

Alexis Robertso...: Welcome to The Path & The Practice, a podcast dedicated to sharing the professional origin stories of the attorneys at Foley & Lardner LLP, a full-service law firm with over 1,000 lawyers across the U.S. and abroad. I am your host, Alexis Robertson, Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Foley. In each episode of this podcast, you'll hear me in conversation with a different Foley attorney. You'll learn about each guest's unique background, path to law school, and path to Foley & Lardner. Essentially, you'll hear the stories you won't find on their professional bios, and of course, you'll learn a bit about their practice. Now, let's get to the episode.

On today's episode, I'm speaking with Vi Tran. Vi is a litigation associate in Foley's Houston office. In our discussion, Vi shares about her childhood, reflecting on how she frequently moved as a child while her parents, who had immigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam, worked to establish themselves in the U.S. Vi reflects on how she had wanted to be a doctor, but how her path changed after she became a single mom during college. Vi walks us through how it was that she was able to raise her son, attend school, and work part-time jobs, and she shares the wisdom she gained from those jobs. After talking to Vi, I'm now convinced that all of us should spend a little bit of time as a bartender.

Overall what strikes me about Vi is just how intentional she is. I'm certain that she would say that the difficult circumstances demanded that intentionality, but in listening to her, I think you'll be impressed by just how smart and self-aware she is. Vi provides some profound advice and reflections on how it was that she was able to build her self-esteem during college. She provides some great guidance on how to surmount large goals by taking them one day at a time. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Vi, welcome to the show.

Vi Tran: Thanks for having me.

Alexis Robertso...: We are going to jump right in. Same way I do with everybody. Tell me about yourself, give me your professional introduction.

Vi Tran: Sure. So my name is Vi Tran. I'm a six-year associate at Foley & Lardner. I work out of the Houston office and I am in the litigation group. Most of my practice primarily focuses on energy litigation.

Alexis Robertso...: So before we started recording, you've shared how you've listened to a lot of these episodes. So you know what comes next. I want to find out how it is that you became Vi Tran at Foley & Lardner in Houston and I want to start at the very, very beginning which is where are you from, where did you grow up?

Vi Tran: So I was born in Port Arthur, Texas. It is a very small town near Beaumont, Texas which is another small town off the coast of Texas. I grew up in California until I was seven years old, then I moved back to Texas. While I was in California, I

lived in various different cities. I was in Huntington Beach, Anaheim, Garden Grove. My parents moved a lot up until we moved to Texas. We were in Dallas for a year and then we moved to Houston and I've been in Houston since.

Alexis Robertso...: When did you move to Houston? So how long have you been in Houston now?

Vi Tran: So I've been in Houston since the fourth grade. Whatever age that is, I think it's seven or eight. So it's been a while.

Alexis Robertso...: It's funny though because ... So for me, my parents didn't move a lot as a kid, but I was in three different elementary schools. Sort of in the same general vicinity between like Illinois and Wisconsin, but even though for me, same thing. I was in the same school system since fourth grade on, it really does feel like you moved a lot, even though you stayed in the same place thereafter. So I just find that so interesting. Like when you move a lot during those formative years, it kind of sticks ... It sticks with you.

Vi Tran: What I remember, my elementary school years was kind of all a blur because I went to about seven different elementary schools and I did not stay -

Alexis Robertso...: You got me beat. I had three, you're at seven. Okay, tell me more.

Vi Tran: I did not stay at a school for an entire school year up until the fifth grade and part of that was my parents got married and had me when they were in their twenties, so they were still finding their career path. When they were in Port Arthur, they opened up a pho restaurant, and then they decided to move to California. They started working there but my dad realized that for any longterm career path, he had to go to college. That was quite a path for him because he didn't speak English very well.

Alexis Robertso...: Tell me more about your parents because also I should say, full disclosure, we were talking about this before we started recording. Vi is diligent and sent me a little kind of like background info about her, so now I know what I want to hear about, which is you already shared a bit about your parents' path but yeah, tell us more.

Vi Tran: Yes. So my parents emigrated from Vietnam after the Vietnam War and they did not meet until they were in the States. But their path to getting to the United States were the same. Right after the Vietnam War was lost, that same evening, their entire family packed up all their things, did not tell anyone, and escaped by boat to Malaysia, stayed at a refugee camp there, and eventually they were able to make it to the United States. Somehow they both ended up in Odessa, Texas, a small town in West Texas, where they met at a church choir. Then they ended up in Port Arthur, Texas, had me, and then to California and then back to Texas.

