

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Arlene Arin Hahn

Global Head of the Technology Transactions Practice Arlene Arin Hahn writes a letter to her younger self.

I was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio. Even as a local, it wasn't particularly easy growing up there as a scrawny Asian girl in the 1980s. My parents focused on assimilating, but I never felt like I fit in. I've since learned that fitting in is overrated.

My father had escaped North Korea as a child, lied his way into the South Korean school system, and graduated second in his class at Seoul National University Medical School.

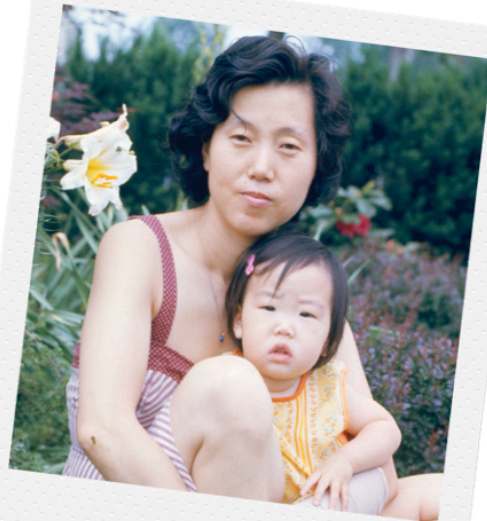
My mother was one of only two women in her medical school residency before surrendering her career to raise kids after emigrating to the United States with my father.

My childhood was a happy one. My parents sent me to private school so I could focus on academic excellence, but they also let me indulge my love of sports as co-captain of my field hockey and lacrosse teams.

Life was good, but as the child of immigrants and overachievers, I felt enormous pressure to live up to my parents' expectations, knowing how far they'd come.

I was their fourth daughter (or their fourth failed attempt at a son). Since they were unabashedly vocal about their disappointment in not having a son, I felt like the only way to make them proud was to get perfect grades, go to Harvard, and become a doctor (spoiler alert: I didn't get into Harvard or become a doctor, but I think it still made them proud).

I went to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for undergrad, in part because I thought their robot competition was cool and in part because it was just down the street from Harvard.



Me as a baby with my mom

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I had a happy childhood

Since I was still planning to become a doctor, I majored in Biology. But since I didn't fit in with the other MIT bio majors, I decided to branch out. I was a teaching assistant for organic chemistry and took courses on Words, Rhetoric, and the Art and Science of Negotiation. I even took classes to learn how to speak Korean.

It was in the summer of my junior year (when I should have been studying for the MCAT) when I decided being a doctor wasn't for me, so I took the LSAT and applied to law school instead.

Although I had never met a lawyer before, law seemed a great way to maximize optionality. There are plenty of former lawyers who have become successful journalists, movie producers, CEOs, politicians and authors, so it gave me a good foundation for whatever I decided to do later.

I always wanted to end up in New York City, so going to New York University (NYU) School of Law turned out to be perfect for me. It was the first of many lucky decisions in my career.

Since I lived off campus and skipped (a lot of) classes, I was fortunate that NYU Law students are exceptionally collaborative. Thanks in part to my fellow students recording classes for me on microcassette and sharing their outlines with me, I got by, even becoming a staff editor of the NYU Law Review.

It was fellow Law Review members who prepped me for on-campus interviews (while teasing me for doing more than 40 call-backs). They also encouraged me to pursue patent and intellectual property (IP) law to leverage my technical background.

At the time, boutique firms were considered the best for IP, but I didn't like their cultures as much as general practice firms. So, I instead accepted an offer to be a summer associate at one of the few general law firms that had a prestigious IP practice at the time, Weil Gotshal & Manges.

It was another lucky decision – not only because most of the prominent IP boutiques are no longer around, but because Weil had a leading bankruptcy practice.

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In the early years of my career, the dot com bubble burst and the Great Recession came, so I learned first-hand how important it is for a firm to have a diversity of practices (including FRI).

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What did surprise me (and everyone else) was that I stayed at Weil for 15 years!

As a mid-level associate, I was seconded to work at Panasonic in Osaka, Japan, for over a year. I met my husband there and he returned to the States with me.

After working at Panasonic, I was asked to join a newly-formed Technology Transactions practice, which became a booming field. I was fortunate to work on number of memorable transactions – including the formation of Hulu and Disney’s acquisition of Marvel.

After returning from Osaka, my world changed. My mother was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.

I was desperate to give her a grandchild before she passed, but getting pregnant didn’t come easy for me. After several years of miscarriages and IUIs, I finally got pregnant via IVF. My mother got to see photos of him in the womb, but she died seven weeks before my son, Hutch, was born.

Losing my mother just as I became a mother myself was profoundly difficult and, within the year, I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, hospitalized with a rare neurological disorder, and admitted to the emergency room twice for infections by an antibiotic-resistant bacteria. I learned from this time how deeply the body is connected to the mind.

In the following year, my father was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. He passed when I was seven weeks pregnant with my daughter, Rakhi.

These events both traumatized and transformed me, but becoming a mother taught me how to prioritize, provide, and focus on the future.



My family

“After returning from Osaka, my world changed. My mother was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.”



Getting married in Vegas

In fact, it was when I was six months pregnant with Rakhi that I decided I'd take a call from a head-hunter who had an opportunity at White & Case.

So, I met with John Reiss, Global Head of M&A, and Greg Pryor, the then-Americas Head of M&A.

