

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Denise Diallo

Paris Partner Denise Diallo talks about her life to date and gives advice to her younger self.

I grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana, which I loved. It's a diverse city, but everyone seems to be united by the same, unique New Orleans culture.

My parents divorced when I was 10 and my mother and I moved to her home city, New York.

We lived in Brooklyn and, I have to admit, it was a huge culture shock.

New York was so busy and multi-cultural in a very different way, with people tending to stick to their own communities. I took every opportunity to return to New Orleans whenever I could.

By the time I left high school, I decided it was time for a change, so I chose to attend the University of Maryland with a full scholarship where I did my undergraduate degree in both French and US History.

I'd learned French since kindergarten and was always interested in languages and I chose French because I thought that it would offer me more career options.

My undergraduate studies also gave me the chance to study abroad in France, which was essential for improving my conversational French.

Law was a natural choice. My father was a lawyer and I'd discovered that I wasn't suited to the other things I'd considered (I didn't see myself studying medicine because I don't like the sight of scabs and blood).

He advised me that studying law was a solid choice and a good qualification to have, even if I eventually chose to pivot to another career later on.



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I went to Columbia Law School in New York because it was an excellent law school and had a very mature global outlook.

My four-year course included a Juris Doctor (JD) and a French Masters in law with two years at the University of Paris, which was invaluable and laid the foundations for what I've done since then.

White & Case appealed to me because at the time, it was one of very few US law firms with a substantial Paris office and a broad international presence.

So, I applied to become a summer associate and spent the summer of 1998 in New York, followed by another summer in the Paris office the following year.

When I arrived on the 40th floor at 1155 Avenue of the Americas for my call-back interviews, I wasn't as dazzled as I had been at some of the other firms who had stunning views of the Hudson and beautiful reception areas.

The furnishings were a bit dated and didn't reflect my perception of White & Case as an international firm. The people, however, left a lasting impression on me.

I recall meeting with Jim Hurlock, Art Scavone and Tony Giustini and going to lunch with Laura Sizemore and another young associate. I was convinced after meeting them all that White & Case was the right fit for me.

During the summers that I spent in New York and in Paris, I was fortunate to work with great people on many interesting corporate and project finance matters.

On completing law school, I took up the offer to join the Firm in New York.

I'd initially expected to choose project finance as my practice area, but after the first-year rotations I opted for bank finance.

I liked the clients and the shorter duration of the deals translated to an exposure to a larger number of transactions and with greater variety. My only reservations were that the bank finance deals were primarily (but not solely) US focused and that there were no women partners in the Bank Finance practice at the time.

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The next five years went by so fast, with long hours and plenty of hard work. I worked on many interesting deals with every partner in the practice.

Things were going well, but I hadn't had time to take a breath and my concern was that I might be closing the door to the possibility of putting my studies in France to use.

Looking back, I should have been more transparent about my career aspirations, but instead I applied for other jobs and was offered a position within the Paris office of a UK firm.

When I handed in my resignation, the head of Bank Finance Eric Berg told me that he would do everything to make sure I didn't leave.

He spoke to the partners in Paris and arranged for me to meet them. Together, they convinced me that it made better sense to stay with the Firm, which is what I did.

I love Paris. It has all the advantages of a large metropolitan city, but it isn't quite as busy 24/7.

Moving abroad was challenging, especially because my husband and I had a young daughter, Oumou, who was four, but it was a logical time to move before she started primary school.

Work wise, being in the same practice made settling in easy and it was clear that the Paris office had the same level of excellence as the New York practice.

Learning how to adapt to the French law nuances and learning the legal language so I could translate documents into French in real time was challenging at first but I settled in quickly.

At the time, the office was still growing with less than 100 lawyers. While the Paris office is now much bigger, with around 200 lawyers, people in the office have invested a lot of time and energy to ensure that the office retains the same culture and values (in line with the Firm values).

I became partner in 2011 and was the Paris office executive partner from 2017 to 2021, which was an amazing opportunity to contribute to the story of the office.

The role of OEP is a lot of work, but it is rewarding because you learn so much more about your partners and their practices.



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You are able to contribute to the growth of the Firm by supporting your partners and the expansion of the platform in your office.

My time at White & Case has been great and I've grown tremendously.

I also appreciate the support my colleagues gave me while I was balancing being a mother (both early on in my career and again as a young partner) with my career at the Firm. Everyone was patient and understanding.

Over the years, I've worked with and been mentored by many amazing people, including New York Partner Joseph Brazil and Paris partner Gilles Peigney, who encouraged me to speak up and step out on my own.

Like many others, I was strongly encouraged and influenced by Eric Berg, in particular his direct approach and confidence.

I also enjoyed working with Vice Chair Dave Koschik and learned a lot from his calm and reassuring manner.

There would be so many people to highlight at the Firm who have influenced me but certainly the last few years it has been great to continue to build the Debt Finance practice in Paris with Raphaël Richard and Samir Berlat who are both truly top lawyers, and real sources of support at all times.

Would my younger self be surprised by where I am now? Well, I think she'd be surprised that I became a corporate lawyer, because I'd considered joining the Peace Corps before law school.

She may also be surprised that I've risen through the ranks because, statistically, it was unlikely that I'd become partner when I joined.

That's one piece of advice I'd give my younger self – don't be influenced by the statistics.

I'd also tell her to be more transparent and to not be afraid to speak up, or you'll miss significant opportunities.

If I could live one day again it would be my wedding day back in New Orleans in 1999 because it was one of those rare moments where all my loved ones, friends and family were together for 24 hours.

And, if I could have one last conversation with someone who is no longer here it would be my father.

We were very close and he died sooner than anticipated in 2019 at the age of 71.

I'd let him know what an inspiration and influence he was to me.