Alexis Robertso...: And then the rest, everything else that you just said. Yes.

Vi Tran: So with my dad, he knew he needed ... To have some stability, he needed to go to college, and with that, they didn't have the money or the funds and my dad had to ... He had to learn English, so he had to work at places that would require him to interact with people. He worked at Hertz, the car rental company, so he could interact and practice his English and because they had very little money, we were living with relatives, different relatives, over a period of time. Which was a reason why I kept moving schools. Eventually we lived with another relative. So I couldn't really make friends in elementary school but I was able to live with my cousins and grow up with.

Alexis Robertso...: Do you have siblings as well?

Vi Tran: Yes. So I have three other siblings. I'm the oldest and I have two younger brothers and one younger sister.

Alexis Robertso...: Also just to make sure I'm following the timeline, so your dad goes back to college later and so how old are you when he's going back to school?

Vi Tran: I was about four by then, and my youngest sister was born, and my dad ... My dad set a goal that by the time my sister turns four, he would graduate from college.

Alexis Robertso...: Wow. Did he achieve it?

Vi Tran: Yes he did, and that's how I remember all the timing because I know when she hit four, he graduated from college. Yeah, so my mom would work ... She would do somewhat odds job. The easiest one, because she had to watch four kids. She would sew clothes, so for factories. So what she would do is bring home the pile of fabric that she needed and then would just sew clothes at home and then bring it back to the factory. So she did that in California and while we were living in Dallas.

Alexis Robertso...: Wow. Thank you so much for sharing about that. I just think it's so interesting to learn about parents and where people grew up because it all feeds into who we end up becoming, so I appreciate you elaborating on that, but I know eventually, we get you back to Houston. You get to stay in the same school starting then. I'll ask this early but we'll see where it takes us. Did you know as a child that you wanted to be a lawyer?

Vi Tran: I did not. In fact I did not know any lawyers until I went to college. So I did not know much about practicing law other than that lawyers existed and what I saw on TV.

Alexis Robertso...: You're like, "I've heard of them. I know that's a thing." But so for you, you watched your ... Well you were four when your dad went back to school. By the time it sounds like he graduated, you were closer to eight. What were your thoughts on going to college, just education or kind of what you wanted to be

when you grew up, at least when you were younger? Or did you think about it at all?

Vi Tran: I did. I had an interest in the medical profession. So I thought I wanted to be a doctor, and of course my parents completely agreed with that goal, so there was zero ... No resistance to that idea in mind. In fact I even interned, did some internships during high school just to be able to work in a hospital or see in a hospital what goes on. See a couple surgeries, see a [inaudible 00:09:15].

Alexis Robertso...: Wow. Wow. Did you actually get to see surgeries as a part of this internship?

Vi Tran: Yes. In fact, I saw an open heart surgery and some gastric surgery. That one was not fun to look at but -

Alexis Robertso...: What kind of internship was this that allows you to -

Vi Tran: It was a health sciences course where you got clinical rotation.

Alexis Robertso...: This is in high school though. That's amazing.

Vi Tran: In high school. Yes. And we would go off campus to different places each day of the week. So we went to ... I helped at an adult day care center one day of the week, and then at the hospital and rotate in different departments of the hospital.

Alexis Robertso...: That's amazing. Okay, you went to a different high school than the one I went to. That's amazing. This brings back memories for me of back before The Learning Channel was all reality TV, they used to actually show operations.

Vi Tran: Really?

Alexis Robertso...: My dad and I, and I think the show was even called The Operation, and my father and I, we would watch that and [inaudible 00:10:20] I was like the closest I've ever come is that show, The Operation. But anyway -

Vi Tran: Like C-SPAN where you just get to turn it on?

Alexis Robertso...: It was like an hour long show and I think they'd tell you about what they were going to do but it could be any sort of ... And I don't even think they show stuff like that on TV anymore, even though we have so many more ... Anyway, that is just a weird trippy memory from my childhood. Thank you for letting me share that. Okay, so you're in high school, you're able to get exposed to aspects of medicine and then you have to apply to college. So what is that, what's that process like for you, what was the thought behind that?

