rahwa:
Yes. So I went in-house with a solar developer that was based in DC, which is so different. When you're coming from a law firm, the idea that you have multiple clients, and then you go from that to having one client, and you're in the weeds with them all the time, and you're doing more of about ... you're still doing legal work. I was still doing deals and transactions and all of that, but you're also doing business advising.

Senayt Rahwa:

So you're being asked to make judgment calls on commercial if everything goes well. So it was a really good experience. I'm definitely glad that I did it while I was there. I remember also thinking I was a fourth year when I left my firm, so there was still when you're a mid level associate, there was still a lot of training and development that I felt like I needed to have in a law firm setting that could ...

Senayt Rahwa:

Because when I got there, when I went in-house, there was three attorneys. So we, the three of us, the general counsel is handling all of the big corporate level things and then there was two of us doing all of these deals. And I was like ...

Alexis Robertson:

Like, "What's going?" Wow.

Senayt Rahwa:

This is a lie. But it was a very good learning experience to see it from a client standpoint.

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, to get that perspective.

Senayt Rahwa:

Everything. It did. It was really helpful.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, and I love you sharing both. One, of course, you picked up the client perspective, but also so for me, as a former recruiter, often for law firm attorneys, and actually I did this myself before I realized I should just stop practicing and go down this other path, but your thought is of course, everything is amazing as an in-house counsel. Everything. And it doesn't matter the size of the company, it doesn't matter your role, but just being in-house is obviously amazing.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yes.

Alexis Robertson:

I don't know anything about when you're in-house, you're disparage to the company, but I think it's just important for people to hear that in-house is not necessarily this panacea to anything that you didn't like about your law firm will be fixed magically if you go in-house.

Alexis Robertson:

But it does show you a different perspective, which can be really, really useful for so many ways. But I've never worked in-house, but I have heard often that you're advising the business. So things do need to change into how you interact when the organization is different from in a law firm.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yes, for sure. And I think the idea also that I don't think you realize or appreciate the resources that are at your disposal when you're at a law firm. If you have this random question about, I don't know, real estate, you can just go call the real estate partner, and the idea that everybody is there on your team, at your fingertips. Whereas when you're in-house, it's like you need to answer all those questions. They're like, "What do you mean? You don't know how to do environmental? You don't know how to do X?" And you're like, "Ah." You're like-

Alexis Robertson:

I am looking at Google right now.

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah. Well, thankfully, it didn't get that bad, but-

Alexis Robertson:

No, I'm just kidding. Please, nobody think that I'm saying she consulted Google.

Senayt Rahwa:

But the idea that you're a specialist is out the door when you're in-house, and you become a generalist really quickly.

Alexis Robertson:

Yep. Solving the business' problems, particularly when it's a small in-house team. So, however did Foley entice you to go back, or to come back to the law firm thing? How did you hear about Foley & Lardner?

Senayt Rahwa:

Actually, I was two parts of it, I guess. The first part of it was that two folks on the Foley team were our outside counsel for some really discrete tax items. So we were working with John Eliason and Jocelyn Lavallo on, I think some sale leaseback questions. We were just getting feedback from them, so I connected with John that way. And I knew of the team from my time at

my old firm as well, just because we ran in the same space as we were working with a lot of the same clients. So I was familiar with them, but I didn't know them personally.

Senayt Rahwa:

And then at the same time, this name will keep popping up because she's my best friend from law school, Lauren was here as well. And I think it was a combination of things. John was like, "Hey, if you're ever interested in going back into a law firm, let me know." And I was like, "Hmm." I was like, "Maybe why don't you go check out what's her team like? Is everybody happy over there? Everything looking good?" [crosstalk 00:39:37].

Alexis Robertson:

Yep, get some intel. Intel is important, yes.

Senayt Rahwa:

And she goes, "Yeah, it's awesome, the team is awesome. They love it." She was talking about ... the things that she was describing about just how people stay here and the longevity of people's careers and the type of team and the dynamic I think appealed to me for sure.

Senayt Rahwa:

So I think a combination of Lauren and John sold me. And I remember being like when I started I was like, "Let's just see. I don't know about the law firm thing, but we'll give it a try for like six months. Well, let me just give it ..." And John was like, "So we're on probation?" I was like, "Yeah, the first month is on probation."

Alexis Robertson:

And now it's like three years later?

Senayt Rahwa:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Alexis Robertson:

Are we out of the probationary period?

Senayt Rahwa:

Probationary ended a while ago. But I think it was a lot of reservations because I was a young mom. I had my daughter, she was 11 months old when I was starting. I was really apprehensive about ... it's a very demanding job and I wasn't sure if I was cut out to keep up with what I know

the pace can be. And so it was more about me not being sure if this was a good fit for my lifestyle.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, and where you are. And I'm just nodding as you're talking because so my kids are seven and nine. I had them when I was still practicing as an associate. I lateraled with a 10 month-old and a two and a half year-old. And regardless of one's career aspirations, depending on where you just are in your life, it will give you pause to take a new job, because you're just like, "I know the dynamic where I am."

