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### **2022 BLSA Spring Alumni Weekend: Banquet Keynote and Chat with Danisha Hall '11 J.D.**

Black Law Students Association

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# 2022 BLSA Spring Alumni Weekend: Banquet Keynote and Chat with Danisha Hall '11 J.D.

March 26, 2022

Location: Duncan Student Center Ballroom, University of Notre Dame

Speakers in order of appearance: Monica Bell, BLSA President; a panel of four third-year BLSA member law students; Max H. Gaston, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Danisha Hall '11, keynote speaker; and Jazmyn Ferguson, BLSA Vice-president-elect and first-year student.

On March 26, 2022, Black Law Students Association alumni, current students, faculty, and friends gathered for a banquet during the 2022 BLSA Spring Alumni Weekend. This video shows the keynote address from Danisha Hall '11 J.D., director of US Leadership and Business Communications at McDonald's, followed by a chat with Hall and BLSA Vice President-Elect Jazmyn Ferguson, a first-year Notre Dame law student.

English (auto-generated)

0:04

okay so before we get started there are just a few acknowledgements that we absolutely just cannot leave tonight

0:09

without making first and foremost i would start like to start with my e-board from this year especially i want

0:15

to highlight josh paldino and malcolm chaka who are two board members who i genuinely would not have survived this

0:22

year without every time i needed something and asked yeah you all got to get up stand up

0:27

[Applause]

0:34

every time i asked them for anything they were there i never had to ask twice sometimes they would get things done

0:41

before i even realized they needed done so thank you so much for everything you've done for me personally and also

0:46

this organization as a whole and i would like to give them another round of applause [Applause]

0:56

and then there's another acknowledgement we would like to make that i think there are people here who are better suited to make it than i am so i would like to

1:02

call up our bolsa 3ls

1:08

[Applause]

1:25

i'm really glad all of us came up because everyone knows i'm going to start crying i can't talk that long because this is really important

1:32

we couldn't leave tonight without thanking professor veronica martinez and saying goodbye and congratulating her as

1:39

she goes off on her next endeavors thank you for everything you have done and see this is why i need the rest of them

1:47

okay um uh professor martinez completely changed

1:53

the trajectory of my career oh my goodness um if it wasn't for her

1:59

i would probably be going into the m a group and crying about having random big huge projects to do and instead i'm

2:06

going to be going into compliance and i'm so so grateful for her and being able to have taken at least four of her

2:13

five classes um and for all the 2l's and 3ls um

2:18

although you might not be able to take her class please stay in touch with her because she is truly the best resource ever and she's super funny while we

2:26

might not be able to have her in the law school anymore you can definitely keep up with her on twitter um my my favorite twitter post of hers

2:34

is when she made an at-home peloton and that was just one of my absolutes like

2:39

she not only is she beautiful and smart she's just like a real person she's a mom she's a wife she's a friend

2:46

and she's like someone we can all strive to be like

2:55

i just wanted to add one thing um professor martinez you've been balsa's advisor for the past two years now so

3:03

thank you so much for always being so supportive of the organization i know last year we talked about this

3:09

but again you have always done so much work behind the scenes and building us you know black women and you know black

3:16

students in general so thank you so much for always always supporting us even though

3:21

you know you're doing this behind the scenes so thank you

3:27

and just quickly and lastly we were talking about this earlier today but professor martinez is a role model to me

3:34

for many reasons but one in particular is her decisiveness which i hope to have

3:41

very soon i also have to tell you she said she sent me an email just saying congratulations when i was elected eic

3:48

and i have it framed because it means the world so thank you for setting an

3:54

example for just being present here at the law school and being engaged and involved with us we really couldn't be

4:00

all that we are without you thank you [Applause]

4:07

a little speech

4:14

[Music]

4:20

um

4:37

the balsa is a family and professor will always be a part of it don't ever leave us you're leaving to go

4:42

somewhere great but don't ever leave us i want to continue the evening by

4:47

bringing up someone else who is very dear to my heart in addition to being a wonderful member of our community

4:53

denisha hall was the sba president when i was a first year at notre dame she was

5:00

also the balsa president herself she's now the leader of she's the director of leadership and  
5:06

marketing at mcdonald's she's going to give us a wonderful keynote address and i'm so happy  
to invite her up right now

5:12

to speak welcome denisha [Applause]

5:27

okay raise this up a little bit good evening everyone

5:33

wow um i am touched to follow that wonderful

5:38

wonderful tribute to you uh small funny story about professor root

5:43

and i we are both members of alpha kappa alpha sorority incorporated and one time

5:48

we served on the undergraduate activities committee for our national organization and i met  
her at that time

5:55

you know on our national board so it was a great introduction i didn't know we were both  
applying to law school at the

6:00

time i wish i did but it's just wonderful to see the impact you've had here and

6:07

what these students are able to have because of you i mean wow i'm blown away and i'm so  
glad that the students got to

6:14

have that experience with you here so wonderful um i have to thank max again for this

6:20

invitation i'm just so honored when he asked me i was like

6:26

me um you know it's good to be home a notre dame has always been a near and

6:31

dear part of my heart of my life and uh you know i'm just honored that

6:37

you would think of me for this and i'm so proud of what you've been able to put together this is  
truly amazing this room is

6:43

beautiful it's powerful i can feel all of the things including the spirit here so thank you

6:50

i would really like to also thank all the balsa members current present future for any admitted  
students

6:56

here i don't know if there are any probably they are okay future thank all of you for the  
community that