Vi Tran: There was not much thought process in that.

Alexis Robertso...: That's fine. I'm in the same boat. Tell me more.

Vi Tran: Well with my dad, college was the goal. So I wasn't really raised to think farther than that as in what college to go to as long as it's a good college. Just get there and then figure it out then. So I chose to go to the University of Houston because it was local and tuition was reasonable, and it was a good school, so ...

Alexis Robertso...: Is that the only place you ended up applying?

Vi Tran: No, I applied to ... So Texas has a program where I think it's top 7% now but if you're in the top 10%, you could apply and get into every Texas college. So I qualified for that, so I think I applied for UT, St. Thomas University, which is a private college in Houston, and I got a scholarship from St. Thomas University but I compared the tuition prices and I went with UH.

Alexis Robertso...: Mm-hmm (affirmative). This also brings back memories of that decision-making process for me because like you said, there wasn't much thought. I was very similar in that it was definitely you're going to college. I grew up in the Milwaukee area and so you had to apply to the University of Wisconsin - Madison because you did. Tuition was really inexpensive as an instate resident, you had reciprocity at Minnesota, so you had to apply there. And then I got a fee waiver for American University and I was like, "Let's apply there too." There were a few others, like I think Emory was my top choice, but it was all very haphazard -

Vi Tran: You just went with the flow, right?

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah.

Vi Tran: Whoever takes me.

Alexis Robertso...: I had heard of U.S. News, I had heard of different things, and my parents sort of helped me but like I directed a lot of it myself, and ultimately the school that I applied to with the fee waiver that I had never visited before is the one who gave me the most money to go. Still would have been cheaper to go to Madison, but I wanted to get out Milwaukee, so I wanted to be in D.C. So it's just so interesting when you look back about the decision-making and how you ended up in one place over another. So yeah, and that just brings back memories. All right, so you go to college. Tell me about that. What's that like?

Vi Tran: Sure. So my freshman year was a bit rough. Towards the end of the first semester, I realized I was going to become a single mom. So barely starting college and I had to shift everything around. Before I went with the flow and I couldn't do that anymore. In fact -

Alexis Robertso...: No, because you're ... I mean you're what, 18, 19 at this point?

Vi Tran: 19.

Alexis Robertso...: You're 19. Right, and you're trying to balance a baby or an infant with college.

Vi Tran: Yes, and just everything you believed in kind of falls apart.

Alexis Robertso...: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Because the plan, the plan's out the window.

Vi Tran: The plan that everyone has in mind to go to college, get married, have a family, it all fell apart.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, the order of operations is off. Like what ... And it's interesting because obviously for the purpose of the episode it's great to really share what you can share, but I don't want to be like overly pry, but I am curious as to how you were able to navigate that? Did you end up staying in college or what did you do once you had your child?

Vi Tran: So once I realized I was pregnant, I had the talk with my parents and my dad sat down with me and he said, "Okay. You still have to go to college, but now you really have to think about what you're going to do. What's your plan? The idea of being a doctor and going to school for another eight years on top of your bachelor's degree is probably not ideal. So what are you going to do? How are you going to make money?" My parents, they were not well off during that time either. So they couldn't help me financially. So I was concerned on, "Well, how do I feed a baby and where am I going to get money to feed a baby?" So money was very much an issue. Luckily school, I still had financial aid. So I was able to continue with that. So I just kept going to school. I finished out my semester, kept going to school while I was pregnant. Took summer classes too, I couldn't work, and I just had to rethink my whole college career path and a few things happened during my pregnancy which was also rough too. I got into a car accident.

Alexis Robertso...: Oh my gosh.

Vi Tran: Yes. I wasn't harmed, but my car was completely harmed. So I didn't have a car.

Alexis Robertso...: When money's an issue for your car to now be gone, that's a big deal.

Vi Tran: My parents couldn't buy me a new car and then I was even ... I had my purse snatched while I was leaving a restaurant when I was seven months pregnant. When the guys ran off, I was yelling at them, "I hope you feel good about yourself. I'm pregnant." I don't know if they heard me, but ...

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, we keep our fingers crossed that karma later took care of them but yeah, jeez.

