

PREFACE

My Story as a Millennial Lawyer

In my home office, a plaque hangs on the wall with an Italian inscription: “La Bedont Famiglia: Una Linea Sangue del L’Avvocati” (The Bedont Family: A Blood Line of Lawyers). On the plaque are the names of the lawyers from the Italian side of my mom’s family, the Bedont family. The last entry on the plaque is mine: “John Patrick Box, Jr., Georgetown University, 2007.” The plaque is a family treasure, reminding me that the practice of law is a noble endeavor that flows through the blood of my family. The story begins with my grandfather, the patriarch of the Bedont family in America.

My grandfather, Attilio W. Bedont, was the son of Italian immigrants. He grew up in the coal mining community of Kemmerer, Wyoming, with a humble floor beneath his feet, the smell of coal hanging thick in the air, and the allure of American exceptionalism in his young, idealistic mind. A smart kid, he graduated from high school at 16, but his family didn’t have the resources to send their bright, precocious son to college. Instead, he joined his father in the coal mine, where he worked for two years before a most fortuitous event occurred: he severed parts of two fingers in a conveyor belt accident. As a member of the coal miners’ union (under a contract no doubt negotiated by a good lawyer), he received workers’ compensation to offset the financial impact of his accident. He took that money straight to the University of Wyoming, where he enrolled as an 18-year-old freshman.

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My grandfather arrived on campus with the dream of becoming a lawyer, the highest and most prestigious calling for which he believed a young man could reach. Unfortunately, he never realized his dream of becoming a lawyer. Two years into his college career, World War II broke out, and my grandfather served as a military policeman for the war's duration. As fortune would have it, he met my grandmother at his training post in South Carolina. After the war, he had a family to support, and spending his post-war days in school was simply not an option. After briefly opening up his own flower shop, he spent the next 50-plus years selling insurance products across the state of Wyoming to provide for his family. When he began his career, he would look for houses with curtains hanging in the windows, a signal that the homeowner might be able to afford life insurance. Following his savvy instincts, he logged tens of thousands of miles every year on the road, meeting folks, fulfilling their insurance needs, and earning national recognition as a top insurance salesman.

But he never stopped dreaming of a life in the law. To him, being an attorney was the culmination of the American Dream, a dream that he shared with his kids and grandkids. My grandfather passed away from cancer in 2005 during my first year at Georgetown University Law Center. The last time I saw him, he held the back of my neck like he had for so many years and pulled me in close. He was sick and his time was short. He looked into my eyes, tears welling up in his, and told me that he would be at my law school graduation. We both knew that he wouldn't make it two more years, but we held on to that moment, that promise, and each other.

On that day in May 2007 when I graduated from Georgetown Law, I thought back to my grandfather's promise—the promise of the son of Italian immigrants who dreamed of becoming a lawyer himself. I smiled to myself, knowing how proud he would be of me, standing on stage, receiving my diploma, and ready to start my legal career. Walking back to the parking lot with my wife and parents after the graduation ceremony, we passed a rose bush. My mom, whose love for flowers came from her father, remarked at how beautiful the roses were. In that moment, I realized that my grandfather—the man who once opened up a flower shop,

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who painstakingly planted and cultivated a rose garden in his own backyard in Wyoming, who dreamed of becoming a lawyer himself—had kept his promise to me. In his own way, my grandfather attended my graduation from law school.

And so, you see, the plaque that hangs on my wall is a family treasure. It lists the lawyers in the Bedont family who followed my grandfather's dream. There are empty spaces on the plaque for the next people in the Bedont family bloodline who pursue a career in law. One day, the plaque will list a new name and adorn the wall of that family member. It will remind the next recipient of our family's heritage and inspire that person to see the nobility and hope wrapped up in practicing law.

As I embarked upon my legal career in 2007, I held on to my grandfather's idealism—his belief in the law to enact social change, to improve our own lots and those of neighbors, to form the backbone of a free and democratic society. I did not become a lawyer lightly. I believe in the law as a noble and worthwhile profession. And that makes it all the more remarkable that I, the grandson of an Italian American man who so loved the law, left the legal profession just six years into my career (more on that story to come).