7:02

continues here everybody plays a role in keeping it and i'm just so glad that

7:07

it's still here it's really fantastic i see some friends in the room from the past from the

7:12

present and i'm just so happy to see you here as well um

7:17

i have to thank my family who's not here with me tonight because you know i had to focus

7:22

my husband who's home with my kids marley noah and mark junior and also my sister joy who's here with

7:28

me she's also a notre dame alum notre dame law alum uh she is getting married

7:34

in just a few days and like literally before the like less than a month at this point so i'm grateful that she's

7:40

here just to have my back as always you know i said that i said this already but

7:46

i have to repeat this is home this is home and for whatever reason for some of us

7:52

including myself it may have been a little while since we came back home but this is home

7:57

and it reminds me who i am and i hope that it reminds all of you tonight who you are and whose you are

8:04

because this is home you know we've all had moments of struggle that we remember

8:10

being here it didn't always feel like home there were moments that did not feel

8:15

like home but there were so many common faces in the crowd who also felt the same way

8:22

and we didn't always know we were having the same struggles but once we came out on the other side it was like

8:27

you too you too so um you know my favorite scripture from the bible is from the book of

8:33

jeremiah you guys all know it for i know the plans i have for you declares the lord plans to prosper you

8:40

and not to harm you plans to give you hope and a future and i definitely stood on that while i

8:45

was at notre dame just knowing that no matter how hard things got and how hard

8:50

they may be for those of you who are still here and who are trying to fight the journey there is a plan and it has hope and it

8:57

has a future and it's a good future you know i've always been proud of the law school's tagline and i'm a

9:03

communicator as you heard so i love taglines i love brand and logos all of that

9:09

i am so proud of our tagline educating a different kind of lawyer

9:14

it's always helped me find meaning and today i want to share three reflections on what it means to be a

9:20

different kind of lawyer for me that i'd like to impart i think of number one the calling of a

9:26

different kind of lawyer number two the path of a different kind of lawyer

9:32

and finally the heart of a different kind of lawyer

9:37

starting with the calling as the daughter of panamanian immigrants no one in my family was a lawyer

9:44

my sister jolene our older sister did trailbase the trailblaze the path that became a lawyer before us

9:51

you know as an introverted person kind of growing up i did love people and i loved to kind of just

9:57

meet them where they were and understand them better so people always said you should go to law school you should be a politician but it was really a distant

10:02

plan for me and i'll talk about this more in the fireside chat with jasmine but it really wasn't there for me i had

10:09

other plans but after having a job pulled from underneath me like a rug after being an

10:15

inroads intern i knew i needed something more something that i could stand on

10:20

a foundation no one could take away from me and i thought maybe i should go to law school

10:25

so i spent two years applying and figuring it out and i really wanted to go to chicago where my sister was

10:32

but at a law school admissions fair i met someone who was from notre dame and she said you know if you're looking in

10:38

chicago you might as well drive the other extra half an hour hour and a half whatever to come up to notre dame and i

10:43

was like yeah okay yeah sure i wasn't really listening to her um but i said

10:49

you know what i'm gonna go for a visit anyway in chicago let's just make the drive up and you guys all know the rest of the

10:55

story because you have your own version of it you get on this campus and something happens

11:00

okay and i had an amazing experience with the admissions office that day some of you

11:05

guys might remember heather moorconey and marie benseman oh my gosh

11:12

i left still planning to go to chicago i was like yeah they're so nice but my spirit stayed on notre dame's campus and

11:18

never left it's still here and that's another reason why this is home you know

11:25

i also want to talk about the importance of home again you know never forget that

11:30

it started with all of us being called here in one way or another we were called to be at this campus at a

11:37

particular time in a particular space to make a particular impact on the people that we met

11:42

some of you are still doing that right now and for those of us that have maybe not been home we still have to do it so i'm charging

11:49

myself with that and i know like so many of my other classmates i stand ready to

11:55

support all of you dean cole included our faculty i am ready to do my part so let's

12:02

remember this is home okay we were called here the second part of being a different

12:07

different kind of lawyer is the path so dean cole shared a wonderful state of

12:13

the law school this morning which i was so just elated to hear about all the new things that you've done

12:19

and you know i think about the time that i graduated and how things were a lot different



12:25

it was during so i graduated in 2011. you all might remember the recession between about 2009 and 2011. those were

12:33

really rough years in the law the oci was very small there weren't a lot of opportunities i

12:39

felt and um you know i think me and my a lot of my classmates were kind of like this is what this

12:45

isn't what we were expecting this is not feeling so hot we're not feeling like these bright

12:50

people that have all these opportunities we were feeling down on the slums and you know many of us took different

12:56

paths as a result of what happened at that time i had offered to go to a regional law firm in dayton ohio but my my heart

13:03

wasn't there um but notre dame had my back notre dame had a bridge to practice

13:08

program i think that's what it's called now back then it didn't have a fancy name i think it was more of a oh crap our students

13:15

can't get jobs the numbers look really bad

13:20

we better figure something out to support them but they had our back so the little stipend we were able to go

13:27

into public interest to go into government and to have the support of the law school that was our paycheck

13:33

because the employers that we went to in those areas are like we can't pay you but you're working for free

13:38

your law school's paying for it cool come on so that's what we did and so i lived with

13:44

three other law students in chicago after graduation niary is in the room

13:50

we were sad y'all like seriously we were like we just graduated

13:57

i thought we were about to make all this money and have all this fame and like did we do something wrong i mean for the grades