Vi Tran: So no car, no money, no purse. But I had a great family support. Great support from my family but yes. Then my classes, I had to pick my classes during the times where I could borrow my parents' cars, and rethink my college career path to something practical. What can I graduate with?

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, and so what were you thinking going in? So kind of what was the plan or what was your major? Did you change it? How did that work?

Vi Tran: Sure. So I think I originally majored in chemistry. I can't even remember anymore, for pre-med, and I decided to major in human nutrition because I knew I wanted to stay in the medical industry, couldn't become a doctor but maybe I could be a nurse or a physician's assistant, and with a nutrition degree, you have the biology and science classes. The same biology and science classes that were required for you to take the MCAT or apply to any post-grad medical professional school. So I went with human nutrition.

Alexis Robertso...: So you pivot. Okay.

Vi Tran: Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: Pivot into that.

Vi Tran: So then I just went about my business with getting as high grades as possible with the -

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, while taking care of a baby, and I didn't even ask. Do you have a son or daughter?

Vi Tran: I have a son. Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: Okay.

Vi Tran: He is 14 turning 15 now.

Alexis Robertso...: Oh my god. Wow, okay.

Vi Tran: Yes. Balancing the classes, finding a sitter so I can go to the classes, when I can borrow a car, whenever he was about nine months, just old enough, I tried to find ... I needed a job. So because I had no car, I worked at Abercrombie & Fitch folding clothes overnight at night from like ... I think it was like 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. or something. Because people are sleeping and the baby is sleeping and I could borrow a car.

Alexis Robertso...: Oh my gosh though. Oh my god. There's so many things that just jump into mind as you say that which is one, I can only imagine how exhausted you are by the way to be doing that at night and school and having to take care of your son.

But then also, my most visceral response when I hear Abercrombie & Fitch is the smell of the stores.

Vi Tran: Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: I swear they would just bathe it -

Vi Tran: They spray the ... Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: Would you spray the perfume at night as well?

Vi Tran: Yeah.

Alexis Robertso...: Are you serious? Would you really?

Vi Tran: You spray the perfume and the way they folded clothes was pretty funny because you had to fold it flat and then scrunch it up. Which kind of defeats the purpose of folding clothes, but that's what I remember viscerally too. I come out smelling like Abercrombie & Fitch.

Alexis Robertso...: You'd smell like the ... I assumed they had to spray perfume every night but you just validated a suspicion I've had for a while.

Vi Tran: They did.

Alexis Robertso...: Okay, okay. But you were able to find that as a part-time job, to kind of help make ends meet and otherwise you kind of keep your head down like you said, try to get as great of grades as you can in college and then what?

Vi Tran: For a while, I was just taking it by the day because -

Alexis Robertso...: You had too. Yeah.

Vi Tran: The concern was food and money and staying in school so you couldn't really think about much else, and taking care of the baby of course. So you really couldn't think about much else so I just kept pushing through. Eventually I was able to afford a car which I'd say was my proudest accomplishment at the time and then keep juggling school. Then I started bartending instead of working at Abercrombie.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah.

Vi Tran: Because you can take shifts and you could work on the weekends, so I was bartending throughout college and that helped pay for everything.

Alexis Robertso...: You also said something that ... I mean I've heard a lot but I think it's really important and profound is that I think whenever you're dealing with any really



difficult situation, that day by day, sometimes hour by hour even, because if you're ... I don't know, just making up the time period. If you're two years into college and you're like, "All right, only two more years to go." Two years sounds like forever. But I can handle tomorrow. I can deal with tomorrow. So with all of this going on, did you start at all thinking about law school or how did that come about?

Vi Tran: Sure. So I took things by the day because that's all I could do and once ... So things got better by the day.

Alexis Robertso...: And getting the car.

Vi Tran: Yes, and the car. Before, it was once I became a single parent, any confidence I had just went out the window.

Alexis Robertso...: Can you see why? Like why? What did that?

Vi Tran: So the plan you had in mind is gone. You're not sure, there's a lack of security, and all you're striving for is security, food, money, job, supporting your child, taking care of the baby. So you just don't think you're capable of much more. You're just not sure what's going to happen in the future and every time you think about the future, it just looks dreadful. You can't predict it and it looks dreadful.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, but the circumstances, you go from like losing self-confidence and I'm guessing at some point those dynamics started to change a little bit and maybe you were able to become more confident perhaps?

