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Transforming into an International Lawyer

by Susan D. Franck

I started out as a simple farm girl in Iowa, feeding pigs and walking soy beans. But somewhere along the way, I transformed into an international lawyer.

In 1997, before the days of iPods and MySpace, I was a 3L at the University of Minnesota Law School. As I wondered whether a career in international arbitration was just an idle fantasy, I signed up for the International Law Students Association (ILSA) Fall Conference that was conveniently being held in Minneapolis. I attended a panel on international arbitration and ended up meeting an attorney from Exxon-Mobil who encouraged me to pursue my passion.

Less than a decade later, my experience at the 2006 ILSA Fall Conference was rather different – and not simply because the venue was on the other side of the Mississippi at Hamline University. The key distinction was that I was the panelist speaking about international dispute resolution and attending a lunch to encourage students to pursue international legal careers.

That 1997 ILSA Conference impacted the ultimate trajectory of my career. It gave me the courage to follow my dreams and helped me establish a network that turned those dreams into reality. It led me to a Fulbright Grant in London, England, a job with an international law firm in Washington, DC, another job in London, England, and my current career in the legal academy where I can pursue scholarship related to international law and dispute resolution.

When asked about how to pursue an international legal career, the best advice I can give is: follow your passion. Life is short. Do what you love. If you stop loving it, think about what else makes you happy and then pursue it with your whole heart and mind.

But desire is only part of the battle. There are other simple steps to translate dreams into reality.

First, join professional groups and build a network with your peers. Groups such as ILSA are a great starting point. There are, however, others. The American Society of International Law (ASIL), the International Law Section of the American Bar

Association (ABA), the International Bar Association (IBA), and the Institute for Transnational Arbitration (ITA) also provide useful opportunities. Young professionals groups – such as the London Court of International Arbitration's Young International Arbitrators Group (YIAG) – are also a good place to make great friends, have fun and grow meaningful professional relationships.

Second, take the time to educate yourself thoroughly in your chosen area. Gain credibility by reading the literature in your area, attending conferences, doing a fellowship or getting an advanced degree (such as an LL.M. or S.J.D.). This serves multiple purposes. Showing your dedication to your field makes a positive impression. It helps you understand the subtleties in the doctrine, policies, politics and practical reality of your area. It also increases your marketability. Employers looking for someone with your skill set can spend less time training you; this translates into a lower opportunity cost for hiring you and gives employers faith that you can hit the ground running.

Third, write an article in your chosen area. It will enhance your professional reputation, and it looks great on a résumé. It also demonstrates you are serious and committed to your chosen substantive area. Writing an article can also lead to other writing and speaking opportunities. These, in turn, can help you to extend your professional network and develop your career path.

Ultimately, in a *Pirates of the Caribbean* kind of way, these tips are not a hard and fast code. Rather, they are “more what you’d call ‘guidelines’ than actual rules.” Adapt them to your own life, and do what makes you happy above all else.

After all, if it can work for a farm girl from Iowa, it could work for you, too.

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