14:03

i mean i mean i didn't okay yes i got that c but like was that the reason [Music]

14:08

was it me so much doubt so much doubt some maybe slight depression i'll be honest

14:14

but we made it and within a year we found our way i stayed in government because of that

14:20

and um that changed my life because when you're in government they're kind of like will you do this also you're a

14:26

lawyer that's cool but can you write okay cool you can write can you communicate oh you're a good

14:31

communicator too can you talk to the media can you do this can you do that can you figure out a new policy on this

14:37

or that and you guys know the answer yes we're taught to research and write and defend anything including our own fake

14:44

it till you make it so it opens a ton of doors and so we have different paths so i get to talk a little bit about that

14:51

tonight because i don't have a traditional path because what was not a great time turned into the story of my life

14:58

so the last part that i want to talk about before talking to jasmine the heart of a different kind of a lawyer

15:04

you know that's the common thread it unites us beyond being called on our path

15:09

it's what you find in the heart of the people from notre dame it's what made my spirit stay on this campus when i came

15:15

to visit the heart to make a difference the heart to look after others the heart of empathy

15:22

it connects us the heart of standing up for what matters being a voice to the voiceless even in

15:28

difficult times we all have our own stories of just being that face in the law school

15:34

being someone to just uplift a 1l who's in the library and they just don't get it you know i that was me someone

15:41

that'll come and just be like do you have this outline do you is there anything you need you know do you know do you ever get your

15:47

hair done you know whatever it would be all the people that came back are excellent alumni that were there

15:54

that said you're gonna make it do you need help with the job judge ann oh my gosh coming back every year to talk to

15:59

us having an appellate court justice talked to us every year we felt so special and

16:05

so seen and so even though we were the minority at times we always felt seen by our alumni and the faculty who looked

16:12

after us and that is the heart of a different kind of lawyer that is what makes this place special so

16:18

without further ado jasmine come join me let's have a conversation um

16:24

i just while she comes up i quickly you know i can't help but reflect on um the

16:30

confirmation hearings that are happening this past week with judge jackson brown um

16:37

brown jackson sorry um and you know that was some of that was hard

16:42

to watch you know it really was i'll tell this just a short story of when um i was at mcdonald's office

16:50

and it was when she was accepting her nomination initially from president biden i was just walking normally and i

16:55

didn't i wasn't i must have been so busy that i wasn't really following that they were announcing it this day and i stopped in front of the television and i

17:01

was just i was frozen and i became emotional seeing what i was seeing her standing between president

17:08

biden and a black vice president i was just floored i couldn't believe

17:13

what i was seeing so it doesn't matter what happened this week that happened this is happening we are

17:20

living this history times are changing the world is changing black lawyers black women lawyers we are here to stay

17:27

no matter what hat we're wearing because i'm kind of wearing double hats right now um but i just think we can all have

17:33

so much to learn from her example and i can't help but acknowledge that judge ann was there

17:39

to give the closing arguments on her hearing and we're just we're part of that history this is the  
notre dame law

17:46

school so thank you i look forward to our conversation [Applause]

18:00

all right well thank you so much denisha i'm really looking forward to this conversation and i  
think we just need to

18:07

give her another round of applause [Applause]

18:16

and are we good to go can you all hear me in the back thank you okay

18:23

all right perfect so i love how you spoke in your speech you talked about

18:28

having your calling having your path and having the heart and i'm so excited about that because  
i

18:35

have a lot of things that i want to touch on in those three areas you mentioned that you started  
not wanting

18:41

to go to law school people were telling you to go you're like no it's not really my thing that's my  
story as well so tell

18:48

us what was the moment that changed your mind that you know this is my calling

18:54

yeah you know i don't know that there was a single moment i would call it more of a collection  
of moments that we're

19:00

confirming that we all have where you're just like i don't know and you have that little bit of  
doubt but then something happens

19:06

that confirms it someone says wow really great job on x or wow you really rocked this you know  
it

19:13

was a lot of moments that happened for me but what i will say is i i feel like

19:19

law gives you like i said it's that foundation that no one can take from you and it has absolutely  
been what's opened

19:26

every door for me where i've been promoted to positions that i did not deserve honestly i'll just  
say that i

19:31

mean literally i didn't have the requisite on paper experience but the degree the name notre dame behind it

19:39

has opened those doors where people have taken a chance on me like you know what we believe you can do we're gonna we're

19:44

gonna take a shot on you so honestly that's what confirmed it for me that i had made the right decision i

19:49

love that you said you had some opportunities that you didn't meet the requirements for i think as a black

19:56

woman as a woman in general a lot of times we feel that we see something that we're interested in we see that list of

20:03

requirements and we're like oh well i don't have that gpa i don't have those class credits and we take ourselves out

20:09

of the game i love that you took the opportunity and said hey i might not have those requisites but at the end of

20:15

the day if they want me they want me exactly so you had a lot of experiences while you were here at notre dame where

20:22

you led the campus you were sba president you were boss of president so just kind of talk us through your

20:29

experience here at notre dame and what it meant for you to be able to lead in those capacities

20:34

well i can just say it was you know the first year will beat you up a little bit right

20:40

um not going to lie i was feeling a little just

20:46

i made it but i came back to all your kind of disillusioned like

20:51

are we is it going to be more of that or is it going to be different i was just i wasn't sure and uh some of my friends were like

20:58

we're going to london like we're not even taking that risk but i was really planted here i was like i don't want to