Vi Tran: So losing self-confidence, you're just not sure what you can handle. When you look into the future, everything looks dreadful, so once I was able to check off, "Okay, I don't have to worry about formula and diapers, I can handle that. I can handle taking care of the baby, check that off. I am a competent mother, I love my child, check that off. I have a car, check. College, check. I can manage good grades, check." So then I start to slowly gain confidence that yes, I can do this. It's not as dreadful. I can somewhat see the future and I was doing very well in school and I even got an internship to work for a dietitian because I was ... There was the health profession but then can I be a dietitian. So I interned for a dietitian. It was a great experience, I really enjoyed it. So by junior year, I checked off all the boxes on what I needed to do and then I had to stop and think, "Well what next? Are you sure you want to be in the health profession? Is it something you're going to be passionate about?" I can finally ask the question of whether I'm going to be passionate about it.

Alexis Robertso...: Yep, which is really ... It's a privilege to be able to ask that question. I actually talk about this a fair amount with professional alignment and the first thing I acknowledge is it's a real privilege to even be able to say, "But am I passionate about it?"

Vi Tran: Yes. I didn't have the luxury to ask myself what I wanted to do. It was more of what can I do. So I finally reached that point and then had to rethink my college and career path, is this something I want to do. Can you see yourself doing this for 10 years? Can you see yourself being a nurse for 10 years? A very good friend of mine suggested, "Have you considered law school?" It never crossed my mind, but it sounded interesting and because I was a bartender, I bartended at a sushi restaurant, I talked to a lot of lawyers.

Alexis Robertso...: You do a lot of [inaudible 00:24:29].

Vi Tran: I started asking questions.

Alexis Robertso...: Wait, you have to stop for one second. Because I was a bartender, I knew a lot of lawyers, and I hope everybody can just find that funny. Because yes, lawyers may have a bit of an issue with depression and alcoholism and we are not making fun of that but let's all say that that's just a funny thing you said, but anyway, go on.

Vi Tran: Yeah. That's not what I meant. I met all sorts of people.

Alexis Robertso...: [inaudible 00:24:50]. But it's still funny and I hope people can laugh with us and not think it's too much gallows humor, but anyway, go on. So what did you gain? You've met all these different types of people because as a bartender you meet lots of people. Some of them are lawyers.

Vi Tran: Yes. I had the opportunity, well as a bartender and meeting a lot of people, I had the opportunity to ask questions and I think that's where I got some of the best advice. One of the best advice I got was ... Well first, he sent me a New York Times article on how risky the law is for an early reality check and told me that, "Look, just do well in your first year of law school and if you don't, drop out." So that was his suggestion.

Alexis Robertso...: Wow, he was very real. Okay.

Vi Tran: Well it was certainly very motivating because going through my first semester of law school, I thought, "Well, you better do well or you're going to be out one semester's worth of tuition money because you're going to have to drop out if this doesn't work."

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, well, but it's so funny because we've had a lot of people on the show and I think people in law know yeah, your first year matters a lot. We've also had a number of people say how their first year was really rough for them and they managed to overcome that, but we'd be lying I guess if we didn't acknowledge that yeah, there's a ton of pressure on your first year of law school.

Vi Tran: Yes.

