



On Power and Curiosity

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AALM: When did you decide to become a lawyer and why? What drove you to this career?

Salehi: Ever since I can remember I was a protector. If I ever saw someone getting bullied, I would eagerly step in. Standing up for others came very natural to me. I'm not the biggest person in the world, so I learned early on to use my words to defuse difficult situations. Plus, I've always been very expressive, and I love to communicate. So, I suppose, if you put those things together, becoming a lawyer was the most fitting career choice for me. It was either that or become a bouncer, but the market is kind of slim for 5'3" female bouncers, even though I do have a considerable amount of bite.

AALM: What do you find rewarding about being an attorney? What do you find challenging about your practice? How do you overcome those challenges?

Salehi: I relish solving problems. At University of Florida, I took logic courses in the philosophy department to have the chance to piece together riddles and logic games. I love learning the room, observing the parties, fleshing out the facts, finding the core issue, and then strategically lacing it together into a beautiful solution. Problem solving feels similar to cooking a delicious meal, all the right ingredients need to be adjusted to the situation. The reward for me is when the strategies help or change someone's life! The challenge is to find work-life balance because I have a knack for burning the midnight oil. I find it helpful to take spontaneous trips to silent, isolated places, like New Mexico or Death Valley to recharge.

AALM: How is your career different today than you envisioned in law school?

Salehi: Some of my friends speak about how they went to law school to help people and change the world, and lament that the reality of being a lawyer has eroded that youthful optimism. I don't see it that way. I was flat broke in law school. I saved every dollar, worked waitressing jobs to pay for rent, tuition and books, and tried to stay awake long enough to prepare for class. I slept in my car the first two weeks of school and had no furniture in my apartment. Given my circumstances, simply graduating was incredibly meaningful to me. It was a nod from the universe that hard work pays off; I never dreamed I would be the managing shareholder of my own law firm.

AALM: Did you have any mentors or professors who helped you develop your career? What is the best lesson they taught you?

Salehi: Professor Amy Ronner. She was my first-year property law professor, and every-

thing I ever wanted to be – a masterful orator and powerful advocate. Passion and strength radiated from every ounce of her 5'2" being. She taught me to believe that power emanates from within, no matter the gender, no matter the size. Halfway through the semester, she returned our midterm papers. I had worked very hard on mine, but inside, I questioned if my work was worthy of her review or comparable to my peers. Professor Ronner silenced my doubt. To my shock, she proceeded to read my entire midterm essay for the duration of class, and proclaimed my work was "publishable." This great woman, with all her wit, grit, and strength believed in me, and that was a turning point. I can only hope to inspire someone the way she ignited me.

AALM: Do you find that as a woman you face any challenges that men don't?

Salehi: Absolutely. Most of the men I have dealt with in this profession have been upstanding and respectful. But I'm sure many of us women have come across those few who either have no idea how to interact with a woman, or seem to still think it's the days of "Mad Men." I once had a judge in West Palm Beach call me "little lady" during a hearing. I looked down at myself to make sure I wasn't wearing a tutu and carrying a lunch box. I shook my head, let it roll off my back, and then proceeded with my argument. But the point is, I have never seen a man being called "little guy" or "little man" by the judge.

AALM: Tell us something about yourself that people would be surprised to learn.

Salehi: I was born in Iran. During the revolution, my family escaped to Istanbul, and from there, was able to make it to the United States. I was 5 years old when we got here. My father, a mathematics professor, and a high-level employee for the Shah, took a job waiting tables when he arrived in the United States. Eventually, through incredibly hard work, he was able to open up his own restaurant, as well as several other businesses in our community. He took special pride in being able to employ many of our neighbors. His spirit and struggle is embedded within me. Although he has passed away, I live to make a legacy for him; after all my family endured, they deserve to see nothing but success.

AALM: What compelled you to start your own practice?

Salehi: My partners, Oscar Lombana, Donald Lavigne, and Scott Boyer. I am blessed to have met a team of impeccable partners, who I wanted to spend the rest of my career with. At our prior law firm, we developed a mutual trust, respect, and care that transcended the



"big law" culture of blood, sweat, and billing. One night, over sushi, we shared our visions of what our ideal law firm would look like – a boutique think-tank, brewing with creativity and strategy. By the time the waitress cleared the chopsticks away, we had just created the first chapter of Salehi, Boyer, Lavigne, Lombana. The rest of the chapters will be filled with legal victories, volunteering and community outreach, protected and satisfied clients, and many more sushi dinners.

AALM: What traits do you think make an attorney exceptional? What's the difference between a good attorney and an outstanding one?

Salehi: Have you ever been treated by a doctor who is hopelessly un-curious? A doctor who thinks they know all the answers? It's a miserable and wasteful experience. My clients will never feel like this. A decent attorney knows strategies and case law, like a good doctor understands medicine. Exceptional lawyers genuinely listen. They are endlessly curious, able to put themselves in the shoes of others, and capable of reading between the lines in order to understand their client's goals. Of course, we understand the legal tools, and read up on case law daily; we will always advocate with passion, but the crucial ingredient is the capacity to listen with true curiosity.

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