21:04

leave may have been that i had a now husband in chicago that i was like i'm not leaving for a whole semester

21:10

and you know i had a choice to make i was either going to lean in or i wasn't gonna make it because

21:17

emotionally i was kind of in a one foot in one foot out and you can't do things that way we know better right

21:24

so the minute that i decided to lean in things changed so balsa was there they

21:29

were like hey we need a president it's your turn the three y'all's are like get in line right

21:35

but um also i you know i had to let off some of the emotional

21:42

weight that i was carrying and i remember a key moment at the beginning of 21 year where i went in to

21:47

talk to peter horvath which a lot of you in the room remember peter he was i don't want to mess up his title

21:55

but he was overall like student activities all of the like a little bit of what max

22:00

does today but more broadly and um i just he said how are things going i was in his office talking about

22:07

some balsa stuff just because i had the face on and i started bawling and he was like

22:13

oh he's getting the tissues i'm so sorry what's wrong and i was like i just there was some really negative

22:19

experiences first year i was disinvited from a study group from these girls i don't know why

22:25

they just stopped emailing me and i saw them in the library without me [Music] and i didn't get the outline

22:32

i've just been struggling and i just i feel like i need more support

22:38

and it hurts you know it was the ugly cry and i i was like oh my god i can't believe i

22:43

did that but it lifted such a weight off my shoulders i had been carrying that and it made me not all the way committed

22:51

the minute i let that go i could move forward and i shared it with my family

22:57

my sister was like do you realize that the people that you think are staring at you might not be staring at you because you're different but because they're in

23:02

awe of you that you're the only one that looks like you in a room constantly but yet you carry yourself with grace

23:09

you show up every day even though you're not in their in crowd or their circle you're there every day

23:15

maybe they admire you and i started to change that narrative in my head i kept showing up and so third year well

23:23

leading into third year all of my friends are in london again so i just got super involved and i was like not thrilled with what

23:29

sba was doing and i was like it feels kind of like insider-ish and not inclusive and you know i'm gonna run

23:35

i had not even been involved any of the two years i had been there i was like i'm gonna run i can change things

23:41

i think we should be more inclusive and i have some ideas and you know what i found after winning is that other people felt the same way

23:48

they felt like it was too insider-ish and exclusive too they wanted more inclusion so

23:54

that's the heart of the notre dame lawyer there are more of us that have that heart black or white than you know

24:01

and those people are the ones that i met because i was kind of forced to go outside of my comfort zone when my friends all went to london

24:07

so that's that's how i led and after that you know i had the support of the faculty because i had built those

24:13

relationships because of dean newton at the time and peter and dwight king and

24:18

so many others who were just there and always had our back you said a lot of really important

24:24

things first you kind of mentioned the story of a moment where you felt like

24:30

you were left out of a study group didn't understand why and you just broke down and i think probably everyone else

24:37

everybody that's been a 1l actually has had a moment where they broke down and i had that experience last semester

24:44

someone said something in class that wasn't didn't sit well with me or really anyone

24:50

else in the classroom i left the class i didn't say anything about it i called

24:55

my mom i'm in my car like crying like i can't believe they said this i don't know what i'm supposed to do with this

25:01

and she told me my mother's a lawyer so she's had this experience and she said you need to find the times

25:07

that you're going to speak up for yourself and you need to really lean in to this experience that you're having

25:12

because at the end of the day you're at a great school you have a great opportunity so you need to figure out

25:18

where you're going to take those opportunities and run with them and with that it kind of sounded like

25:23

you were dealing with maybe a little bit of imposter syndrome kind of talk about where where else you

25:29

were seeing that happening within your experience and how you overcame it definitely i mean a lot of the rooms

25:36

that i walk into to this day this just just recently at work i was kind of asked to step in in a bit of an elevated

25:42

uh capacity on our senior leadership team to attend some meetings and i was in a room that was actually

25:48

had some diversity but it was still one of those um sorry intimidating class classroom type

25:55

settings that reminded me of notre dame and i was like okay it's just like nerdy name it's just like north name just

26:00

imagine that you're back in law school you got this you know but it requires acknowledging the moment

26:06

and sometimes it's like they say that you got to take the little you gotta take the cat out of the bag and be like what is it about this experience

26:12



that is making me feel this way and once you acknowledge it and you address it you can deal with it and one of my

26:19

favorite phrases is like do it afraid like sometimes you're you're afraid and you're waiting for the

26:25  
fear to disappear and meanwhile you're stuck but like the fear may not leave in time and you

26:31  
might miss that opportunity so do it afraid so what keep going so a lot of the times that's

26:38  
what i do i'm like i don't know keep going just keep swimming just you

26:43  
know and you just keep going and then you look around you're like oh i did that i did that because you're capable

26:49  
right we were trained excellently the way we think i mean you made it you belong here you heard that

26:55  
from jackie and other speakers this weekend you know you're in the room because you're qualified

27:01  
that's a prerequisite you're already in the room so stop you know having that conversation but we all do it and so i

27:06  
think it's okay to realize that you're doing it just keep going anyway i think that's really important how

27:13  
you are in the room because you deserve to be there we've had some conversations throughout the weekend how sometimes

27:18  
students may feel like students of color may feel like other people look at us

27:23  
in the sense of we're here because of affirmative action yes and we've probably all experienced that in any

27:30  
space because we're usually the minority and so with those experiences it's all

27:37  
sometimes it's hard to kind of get over that kind of think about okay well at the end of the day i'm here

27:42  
they can say what they want to but how do you really get to a place where you can just walk into a room you know