- Alexis Robertso...: Absolutely.
- Vi Tran: So I went an all or nothing approach and I really didn't want to waste a semester or that tuition money. So I did everything I could to do well.
- Alexis Robertso...: Oh my gosh. Well and did you go to law school right after? What was the timing between college and law school?
- Vi Tran: So during my junior year, once I decided that I wanted to go to law school, there were a few problems. First, with law school and becoming a lawyer, you have to write a lot. By then with the science background, I did not write a single paper for the last four years. So can I write? Do I even like writing? So then I picked up an English minor.
- Alexis Robertso...: Wow. That's a lot of foresight.
- Vi Tran: Just to figure it out. Just to figure it out. Because there's an issue with risk, with having ... You're taking care of a baby, so whatever decision you make, you have to do this risk analysis on how is it going to affect the baby and how it will affect my family because my family was my support structure and they were my support system to help me even keep going to college and even thinking about law school. So when I made the decision, I had to talk to my parents again to see if they were fine with it too and whether they would support me. So I joined a pre-law society to see if I would ... How well I'll get along with my pre-law classmates. I picked up the English minor so I could start writing again and see if I like it. I enjoyed writing.
- Alexis Robertso...: By the way, that is so incredibly smart, because I've said this repeatedly, but I was basically a pre-law major. I had to write things all the time. That does not mean my writing was any good. I also for some reason thought lawyers or being a lawyer more about the oral communication than the written communication, so not to say that I didn't think that lawyers wrote a lot, but I don't know if I really understood that, particularly as a litigator at a large firm, you spend most of your time writing. You're not just sent out to court every day, but so for you to do something or to take classes that would really ... Like formally improve your writing I just think is such a brilliant idea. Sorry, I digress, I just wanted to spin on that because that's just so incredibly smart. But so what happens, you talk to your family, will they support you and then when did you apply or how did that work to actually go to law school?
- Vi Tran: By the way, I got the tip on the writing from a customer while I was bartending.
- Alexis Robertso...: That's so awesome.
- Vi Tran: While I work. "Oh you're a lawyer? Hey, by the way, I have this random question. What do you think about picking up an English minor to get better at writing?"

Alexis Robertso...: He's like, "Go for it. Do it. Just do it."

Vi Tran: Exactly. So part of the decision to go to law school, well law school tuition is expensive. What are you going to do? What law school are you going to go to? How is this going to work? What do you need to do to minimize the risk of the law school lawyer path not working out and what are you going to do to maximize the recovery? Am I going to get paid when I get out of law school? Will I be able to get a job and during that time, this was during the Great Recession too. So this was in '09, so it was an even bigger risk. So I started reading a ton of articles, just talk to people, and I realized, "Okay, law school is expensive. You need a scholarship, and the better the law school, the better the job prospects. So how are you going to get into the best law school you can without paying so much money?"

The path to that was the LSAT, so once I graduated, I took the year off just to spend more time with my son and my family and just work and study for the LSAT. I spent about a semester to study for the LSAT to get the highest score possible. Luckily I did, and then I applied to the law schools that ... And even picking the law school, I had to talk to my family because the first year was going to be tough. Would they be able to help me watch my son while I handled this first year, and I knew the best way to do it is I have to live on campus, and I wanted to go to UT Law School. Can I go to school in Austin and be away from my son Monday through Friday and come back on the weekends? My parents said, "Look, if that's what you want to do, we'll support you." But ultimately, that was not what I wanted to do, so I decided to apply to Houston schools. I applied to other big schools that I knew gave out bigger scholarships and then I took the scholarship offers to request a scholarship from U of H, the University of Houston Law Center, and they gave me a half scholarship and then I decided to go to U of H Law School.

Alexis Robertso...: You've just said so many things that are so helpful, particularly the -

Vi Tran: Pretty long-winded.

Alexis Robertso...: No, but it's so important, everything you said and the fact that you're deciding all of this during the Great Recession because you have to be really intentional about law school. I think I might be sort of the last ... I don't know if generation is fair, but that last group of people who went to law school and can be like blissfully naïve in the sense that it was that time where it was like law firm salaries are just going up, up and up and this is amazing. We had a little bit of an adjustment with like the dot com kind of early 2000s but we had encountered nothing like the Great Recession.

So just everything you did and the diligence, and also that ... What you just said about being able to take scholarship money and I actually did that a little bit with law school. I was able to say, "Hey, I got x from this school. Could you guys meet that?" Not everybody knows that that's something you can do, so I'm just

in awe and thank you so much for sharing all of that. We're going to move forward and we might go a little tiny bit long but I'm watching the clock but I want to hear about ... So what was law school like and then of course we have to talk about ... You started at Gardere which is now Foley but we're going to hit on those two things.

Vi Tran: Sure.

Alexis Robertso...: We have to before this podcast ends. We have to.

Vi Tran: Sure.

Alexis Robertso...: So yes. Tell me a little bit about law school.

Vi Tran: Law school, hopefully this one's a briefer story but law school went as planned. The first year was an all or nothing approach and my son was the source of motivation throughout college and the first year because I was away from him Monday through Friday and my parents are helping me watch him so don't waste your time. Use the most of it, you have your support system, your son's waiting for you, so you better not be wasting your time. That kept me diligent. I remember on the weekends I would take him on campus on Saturdays. We'd ride the bike around campus and then ride to the library where I'd study and then he'd sit next to me and play some computer games and then we'll walk to the food court, that was our Saturdays.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, and so he was like what, four or five at that point?

