

Career Autobiography

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I grew up in rural North Carolina. My mom stayed home with my two older brothers and me, and my dad was a small town lawyer. From an early age, I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to be just like my dad. I saw that he was his own boss, and he made a very good living. My parents were very supportive of the idea of my becoming a lawyer.

I continued wanting to be a lawyer through elementary, middle, and high school. I never talked to a career counselor, but I worked hard to accomplish this goal. I went to the University of Michigan for my undergraduate degree. In 1995, I received a BA with Honors in Psychology. I will admit that I was shocked by how much I loved my psychology classes. To my parents' chagrin, I even considered obtaining a PhD in Psychology over a law degree. My dad was especially distraught because he does not believe in mental illness.

I knew nothing about earning a PhD, so I went to discuss my PhD plans with one of my psychology professors. He told me two things that influenced my decision: 1) that I would never be my own boss and 2) that I needed to know exactly what I wanted to write my dissertation on before I entered a PhD program. I was young. I believed what he said, and I was devastated. I walked out of his office knowing that I was going to law school. I will never forget that professor and the negative impact he had on my career. At a time where I needed support and empathy (especially going against my parents' wishes), he was extremely harsh and negative. He was also shocked when I turned around and told him I was going to law school.

I graduated from Harvard Law School in 1998. I did not really enjoy law school, but I assumed that was normal. I did not know any different. It was hard, and I was tired. Most students that graduate from Harvard Law School go to big cities: Los Angeles, New York, Washington DC, Chicago, Atlanta. I, however, was not looking for a huge city. I wanted

Richmond, Virginia. When it was time to look for a job, I went to the career office to ask if there was someone who could read over my cover letter. I was told that I did not need a cover letter because “all the firms come to job fairs at our school.” I was frustrated. No firms from Richmond, Virginia were coming. I sent my cover letter out without it being reviewed by the career office.

I took a job at a large law firm in Richmond as a real estate lawyer. I hated it. It was long hours and boring work. Although the money was good, I did not feel as though I was helping anyone or making any difference. After a year, I moved to a small law firm thinking that environment would make things better. It did not. I still did not like practicing law, so I left the small firm too. I became an account manager at GMAC Model Home Finance. I had been a real estate lawyer so I was a perfect fit for this new position and after a year was promoted. I was relatively happy at GMAC Model Home Finance. I was not fulfilled by my career, but I liked the people I worked with. I liked it much better than practicing law.

My husband and I then decided to move to Cary, NC from Richmond. Family is extremely important to us, and we were looking to be closer to family. Once we moved, I decided to try opening my own law firm. I always felt such guilt for not using my law degree that I kept going back to my legal career. After taking the North Carolina Bar Exam, I opened the Law Office of Leslie A. Argenta. I enjoyed running my own business, but it was lonely. I missed having colleagues to bounce ideas off of.

In 2008, my daughter was born, and my priorities changed. I wanted to stay home with her, and I did not see how my legal career would work with being an involved mother. I was a real estate lawyer. People schedule to close on their houses, and a sick kid is irrelevant to their schedule. So I stopped practicing law, and I have been at home for 13 years. I have loved every

minute of it. But as my daughter is starting high school next year, I knew it was time to move forward in my life.

I did not want to go back to law. I never really enjoyed it, and I wanted a more fulfilling career. As I contemplated my next step, two things came to mind. 1) My favorite part of my legal career was meeting with the clients (which was only a small part of my time). The bulk of legal work is done preparing documents after the client leaves. You actually spend very little time talking to your clients. 2) I remembered how much I enjoyed my psychology classes at the University of Michigan. These two factors became extremely important in my decision.

I have had very little career guidance in my life. As a child, I always said that I wanted to be a lawyer. My parents were happy and did not question that decision. No one talked to me about careers in high school. The guidance counselor expected that I would go to college, but no one discussed with me what my major would be. In college, I did speak with the one professor about obtaining my PhD, but feel as though I was given very poor advice. I wish I had pursued other advice and help at that time. In law school, it was assumed that the decision was made...they would not even read my cover letter. As a young practicing lawyer, I really feel that I was “thrown in” with no mentorship or support. I did it, but I was often lonely and scared. I believe that a mentor would have made a world of difference in my legal career.

Putting all of this information together led me here today: obtaining a Masters in Counseling degree. I am scared to death of obtaining this degree and not being happy. I do not want that to happen again. I have been in therapy for depression for years, and I believe that my career struggles are a huge part of my problem. Being a counselor will allow me to fulfill two life goals: 1) talk to people and 2) help people. Both of these aspects were missing from my legal career but I hope to experience them as a counselor.