27:48  
people might be thinking one thing about you but you don't care and you're just gonna do what you need to do how do you

27:53

get to that point i think it's hard to not care right we're human we all have

27:59

doubts about ourselves even if people aren't showing it like other people are feeling these things as well so you have

28:05

to remember that in my role i work with a lot of executives and i can tell you they're always nervous

28:11

they feel the same emotions we feel before they speak before they go into a big meeting you see it like kind of the

28:16

shaking the sweating i mean presidents of companies ceos they all go through the same thing they're human so

28:22

you have to first acknowledge you're not alone and i think it helps to sometimes break the ice that way like

28:27

nervous what about you yeah i'm kind of nervous you know so you find a way to connect with people

28:33

the other thing i would say is you know whatever you do that kind of lifts you up whether that's like meditation or

28:39

prayer or whatever it is for you it's really important to go into those spaces prepared

28:45

because if you're also like super burned out and like stressed like you break easily

28:51

and like for me i was always like the last thing i want them to see me do is cry you know so i really have to prepare

28:56

myself mentally which starts with self-care which is so important with covet and everything we've been through the stress of law students like

29:03

lawyers period like you have to take care of yourself so whatever your daily practice is you have to do it and that's

29:09

advice that we can all take we're kind of in a situation where we're figuring out how do i balance

29:15

being a law student but oh wait i still have bills and like

29:20

no money to pay them or like i have things going on with my family so yeah it's it's always a struggle of like how

29:27

do i balance all of these things and still be able to do what i need to do totally and so

29:34

with that as you are preparing to transition to your career whether when you were starting looking for summer

29:40

opportunities how did you leverage the notre dame alumni network i think that's

29:45

something that you always hear when you're coming to the school is oh the alumni network the alumni

29:51

network and you're like all right yeah sure but like talk to us about how you really leverage

29:56

that network yeah so for me i'll admit i am not the greatest networker

30:02

big surprise like i like the moment like oh i'm having this great conversation i'm terrible about following up and keeping in touch it's not my

30:09

it's just not i'll mean to but like i just i move on to the next thing

30:14

so i always felt like can i call this person i think i saw them like three months ago and can i call them and i got

30:20

the advice from someone was like yes even if they don't remember you just bring them up to speed and make the call

30:25

so especially when you're going through those times of making a decision especially a big one that's the time that you really need to make the

30:32

decision not alone and with the network so for me it was the decision between going to dayton ohio and taking this other

30:38

path and i called um a notre dame alum and i was just it was it was sheila

30:44

i'm forgetting i'm looking at bob jones now because i'm like o'brien thank you i'm like i just had a

30:50

moment i'm looking i i know her name but she had come to campus she was amazing everybody's like oh you got to

30:56

get to know sheila brian she's so connected in chicago you can't go to chicago without knowing sheila brian i'd only had one conversation with her and

31:01

she's like yeah sure call me anytime but i'm here sitting this huge cross sitting at this huge crossroads and like can i call her yes yes the answer is yes like

31:09

the notre dame alumni network equals access to that yes pick up the phone i know you don't remember me

31:17

what's going on what's on your heart and she just spoke to me from the heart and she helped she's like girl follow your heart this is easy

31:24

really that's okay i can say no to the law firm she's like yes you know and i needed that so

31:30

um it's so so important to just realize that you are a part of this family don't

31:35

go through all that stuff in your head that we always do i don't have the connections i might i don't know them well enough or i didn't keep in touch

31:41

just use the network or keep in touch that's good too right yeah

31:47

that's also good so i want to get to talking about your early career you're a young attorney you're trying to figure

31:54

out what you want to do you've already thought about what's my calling here you told us how you turned down a

32:00

law firm and decided to do government work i want to hear some of the stories there

32:05

because i feel like with that experience you already said you'd be like what is going on what is this so what are the

32:11

stories what are the struggles that you had early on in your career what are the ups and the downs kind of talk us

32:17

through that yeah so i described the kind of the low moment of like going to chicago with without the full-time job i

32:23

did get a position at the illinois workers comp commission and it was like basically working for an appellate administrative law judge and it was all

32:30

writing and it was a very intense commissioner let's just say that it was red red red red red red red red red red

32:37

rewrite and i was like oh my gosh like i was just like i can't do this like i thought i was a good writer i had a good

32:44

legal good legal research grade and legal writing grade like what's happening and you know when you go into those

32:50

things you're gonna get a little haze like let's just be honest they're like you're new you think you know something you don't know something and the truth

32:56

is like you have to we have to take the ego off a little bit too and be like i have something to learn and you've got to go through the

33:02

process so you gotta you know we gotta stay humble along the way and i did so that experience however was extremely

33:08

molding to me even though it was difficult i can say and they say that if you are speaking facts it's not bragging

33:14

i'm a hell of a writer now you know because she really molded me

33:19

but i knew that i wanted to do something that involved a little bit more of my people skills so i then ended up at the illinois commerce commission which

33:26

regulates utility companies in illinois and it was there that i really started to find my career and they just believed

33:32

in me they gave me every opportunity i worked for a black commissioner at first and she was like let's do this and we

33:38

like you know got into issues of diversity and inclusion we started a lot of new programs on policies in illinois

33:45

supplier diversity you know ensuring that all the utilities were spending the right amount of money or more money

33:51

with minority-owned businesses and uh through that they were like you know we need to create our own

33:57

initiative like the chairman was like we need we can't be telling these guys what to do if we're not doing it ourselves like