Vi Tran: Yes. He was five at the time, in kindergarten.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah. What you're saying is very similar to ... So a podcast that will air before yours is with a partner in Miami, Larry Perlman, who was actually a doctor. So he's a partner at Foley of course, he was a doctor before he was a lawyer but he started law school with like a two-year-old and soon a newborn and he said the exact same thing about this is time away from my family, I have to. It's disrespectful to them, so for you it's with your son, your parents, for me to use this time for anything other than to just really maximize everything I can with law school and learning and grades and all that.

Vi Tran: Yes, and that was the three years of law school. I did enjoy law school. I enjoyed meeting my classmates. I've made lifelong friends. I may not have gone to as many bars and trivia nights as I'd like, but that was okay.

Alexis Robertso...: Yep.

Vi Tran: But yeah, it was a great experience. I even got an internship before law school and during the first year of my law school through a customer at the restaurant that I worked at.

Alexis Robertso...: I love it.

Vi Tran: Because you have regular customers. So I've seen this one customer, I've chatted with him for the four years that I worked there. Whenever he comes in I'd say hello and chat with him and then I told him one day, "Hey, I'm going to law school. So this is my last week. Farewell, I enjoyed meeting you," and then he gave me his business card and said, "Hey."

Alexis Robertso...: Stay in touch.

Vi Tran: "If you want to intern in the legal department. Let me know." I called him, interned there, worked out very well. I learned so much there before law school and after my first year, and that's still a lifelong relationship.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah. That's an amazing story. I love that. Thank you for sharing that. So how ... I'm trying to decide if I want to get into the [HOU 00:35:51] Gardere or HOU Litigation. I don't know, maybe they overlap a bit but how is it that you ended up working for Gardere and then for those who aren't familiar Foley & Lardner merged with Gardere a couple years ago, so it's now Foley & Lardner, but that is your path to getting to Foley. So how was it that you ended up at Gardere?

Vi Tran: I went through the OCI process, the on-campus interviews and Gardere was one of the firms I interviewed with and I got an offer from there and another firm. So I split my summer between two firms and whenever I summered at Gardere, and this does go into the litigation part. Whenever I summered at Gardere, I split my summer to do both transaction and litigation, because I was not sure what I wanted to do and I realized I wanted to practice litigation because I'd have lunch with all the attorneys every week at the firm and I would ask the transactional attorneys, "What made you decide to do transactional instead of litigation?" The most common answer I got was, "Well I don't really like the adversarial nature of litigation." By the end of the summer, I thought about it and realized that I do like the adversarial nature of litigation -

Alexis Robertso...: Well I do.

Vi Tran: I'm going to go with litigation.

Alexis Robertso...: I really like that. I know the reason I became a litigator was because I understood litigation. I just couldn't understand what they were doing with corporate ... I was like, "I don't get it." But it's so funny to see, "And I did like the adversarial nature, so let's do it."

Vi Tran: I still do to this day.

Alexis Robertso...: I'm curious, what is your practice like? You've now been a practicing lawyer for six years, you touched on it a little bit but that was almost 40 years ago. So what kind of stuff do you work on and what do you enjoy about practice?

Vi Tran: Sure. So my focus is in energy litigation. Being in Houston, there's a lot of clients in the energy industry. With litigation, what you do day to day is controlled by the cases you're on and the schedule, the docket. When is your trial date, when is your discovery due, when are your expert reports due? So that controls my day to day if I have a dispositive motions deadline in three weeks then that's going to be my focus. Which is great because you can manage your schedule knowing what's coming ahead. So each day is just managing your schedule to check off the list on the things that are due and then move on to the next day.

Now cases, the reason I chose Gardere too whenever I summered was I got the impression that whenever they hire associates, they hire them for the purpose of grooming them to be partners. They hire associates who they see will become partners in the future. So they're invested in your future, so you get experience very early on, client interaction, depositions, hearings, trial. It's more of if you can handle it, you can do it.

Alexis Robertso...: Go ahead.

Vi Tran: Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah, and I think that's the same now that the firm is Foley, right?

Vi Tran: Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: Because I think the firms culturally were very, very similar.