Alexis Robertson:

But I appreciate you sharing that, but I just think that's such a universal concern. Now I know also because of coronavirus, you are at home. Your daughter is home right now. We've kept our fingers crossed that if she had joined us, that would be fine. But I'm just curious. So, how old is she now?

Senayt Rahwa:

She's three. She'll be four in November. I can't say enough how much of a positive and supporting team I have here, because it's a challenge. There are so many things that pop up, like your daycare calls and they're just like, "[Kizzy 00:41:46] is sick, she has to go home." And you're like, "It's two in the afternoon, and I have a call in 10 minutes."

Senayt Rahwa:

The idea that people really look out for each other, and that you're able to both take on the work that you need to but also have the flexibility that you need-

Alexis Robertson:

Yes.

Senayt Rahwa:

... it's huge. And I can't speak to other places, but I don't know that that is ... I can't understate how much that has been a large part of [crosstalk 00:42:15] being able to stay and thrive here.

Alexis Robertson:

Absolutely. Well, it's interesting. It's the ... I don't want to say curse, but anyway, the gift and the curse of the billable hour is frequently it depends on who you work with, whatever firm you're at. But there is flexibility as to when you're doing the work, which is so important.

Alexis Robertson:

But then obviously, it goes without saying just also working with just kind, understanding people who particularly once they know you're going to get the work done, they're like people have children. And particularly now though. Now, it's crazy.

Senayt Rahwa:

All the worlds have converged now, so cue the regular guest appearance on any live video conference that I have at this point. And with people who call me it's like, "Mommy, your computer is calling," and will tell me who it is.

Alexis Robertson:

Which is funny. I guess there's a lot of just really difficult things happening in the world right now, too many to even count. But a silver lining, I think has been we've all had to become more human throughout this experience. So for someone listening to this in six months or a year, right now it's September 2020.

Alexis Robertson:

We're six months into home quarantine and coronavirus, and all of that. And people just have had to accept that yeah, sometimes you might see a kid just traipse through my background. Or I might be like, "Hold on, I have to go right now. I'll call you later."

Senayt Rahwa:

Yes. Yeah, it's true. Like you said, I think it's made people more understanding and passionate in a lot of ways as well. So I guess that is definitely the upside to all of this.

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, absolutely. Well, we're getting close to our time. So as we wind down ... oh, the last time I had a followup for my wind down question, so we'll see what happens, Senayt. But as we wind down and you reflect on at this point, you are eight or nine years into your legal career, but you're closing on a decade.

Alexis Robertson:

What's your advice, whether it could be to your college age self, before she embarks on this, what is going to be the better part of a decade journey till now, or to current law students when it comes to navigating a career as a lawyer, particularly a career at a large law firm?

Senayt Rahwa:

My advice would be to ... I don't know that I have specific ways to do this. This is more just like an understanding that I've come to now, but it's taken me way too long is to not lose your sense of self. And to not let unfamiliar environments, situations, works, whatever it is force you to change who you are or how you show up. Because I do think particularly for ... I'm going to only speak for myself, but as a black woman, showing up at a law firm, my first real grown up job, it was this anxiety or I don't even know, just fear of I don't want anybody to know that I don't feel like I belong here.

Senayt Rahwa:

So I don't feel like I fit here, or I don't have the same background or stories or upbringing or whatever it is. So it made me close myself off in a lot of ways that I think was to my detriment. It's like, be who you are. Don't be afraid to be who you are. If that's not the place for you, then-

Alexis Robertson:

Then it's not the place for you.

Senayt Rahwa:

... it's not the place for you. And that's fine.

Alexis Robertson:

That's such a powerful lesson, though, because I do think particularly when you're coming from I just need a job, I have student loans, this idea that if a place doesn't appreciate you, that you should go somewhere else is like, no, no, no, I'm going to do what you need me to do so that this works out. But no, that's such a strong and important thing, and take some time, I think to really learn and trust.

Senayt Rahwa:

And I would say that it even applies to law school. It's like the idea that there are so many things that like, well, you're supposed to do this or you're supposed to do that, you're supposed to go about it this way, there's a lot of pressures that I think are imposed on you in this process.

Senayt Rahwa:

And just don't be afraid to chart your own path and your own way of doing it. And just be confident like, "Look, I've gotten this far. Even if it doesn't look like everybody else's path, I'm going to get to wherever I'm going."

Alexis Robertson:

Yes, I will stop there. The show is called The Path and the Practice, so is there a better way to end? It's taking everything for me not to keep talking to you for another 30 minutes, but we will wrap up. And with that, I'll ask if somebody has questions, can they feel free to reach out to you if they find you on Foley's website?

Senayt Rahwa:
Sure. 100%.

Alexis Robertson:
Awesome. Thank you so much for being on the show, Senayt.

Senayt Rahwa:
Thanks, Alexis.

Alexis Robertson:
Thank you for listening to The Path and the Practice. I hope you enjoyed the conversation and join us again next time. If you did enjoy it, please share it, subscribe and leave us a review because your feedback on the podcast is important to us.

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