34:02

denisha you need to be the director of our office of diversity and inclusion i was like okay i can do that sure

34:08

research called my law school network you called a lot of my friends black brown white all of them what do i do

34:14

they're like you got this like send you some stuff here's this i know a chief diversity officer hears that you

34:20

start putting your stuff together and you're like okay i'm gonna make a strategy have a plan what is how does it look guys like good you're good present

34:26

it and they're like this is great go do it and you just go do it right you use your resources along the way so um

34:32

that's really what changed my trajectory and through there i then became our bureau chief of external affairs so i

34:38

was overseeing all of our communications our government relations and just things that lawyers can do because it involves

34:45

working with people advocacy talking to the media and so suddenly you're like okay i can do this um and i

34:52

followed that to a director of corporate communications role at a utility company and then that led to mcdonald's

34:59

so we talked earlier and realized that we have a common connection

35:04

so when you were at illinois commerce commission kind of talk about what it

35:09

was like to have a leader that was a black woman because i know for us we're probably going to go into careers where

35:16

our leaders are not people that look like us and that's really what the space the field of law is looking like right

35:22

now so from your experience how did that impact you and kind of figuring out what

35:27

exactly you wanted to do and where you wanted to take your career yeah i'm so glad that she pushed me to

35:33

think outside of like what's your next move because i was just like i have your back i have your back she was like okay yeah

35:40

just do a good job but like that was like kind of how i came in like of like i felt so in awe like

35:47

you know and i worked i mean i've worked worked hard for every leader that i've had so it's not like i've ever given less but i had this

35:54

sense of you know loyalty but i've also heard it said like be loyal to your work

36:00

be loyal to your reputation so i learned in that time like yes be excellent make sure she's taken care of she looks great

36:06

but also make sure you're building your own reputation your own skills so i had to learn that along the way because i

36:12

think it first was so like glued but then i was like okay she's like how are you building your personal brand and

36:17

what are you doing for yourself and i was like oh i have some work to do in that area so that's what i would say on that it's like obviously do an amazing job but for

36:24

anyone you work for you never want especially communications because we can be seen as like the person behind the

36:29

person like oh the speechless you're always attached to them and you're walking around with them

36:34

but suddenly people don't see you they're like all right i see your leader and i know you work for them but like what about

36:40

you so it's really important that along the way you're building your reputation maybe you're working for you know

36:46

another role where that's the case um it's important that you're taking the time to network internally put yourself

36:51

out there use social media linkedin is pretty amazing you know you if they say if you don't post about it didn't happen

36:57

now right like especially in a professional setting which is hard for us we don't like talking about ourselves

37:03

i admit it's hard for me but again if it's a fact you're not bragging it's the truth you deserve to share it with the

37:10

rest of the world so that's your communications advice of the day i love that i actually worked on

37:15

linkedin so i love when people love linkedin

37:21

speaking of linkedin you kind of talked about your leader was telling you how are you building your brand yeah you're

37:27

in a position with the illinois commerce commission you're getting these new positions and having the opportunity to

37:34

lead in other aspects how did you then make the transition from

37:40

the typical legal practice to realizing okay i want to do something different i want to go into the communication space

37:46

how did you make that jump yeah honestly it wasn't a choice it was like an opportunity presented itself

37:52

and at first i was like no no i'll just do it temporarily so somebody went on a maternity leave and they were like we need you to cover temporarily and i was

37:59

like okay i'll do it temporarily but i don't want the roll and then i was like wait a minute i get to lead a team of 20 people

38:06

what am i missing here like wait a minute let me think about this and then you realize i always say people say what are your

38:12

biggest aspirations i've been asked this in job interviews like what are your aspirations my response is always

38:18

i have a responsibility to have no limit to my aspirations i have been given an opportunity i have

38:25

been blessed with an education with the resources to do these things i owe it to

38:30

the little girls that look up to me that look like me to go as far as i can go and so i had to

38:36

break that mindset of like no no this is my lane another quote that a friend of mine said was like stay in your lane but use your

38:43

brain you know always think about the next step always think about what opportunities you're really going to get

38:49

so it's important along the way to do that and i did and i think it helped me to just

38:54

expand because the opportunities will come the question is are you ready you know so you have to stay ready so

39:01



that when the opportunity comes you're not like oh let me get it together like you know you got to stay ready and those

39:06

opportunities will keep coming yeah my mother always says stay ready so you don't have to get ready yeah yeah

39:12

totally with that how did how did your notre dame

39:17

connections kind of play into your career trajectory as you had an opportunity that came to you were there

39:24

any other spaces as you've even getting to now in your new position where your

39:30

notre dame connections have come to play yeah so honestly notre dame has always been there and i would say that the most

39:36

important connections have been with the people that uplift me when i'm thinking about the next move i'll ask them what do you think about

39:42

this and they'll kind of be that this is amazing like do it or like you can you know they've given me so much confidence

39:49

that's a big source of it for me as you know for example i've gone into professor jones's class into the chicago

39:54

program and meeting students and realizing that like hey what you do is kind of cool you know

40:00

when you have those moments of like well i left a legal career and i'm kind of in communications now

40:05

and then other lawyers being like tell me how you got out of the law

40:11

like oh what happened and now i have people reaching out to me

40:16

like tell me how you made the pivot like how did you do it and i'm like i was in government and i didn't have a job at

40:21

one time so i just you know like but you realize people are interested in different paths

40:27

in the law and outside of the law and you would be surprised how these corporations they're like oh we have