Vi Tran: Yes. That's what I really liked about the merger too. The culture was the same and it felt seamless to me. Yes, so I ... In fact, I went to trial by my second year at Gardere.

Alexis Robertso...: Wow.

Vi Tran: Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: Yeah. That doesn't always happen. Although you know what Vi, I've realized ... I kind of skipped ahead, so I actually have to go back a little bit. Because you took us through really your tremendous journey and path. Everything that you encountered up until graduating from law school, getting that first job. I have to ask, was there ever a moment of ... I don't know if it would be of catharsis or where you just are like, "Wow. I did it." So I don't know if it's when you started that first day as a lawyer or when you walked the stage to get your JD but like a moment where you could just be like ... I don't know if it's breathing a sigh of relief, what was that like and when did it happen?

Vi Tran: Sure. So I'd say that moment was when I got an offer for the summer program at Gardere. Granted it wasn't in the bag completely, but it's certainly a

milestone. Because you have a job, at least for six weeks. So I'd say that was when I knew I did it.

Alexis Robertso...: That was a big one. How about your parents and all the support? I mean at any point were they ... I don't know if you guys are a family that would talk about this stuff, but they're also a main character in the story that you just shared but it's also just awesome that at some point they were like, "Wow, she did it."

Vi Tran: Yes. I think for them was when I graduated. When I walked across the stage and that I had a job lined up. That was it. But I would give them the milestones, "Hey, my grades are great. Hey, I'm getting job interviews. Hey, I got a job. I'm working the job. I haven't been fired."

Alexis Robertso...: That's fantastic. Well and as we wrap up our time I have to ask you the same question I ask everybody which is I'm wondering about your advice and I have to do a better job at asking this question, so be charitable and kind of respond whatever you want to say. But I've actually had a lot of law students that I have encountered over the over decade I've been in the legal industry and we don't hear stories like yours. We hear stories about that person who had the prototypical I'm going to college, I'm going to law school, not a care in the world, money doesn't matter, it's fine. But do you have advice to somebody about if you have a little bit of an alternative path that they too can do this, or what are your thoughts?

Vi Tran: Sure. The best advice I have is make those short-term goals and long-term goals. With being a single parent, if you look into the future and looking at how high the mountain you have to climb, it looks dreadful. So making what do I want to accomplish in 30 days, what do I want to accomplish in a year, your five year, your ten year, and during college, okay, well you need a high LSAT score. What do you need to get there? Within 30 days I'm going to take 10 practice tests. And keep focusing, once you check off all those short-term goals you make, you look back and you realize you've accomplished one big long-term goal. So I didn't really get to reflect on everything I checked off until I got the job and I looked back and it's like, "Oh, well I checked off all the boxes on what I said I was going to do." But that five term goal or the goal of getting into law school and getting a job is just more manageable if you make your list of tasks, the things that you need to do to get to that ultimate goal.

Alexis Robertso...: Well that big goal is fundamentally a bunch of tiny little steps.

Vi Tran: Yes.

Alexis Robertso...: And so what I hear you saying is to map those steps. What I have also heard you say over the last 45 minutes is that the experience being a bartender is really invaluable because -

Vi Tran: Yes. Yes, it was. It was just as invaluable as law school.



Alexis Robertso...: That's amazing. I think there's actually a book that's like The Wisdom from a Bartender. That's not the title but it's something like that. I totally understand why, when you're exposed to that many different types of people. Well with that we're going to wrap up and then I just have to ask of course if somebody listens to this has comments or questions for you, can they look you up on Foley's website and shoot you an email?

Vi Tran: Yes, of course.

Alexis Robertso...: Fantastic. Thank you so much for being on the show, Vi.

Vi Tran: No problem. Thanks for having me.

Alexis Robertso...: Thank you for listening to The Path & The Practice. I hope you enjoyed the conversation and join us again next time, and if you did enjoy it, please share it, subscribe, and leave us a review as your feedback on the podcast is important to us. Also, please note that this podcast may be considered attorney advertising and is made available by Foley & Lardner LLP for informational purposes only. This podcast does not create an attorney-client relationship. Any opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of Foley & Lardner LLP, its partners or its clients. Additionally, this podcast is not meant to convey the firm's legal position on behalf of any client, nor is it intended to convey specific legal advice.