My grandfather's story may be unique. His love and belief in the law may be unique. And my love for my grandfather and his idealism may be unique. But my story, as the successful but unfulfilled young lawyer, is not entirely unique. My story is part of a broader arc of experiences shared by Millennials who pursue legal careers. I offer my experiences to help frame the generational divides that lead to misunderstandings between associates and partners, to illuminate the Millennial mindset, and to help law firms understand how to connect with, motivate, and retain the very best Millennial attorneys.

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You know my grandfather's story, so now let me briefly tell you the path of my legal career. On paper and in practice, I was a great lawyer. I graduated *cum laude* from Georgetown University Law Center where I served as executive editor of the *Georgetown Law Journal*. As a member of the journal's senior board, I worked closely with bright legal minds,

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helping them craft their articles and double-checking every single citation along the way. The work was sometimes inspiring, sometimes tedious, but always important. I learned how to craft a legal argument, find the best support possible, and spot the difference between an italicized and romanized comma (hey, I told you the work was sometimes tedious).

Most importantly, however, I found a community at the journal. To us, it was a place where we felt at home together, where we supported each other, and where we cared deeply about our journal's legacy. For much of my third year on the journal, we debated the future of the publication's membership—notably its lack of diversity, in particular among African American students. Although Georgetown Law boasts a diverse student body, our journal membership failed to reflect that diversity. After much discussion and debate, we crafted diversity criteria for part of the journal's annual membership selection. We worked with the school's administration to approve our new criteria, made Equal Protection arguments, and left the journal—we hope—with a legacy of diverse inclusion that will improve the community and the publication's mission for years to come.

In part because of my work at the journal, I left Georgetown with my grandfather's optimism buoying my legal dreams. I was confident that I had chosen the right profession. I suspected that I would be at my first law firm, a large international firm in Washington, DC, for many years. In reality, I practiced law for six years at three different law firms in Washington, DC, and Denver, Colorado. You could call me the “Goldilocks” of associates—trying on for size a large international firm in DC, a large regional firm in Denver, and a small regional firm in Denver (the last of which merged into a mid-sized national firm during my final months there). My practice focused on government investigations, commercial litigation, and real estate transactional work.

Unlike Goldilocks, I did not find the right “temperature” at any of these law firms. I worked at each firm for roughly two years (which, coincidentally, is the national average for a Millennial in a new job¹). At each firm, I quickly earned the trust of partners, and clients would often

1. Jeanne Meister, *Job Hopping Is the “New Normal” for Millennials*, FORBES, Aug. 14, 2012.

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call me directly about ongoing and new cases. Clients knew that I would usually answer the phone and appreciated my quick recall of facts and law. And, yes, I could make a legal brief sing. In addition to writing the bulk of every brief in every case I worked on, I was often pulled to write important briefs on cases that weren't even mine. In return for my long hours and excellent work, I received a six-figure salary, a sizable yearly bonus, and lots of "attaboys." But none of it was enough to sustain me. I pulled the plug on firms whose partners told me they were looking for "the next J.P. Box" when hiring new associates.

After six years as a lawyer at small, medium, and large law firms, I switched gears and cofounded a merino wool children's apparel company called Chasing Windmills. Officially launched in the summer of 2015 with my cofounder and wife, Sarah, we have been able to share the natural goodness of merino wool with families in more than 20 countries, partner with small shops and brands we have long admired, commit to operating on a carbon-neutral basis, and connect with other parents striving to live adventurous lives with their little ones. After chasing the dreams of my grandfather for all those years, I finally found meaningful fulfillment in an entirely new endeavor.