40:32

lawyers doing this we have lawyers doing that you know leading business areas in community we're doing we're everywhere i

40:38

meet lawyers all the time in non-legal roles but i didn't know that as a law student you know so i feel like it's

40:44

been more that for me in terms of just people really affirming you're making the right move

40:50

you don't want to bill hours like you're making the right move so at least that was my situation when you're in law

40:56

school you always get the question of are you going transactional are you going litigation it's like all right

41:02

like i'm just trying to figure out what my reading is for tomorrow right right so

41:08

kind of tell us let us know what are the other things that we can do with our law degree oh my

41:13

gosh so operations is a huge area every major fortune 500 company has a huge

41:20

operations organization and they need someone that can deal with things like compliance or like well how do we make

41:26

decisions how do we you know there's so many things they're not just in the general counsel's office so

41:31

communications is a big one i think because um there's so many parallels you're doing advocacy but in a different

41:38

setting so you're not advocating on you know the trial floor you're advocating usually through a campaign a brand

41:45

message a commercial a marketing scheme something like that we're constantly trying to do internal

41:51

communications there are a ton of legal issues especially that came up with covid how are we communicating with our

41:56

employees about our policies me being able to have that legal mind to read you know read through the lines and ask

42:03

questions like i don't think we can say that did we run that by the general counsel's office and they're like oh my gosh good call

42:09

you know like are you sure you want to say that in public i don't think you want to say that you need to get that check with legal and i don't i try not

42:16

to step on legal's toes because they'll be like that's our call to make move out of the

42:22

way right i just wanted to copy you on this because i think you should see this and

42:27

just let me know your professional expertise so um there's a lot of roles though i would just say business has

42:33

them government definitely has them non-profits the nonprofit sector is huge and there are attorneys doing the work

42:40

there a lot of ceos are lawyers a lot so how did they

42:46

how did they pivot like you follow their paths that's another thing that i use linkedin for like i just like how did you get

42:52

and i just like looked up oh interesting so like doing the research to see how people make these moves and realizing

42:58

that you you too can make them really opens your horizons i love to hear that you say

43:03

that that you've looked at people's linkedin because i was looking at yours like so how did she get to mcdonald's

43:13

since we're on the subject talk to us now what is your experience like at mcdonald's you've been there for about

43:19

six months now i know last night you were on a late call what's the experience been like

43:25

okay so i left a non-competitive industry the utilities where it's like

43:30

any competition we just get to sell electricity or sell natural gas in

43:36

my case and it's not competitive mcdonald's on the other hand highly competitive industry highly

43:42

competitive so it feels totally different utilities aren't really changing mcdonald's is changing all the time

43:47

literally they're like we have to stay 100 steps ahead of our competitors so that the pace of change is constant um i

43:55

support our president of the u.s and all of his speeches all of his everything that he does i don't know how

44:02

he does it he's out there literally like i don't know 30 times a week literally speaking doing things

44:09

we're planning right now a convention for our global system so all of our franchisees our suppliers and our

44:14

employees that will take place in orlando over 12 000 people getting together to talk about the

44:20  
business and when you realize the scale of mcdonald's like so i'll just give you a glimpse of what i'll be doing next

44:25

week we have christina aguilera opening our u.s session we have bruno mars doing the final night concert we have um and

44:32

i'm not just saying i mean it sounds glamorous but trust me there's some work involved under this but you realize oh my gosh the scale

44:39

of now what's possible of what i can impact has grown and that's what i feel grateful about of course i give all

44:44

honor and glory to god because i'm still being used yes but what i'll say is that what i realized is that now i'm in a

44:50

place where i can do more so use me more because the capacity at what mcdonald's does the

44:56  
scale of what we can reach the lives that we touch every day they say 80 of the population goes to

45:02

mcdonald's at least one time a year 80 percent of the population

45:08

so we have a huge influence so i'm looking forward to what i can do

45:16

so with that i love that you mentioned how you know god is still using you

45:22

so kind of talk to us about how do you balance your faith

45:27

with your demanding career and having a family talk to us about that balance

45:33

you know i've heard someone say like work-life balance is fake it's more about integration and i

45:40

would say that's true you know you have to deal with whatever the priority is at the moment and i know

45:46

so many of you in here know this like okay have a sick kid this is my priority okay work really needs me for this this

45:53

is my priority and of course the other days you're really just trying to you know map things out the best you can

45:59

using your resources having a huge support network of either family or caretakers

46:05

you know having a circle of people that you can call when you do feel like you're breaking down it's not necessarily easy but it is

46:11

possible and certainly my faith has played a huge role in that for me every day i start

46:18

on my knees just like give me the strength you know lord please help me get through this day watch over my

46:23

family you know that's that's that's what it is for me um i once had a moment of like

46:29

do i i wear a cross normally i couldn't because of the dress today but i wear a cross every day and um i had one moment

46:36

where i was going into like a different environment for a media interview and i thought about putting it

46:41

under my shirt and i stopped myself like why am i doing this i didn't i took it back out and i later had

46:47

people comment as i was leaving one of my roles and say we really appreciate how open you were about your faith it

46:53

really helped to just see who you are and kind of your why and even if we didn't feel like we were at the same

46:59

place it helped me be more of myself so they say today it really is important to bring your authentic self to work it's

47:06

true i mean companies realize that diversity is not just

47:11

an affirmative action thing it is a business competitive advantage they have done the numbers trust me they know that

