

## LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

# Nandan Nelivigi

New York Partner and Head of White & Case's Americas Energy, Infrastructure and Project Finance team Nandan Nelivigi talks about his life and gives advice to his younger self.

**I** was born and raised in India in the small suburban community of Haveri in Karnataka state.

My dad was a trial lawyer in the town, resolving conflicts, and was highly respected.

He loved his job and was a big influence in my life. He was a civic leader and I saw how being a lawyer made him an effective leader in the town.

My teenage years were spent at a boarding school in Mysore and, at the age of 15 or 16, I was surrounded by friends who wanted to become doctors or engineers.

Having passed the required tests to join medical and engineering schools, I asked myself if I was just following the crowd.

I realized that my real passion was to be part of the public discourse about societal issues, so I decided to apply to a newly established law school, which seemed like a crazy decision to everyone at the time.

The National Law School of India University was a national project aimed at changing the quality of legal education and the standards of the legal profession in India.

I was part of the first intake of 55 students in 1988 and, while it was underfunded and a bit of an experiment, the experience was very rewarding and the school became a big success.

**It felt good to be part of a project with such high ambitions.** It was inspiring to be supported and taught by so many leading lawyers in the country, who were invested in the success of the school.

I also met my wife, Poojitha, at the law school. We were both active in moot court circuits, debating competitions and student body issues. When we graduated, we decided to apply for LLM courses in the US. I was accepted at Harvard Law School and Poojitha studied in Washington, D.C.



**"It felt good to be part of a project with such high ambitions. It was inspiring to be supported and taught by so many leading lawyers in the country, who were invested in the success of the school."**



We couldn't have moved to America at a better time. It was 1993 and India was undergoing a transformation from being a state-led economy to a more open, global economy, so it was great to experience life in the US and to imagine what India could aspire to be. It was a time when the internet was just becoming a reality, the US economy was about to enter a long growth phase and Bill Clinton had become President.

On finishing my LLM program, I spent the summer of 1994 completing two internships at non-profit environmental organizations in Sausalito, California and Denver, Colorado, both run by people who had taught courses at the law school in India.

I'd been passionate about environmental law and climate issues from my days at the law school, so those internships were fascinating, but I quickly realized I had a lot to learn about the issues and decided I needed to focus on acquiring the basic skills to be a good lawyer.

At that time, I'd already accepted an offer to join White & Case's 10-month International Lawyers Program in New York, so I joined in September 1994.

**It was an eye-opener to be part of a corporate law firm**, especially one as global and large as White & Case, even though the Firm wasn't as big as it is today.

From my first day to the end of the 10-month program, I was adjusting both professionally and socially.

Within the first few weeks though, I was asked to get involved in a huge matter – the US\$3 billion Dabhol power project that, at the time, was the largest foreign investment project in India as the country had just opened its doors to foreign investors.

It was a phenomenal experience and literally became my life for the next five years.

There were lots of twists and turns and it was exciting to be in the middle as we helped our clients navigate all the risks they faced in a newly opened emerging market.

The project was frontpage news across the world and was pivotal to the national debate in India on the evolution of the economy and the idea of foreign investment and private ownership of critical public infrastructure.

I can't overemphasize how much that project influenced and shaped my future as an international project finance lawyer.

During those early years, I was still working on a temporary visa and planned to return to India.

The Firm had plans to open an office in India if regulations that forbid international law firms from opening in the country were lifted, but they never were and now, 27 years on, I'm still in New York.

I'm so thankful that my job has enabled me to be active in the US energy and infrastructure industries while working on leading private sector investments in India. That's precisely what I wanted.

**It was my dream come true to be doing deals in the US and in India**, the two countries with which I have the closest connections.

I was made a partner in 2004 and continued to build my practice before being appointed the head of the Firm's India country practice in 2011.

Throughout my career, my practice has always been split between energy, infrastructure and project finance, and India-related work. That also included M&A and debt finance work and extensive collaboration with colleagues in our capital markets, arbitration, litigation and white collar practices.

As the head of our India country practice, I was helping colleagues source work in all those areas and coordinating the Firm's response to client needs relating to India.

Then, in 2019, I was appointed the Regional Section Head (RSH) for the Americas Energy, Infrastructure, Project and Asset Finance (EIPAF) team, continuing in both roles until handing over leadership of the India practice to Dipen Sabharwal in the summer of 2021.

We recently made several lateral partner hires and internal promotions to the India team, which has opened up a new chapter for our India country practice and made it the perfect time for me to focus on my responsibilities as the RSH of Americas EIPAF section. I'm glad that our India country practice is now well-positioned to take advantage of the many opportunities we expect in relation to India.

I'm enjoying my current role in a practice that's considered to be the market leader in the Americas and globally.

Our team has been consistently ranked Band 1 by Chambers for the past 17 years and it's so exciting and humbling to be part of the significant growth and transformation of a practice that is at the center of the global discussion about energy transition and climate change.

Having been passionate about the environment from the very start of my career, that's really gratifying, especially because I can now appreciate the challenges from multiple perspectives.

**If I was to offer advice to my younger self, I'd tell him that you need to be humble, nimble, but confident in your abilities.**

I'd also say don't be afraid to take risks, be flexible and invest in relationships and in the advancement of other's careers. When I see the benefits, I wish I'd done it more.

Remember that small gestures are important in building relationships and appreciate what's going well in your life – big or small – rather than taking it for granted.

It's also important to know your strengths and weaknesses, but not to be afraid of what you don't know.

That's something I learned from retired partner Larry Gannon, who led our team on the Dabhol project and who eventually became co-head of the Americas EIPAF section.

I worked with Larry for more than 20 years and he was a mentor and an inspiration during that period.

He taught me to keep an open mind, to have the courage to embrace new challenges, to have the confidence in your own experience and abilities, but to be humble enough to appreciate that there will always be things that you don't know. He was calm and composed in every situation.

Another big source of inspiration for me was retired partner Gene Goodwillie. He founded the Project Development and Finance practice at the Firm and was a member of the management committee of the Firm.

I learned from him that, with the right charm and creativity, no problem could stand in your way. He was also brilliant at building client relationships, something I greatly admire and aspire to do.

**At the end of the day, the client experience is everything.** All we do should be geared towards giving our clients the best experience possible.

That's why I'm delighted that the client experience is at the center of our 2025 Strategy and that we have zeroed in on what clients value the most in their interactions with us, such as being understood, protected and prioritized.

Now that we have identified what clients value the most, they seem so self-evident and I think we can focus all our energy on them.

What would my younger self think about the way my life has gone? I think he'd be amazed.

**I never imagined I'd be where I am right now.** I exceeded my dreams.

My dad passed away a few years ago and he was proud of what I was doing, even though he always said: 'you're not a true lawyer unless you've cross-examined someone at the witness stand'.

Finally, if I could have a conversation with one person who is no longer with us, it would be with Ellen Smith, who was a senior associate when I joined the Firm and later became a counsel.

She was the lead associate on the Dabhol project. Ellen was very kind, took me under her wing and taught me the basic skills that I needed to be a good technical lawyer.

Ellen died very young after being diagnosed with cancer brought on by pregnancy. That meant she never returned to work after she fell ill, so I didn't get the chance to thank her properly.

I would simply say 'thank you'.

**“At the end of the day,  
the client experience is  
everything. All we do  
should be geared towards  
giving our clients the best  
experience possible.”**