As time passed, however, I could not shake a question that disappointed partners asked me at each of my three law firms: "Why are you leaving us?" The question "Why?" was quickly followed by: "What could we have done differently?" In fact, at one firm, a senior partner took me out to lunch and employed the Socratic method for two hours to try to change my mind.² At the time, I did not have great answers to those questions. I was simply following an instinct within me, a feeling in my gut, that my journey did not end at that particular firm. Nonetheless, those questions hung with me into my career rebirth as an entrepreneur. I believe those questions haunted me because I needed to answer, for myself, why I had not found fulfillment in a calling so important to me and my grandfather. What was it about practicing law that did not nourish my heart, mind, and soul?

2. Throughout this book, I share anecdotes from my years practicing law, including the good and the challenging times in my life as a young attorney. However, I have chosen not to use the actual names of the partners who appear in these stories, and therefore all names in this book (except, of course, my own) do not reflect the person's actual name.

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As with many things in life, the passage of time lent me perspective. I realized that my story—the successful yet unfulfilled associate—is part of a bigger story shared nationwide by Millennial lawyers (aged 36 and younger as of 2017). It is a story about how generational misunderstandings undermine cohesiveness and productivity at law firms. It is a story of Millennials jumping from firm to firm every few years searching for the right fit, all at great expense to law firms, which spend significant time and resources on their recruitment and training. It is a story of Millennials like me opting out of law altogether to start their own companies or go into other fields. It is a story that led me to my second career rebirth: advising law firms on how to motivate and retain Millennial associates like myself.

The good news is that the story does not have to end with your best Millennial associates walking away. Law firms can attract, motivate, and retain Millennial associates by creating environments where everyone—from Boomer and Generation X partners to Millennial associates—works together effectively and harmoniously. This book explores how firms can transform generational divides into strengths; how they can unlock the talents and passions of a new generation of lawyers eager to contribute; and how they can boost their firm's retention rates and productivity by simply understanding the Millennial mindset. Inspiring the next generation of young attorneys will not cost your firm big bucks either. You do not need to spend millions of dollars renovating your office space to recreate Google's campus (although establishing communal space, even in a law library or lunchroom, is important). And you do not need to lavish your associates with bigger salaries and bonuses (in fact, as I will discuss later on, seeking to inspire loyalty and hard work through higher pay may backfire for this generation).

So, what can a law firm do to make a Millennial attorney feel inspired and ready to produce? Simply stated, it will require a mindset change and a commitment to understanding commonly held Millennial values. If you understand what makes a Millennial tick, you will be on your way to establishing strong relationships with your firm's younger attorneys that will benefit you and your firm for years to come. With Millennials poised

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to represent nearly half of the U.S. workforce by 2020,³ it is critical for law firms to crack the Millennial code.

My wife has asked me: What if a law firm followed your advice completely? Would you go back to practicing law? My answer is no. I love what I do now as an entrepreneur and consultant. But if you had asked me that question when I was still practicing law, I would probably still be a lawyer today. In my six years practicing law, I lived through the good and not-so-good practices of law firm life, and I will share those experiences in this book to highlight the Millennial-friendly and Millennial-repellant practices at law firms nationwide. If you are reading this book, you care deeply about the future of the law and its youngest generation, and my goal is to share my experiences and research to help strengthen your firm's ability to get the most out of this new generation of attorneys.

So you see, the research, advice, and experiences shared in this book are not coming from an outsider who never practiced law or a person who belongs to a different generation. I am a lawyer, licensed in Colorado and Washington, DC. I am a Millennial born in 1981. I have lived the life and done the research. Although generational perspectives and client pressures present unique challenges for law firms, the future of the legal profession is bright—especially for those law firms willing to pivot in the direction of Millennials. This pivot will not require law firms to abandon completely the founding principles that have served the legal industry so well for generations, but it will require flexibility to connect with, and unlock the talent, passion, and productivity of, a new generation. The law firm of the future is one where lawyers of all generations work together in harmony, united by a common purpose, a healthy culture, and a commitment to law's nobility. Sure, that might sound idealistic, but that is lesson number one about us Millennials: we dream big.

3. Landon Dowdy, *Why Do Millennials Get Such a Bad Rap at Work?*, CNBC, April 21, 2015.