It was a discussion that changed my life. John and Greg explained White & Case was a truly global Firm with an entrepreneurial spirit and diverse people.

It sounded fantastic until John mentioned that I'd need to start immediately. Since I was heavily pregnant and planning an extended maternity leave, we mutually agreed that the Firm would have to look elsewhere.

Then, two months after the birth of my daughter, I received a call that White & Case had decided to wait for me and wanted to resume discussions.

In the days that followed, I interviewed with dozens of partners, many of whom (including Oliver Brahmst, John Donovan, Sang Ji, Mort Pierce, Chang Gong, Dave Koschik, Jennifer Paradise, Don Baker, Jim Hayden, Jaqui MacLennan, and Henrik Patel) have become mentors, sponsors and friends.

I joined White & Case on 28 September 2015 and, as John Reiss walked me around the office on my first day, I was immediately struck by how diverse the Firm was.

In those early days, Henrik Patel gave me a brilliant bit of advice: 'go to everything.' I took him literally, attending pretty much every event I could.

This meant I quickly met lawyers and Business Service professionals across the Firm, particularly Hope Ellen and the Events team, who must have thought I was stalking them.

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During my second week, I met Partners Claudine Columbres and Alison Hanstead. We quickly became 'ride-or-die' friends. I feel incredibly fortunate to be surrounded by extraordinarily talented women throughout the Firm, including associates, counsel, local partners, and Business Services Professionals, like the amazing women on the New York Women's Alliance Leadership Committee. I cannot name them all, but so many of my fellow women Partners, including Carina Radford, Heather Burke, Maria Beguiristain, Kristen O'Shaughnessy, Kerry O'Rourke Perri, Rachel Feldman, Elena Millerman, Eliza McDougall, Elizabeth Kirk, Heather McDevitt, Morgan Hollins, Tali Sealman, Ingrid York, Caroline Sherrell, Caroline Miller Smith, Anita Varma, Erin Hanson, Germaine Gurr, and countless others have also been an invaluable source of inspiration, expertise, support, friendship, and lots and lots of laughter.

When I joined the Firm, I never considered myself a leader. I grew up with a healthy dose of imposter syndrome and I'm terrified of public speaking, plus I still have so much to learn. But White & Case has given me incredible opportunities to stretch and grow. When the Firm's Global Women's Initiative launched a coaching program for women partners, my scepticism of coaches turned into radical enthusiasm.

I quickly realized that coaching is a gift – if Serena Williams (who is the G.O.A.T.) has a coach, then I could learn from one too. The Firm has also pushed me in other ways too, like asking me to do a live, unscripted interview on BloombergTV. I was just relieved to get through the segment without blacking out.

When I was welcomed back to do another interview remotely during the pre-vaccine days of the pandemic, I tested positive for Covid-19 right before the interview, gave myself a double dose of medication so that I could get through the interview, and then was sick in bed for the next 14 days.



At the GPM in 2020



“I was humbled to have been chair when George Floyd was murdered – a watershed moment in the fight for racial justice.”



With my husband and children

On the bright side, the pre-vaccine antibodies allowed my family to take a surprise trip to Disney World for Christmas 2020, which was amazing. Along with the night my husband and I eloped to get married at 3am at the Little White Chapel in Vegas, it's a time I'd love to re-live, along with any days I spent with my parents before they passed.

Over my career so far, I've had the opportunity to serve the Firm in many ways, including as co-chair of the New York Summer Program, chair of the New York Women's Alliance, and head of the NYU Law Campus team.

I've also been a member of the Firm's Global Pension Plans Committee, Technology Industry Group Core Team, Innovation Knowledge & Technology Committee, and Global Women's Initiative. It is through these roles that I've learned so much about White & Case, its structures and, most importantly, its people.

One of the greatest privileges of my career was my time as chair of the Firm's Global Diversity Committee.

As a girl who never fitted in, I was responsible for helping to create an environment where everyone feels accepted for who they are in a culture of equal opportunity, respect, and belonging.

I was humbled to have been chair when George Floyd was murdered – a watershed moment in the fight for racial justice. It forced me out of my comfort zone and into courageous conversations about white supremacy and anti-black racism. I also realized how much more I have to learn.

In my current role, I have the privilege of serving as Global Head of the Firm's Technology Transactions Practice, helping the practice to pursue the Firm's 2025 Strategy to provide a distinctive client experience.



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To achieve this strategy, I believe we need to prioritize our people. Richard Branson was quoted as saying that ‘if you take care of your employees, they will take care of your clients’. That’s why I think it is so critical for people to feel fulfilled, to be comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work, and to feel like they belong.

Looking back, I’ve realized that 99 percent of my motivation in life has been to make my parents proud.

They passed too early to see some of my accomplishments as a mom and as a lawyer and, if I could have one last conversation with someone who is no longer with us, it would be my mom.

I’d like to tell her how much I love and miss her, for her to meet my children, and to learn more about her life. Asian parents often prefer not to share these details with their kids.

I didn’t get the chance to talk to my father about my career before he died either, but a few months ago my husband and I went to see celebrity medium, Tyler Henry, and I was one of seven people to be chosen for a reading out of 2,000 at the show.

I don’t know if Tyler is for real or not, but he said my father was with him and wanted to tell me how incredibly proud he was of me. I broke into tears hearing this.

For my father to say that would mean the world to me.



On vacation at Disney