47:17

you coming in being yourself is going to make them more money so you really have to embrace who you are i

47:24

love to hear that you've had the experience of being able to bring your whole self to work that's something that

47:30

i think now with company culture being so big something that as we're looking to go into our

47:36

career what we want to see and so i see max over there and i'm pretty sure he's

47:42

telling us to wrap it up so no one upset me with that just my final question for you you've

47:49

done a lot of amazing things in your career so far what is your next step i know you just

47:56

got to mcdonald's but yes what do you see yourself doing in your future

48:02

i can't see the next thing yet i'm really focused just on doing an

48:07

excellent job because i didn't talk about this but of course you have to do a good job like you have

48:12

to you really have to do work with excellence and i have ensured that in everything i've gotten to do

48:18

nobody could say well she really mailed it in for this like that's not out there on my record and if you have your bad

48:24

days if something happens because things do happen go in there and talk about it like i you know i had a family situation i'm

48:30

dealing with something right now don't try to hide it because everybody's noticing like you're not showing up so

48:36

if you're going to have that happen you better let the record reflect there is a problem here's a reason there

48:42

was a reason here like let me be the one to address this don't i don't want you telling my story so excellence is required so i'm working

48:50

on my excellence i'm learning a new environment a new business a new language and i'm going to continue to focus on

48:56

being the best i can i love that i'm working on my excellence well thank you so much for your thank

49:03

you i'm so grateful we were able to have this conversation thank you

49:16

denisha before you step off the donation before you step off the stage um

49:21

i have to say first of all you're already excellent uh and thank you so much for everything

49:28

that you've done we do have a small token of gratitude for you thank you um i just wanted to hit it under here

49:40

oh thank you thank you so much

49:49

in addition to denisha there are so many people who really helped to make this weekend and this banquet possible and

49:56

one of them who i think is probably the definition of an unsung hero is

50:02

ladon brunette um ladawn has been here from the start of this to the end of it i'm getting a lot of pats

50:09

on my back so much of this was her directing me with nobody else really seeing that happening because she was

50:16

the balsa president as well she had a vision for what this was and she wanted to restore it and so

50:21

i thank her for for everything that you've done and

50:26

we got something for you

50:54

jackie wilson unfortunately couldn't be with us this evening but to those of you who were here last night you saw how

51:00

impressive and how inspiring jackie is uh thank you to him uh this is on video so

51:06

i know he'll see it um and also to mari miller mario got your gift but

51:13

uh this couldn't happen without you this is a guy that you can text right away when you need something and he responds

51:19

to you right away with a solution or with some kind of a help and i think that you know you to me you and ladon

51:25

together are such a perfect example of what the balsa is and what the balsa should be it's a family of people who

51:31

come in and show up to help you and to support you in any situation um it doesn't matter  
51:36

how much time has passed since you've been back to notre dame it doesn't matter how much  
time has passed since you've spoken to each other when you  
51:42

come together again you're right back where you were you're you're a family and that's what  
this is and i'm so  
51:47

excited to see this community grow i really hope that you all have enjoyed this weekend with  
all of us i wanna just  
51:52

say before we wrap up um thank you to our three l's  
51:59

we're gonna miss you so much but we're so excited for where you're going next what you're  
going to do  
52:04

you're in a community of black excellence at notre dame and you're about to enter into an  
alumni community  
52:11

of black excellence at notre dame we love you you are already excellent and  
52:19

you're going to do great all of you are going to do great um and before we wrap up i know  
we're way  
52:26

over time so thank you all for bearing with us i do want to invite jakeem already she came up  
one more time uh i  
52:33

had a lot of lovely things to say about monica because i think the world of her but i'm not the  
only one who thinks the  
52:39

world of her so jakeem come up here  
52:45

and now she's already tearing up but as max previously said i believe  
52:51

that monica is probably one of if not the most unsung  
52:57

heroes of our school i've seen the late nights in the early mornings of her doing  
53:02

whatever needed to happen to push balsa forward making the time at the beginning of the  
school year to meet with everyone  
53:09

else and just making herself available for whatever our needs were actually being responsive  
53:15



when it came down to programming when we said that we wanted to see something she made it happen

53:20

and you know just on a personal note monica saw something in me monica's younger than me

53:26

by a few months but she's been one of my mentors in this space because she saw

53:32

leadership in me honestly and the reason why i'm standing in the space today is because she decided to take the time to

53:38

invest in me to trust me with certain relationships to say hey you run point on this meeting you develop this program

53:43

you do you know you just take the lead so because of that we just can't let this night go by

53:49

without appreciating her giving her one huge of course round of applause please join me

53:55

[Applause] and we do have a small token of appreciation

54:19

[Applause]

54:26

we hope you all have enjoyed this wonderful evening we want to say thank you to fagri drinker and to brian cave

54:32

for helping to sponsor this entire weekend uh brian cave sponsored our welcome reception fakery drinker is

54:37

sponsoring our uh our farewell brunch tomorrow i hope we'll see a lot of you there um we've kept you for as long as i

54:45

think we should have kept you we kept you a little bit over that but we're looking forward to the fall we've got a couple of events coming up in the fall

54:51

we've got balsa fall weekend we have a homecoming uh homecoming weekend with a big sports law panel full of a black

54:57

panel of really really preeminent leaders from notre dame it'll be open to the university it's gonna be a can't

55:02

miss event so i hope to see a lot of you there you'll be seeing me again in your inbox so i hope

55:08

you don't get annoyed about that and thank you again so much for joining us it's been wonderful