

# FIVE LESSONS AS YOU GRADUATE LAW SCHOOL

By Gina Alexandris, Former HCLA President

**"As I realized this, and reflected on my professional journey for a Greek International Womens Award, five themes came to me that might be helpful to current law students and new lawyers (and with it, the chance to thank a few people who sparked these lessons for me)."**

This year marks 30 years since I graduated law school and began my professional career. As I realized this, and reflected on my professional journey for a Greek International Womens Award, five themes came to me that might be helpful to current law students and new lawyers (and with it, the chance to thank a few people who sparked these lessons for me).

1. **Quiet the noise and listen to your soul:** I remember the absolute angst I felt as I contemplated various articling options. Following the pack at the time, I had applied for and interviewed with mid and large sized general practice firms and one boutique family litigation firm (an area of interest of mine at the time). And truly at the last minute, I included a smaller general practice firm which nobody around me at law school seemed to know, but that appeared from my research to be doing good work and served a broad constituency, including the Greek community, which was important to me at the time. I realized I had my own unconscious bias (didn't appreciate the term at the time, of course) against "Greek or community-based firms", largely formed from some of my experiences and conversations with others at

law school. Having met with representatives at the various firms, I really liked this firm (Sotos, Karvanis, now Sotos LLP), but I was so unsure based on the noise from lawyers and law students around me. Until one day a wise mentor, herself not a lawyer, patiently listening to me listing pros and cons of all possible options, stopped me and suggested I pause, quiet the noise around me, and simply listen to my own soul. Call it gut or instinct or heart, but truly listen to what I wanted to do, not what I felt I should do based on everyone else's reasons or expectations. And when I finally did this, and made my decision to start my professional career with Sotos, a weight was lifted and much became clearer.

2. **Be authentic:** Before the legal profession formally spoke about "authenticity" or bringing one's whole self to your work, I met **Lou Alexopoulos**, who embodied and lived this concept. I am grateful to him for recruiting me to the firm and reminding me how important it was for me to be able to bring (among other things) my "Greekness" to work every day – to be able to wish "xronia polla" and "kalimera" to colleagues without feeling apprehensive or weird about it. And who

from his own examples of amazing travelling recharge adventures reminded all of us the need to stay true to your interests and wellness. During the articling interview process, in addition to Lou's comments, I remember proudly buying an olive green business suit, paired with various colourful blouses and scarves to wear to interviews – no dark blue or black suits for me, I had thought. Only to find myself about the only person in a sea of blue and black at most of the larger firm cocktail parties that season. And while an initial reaction was “what will they think”...the stronger reaction I noticed was “I don't want to be in a room of just blue and black suits!” I had to be able to find a place where I could be the best version of myself – and throughout my career, starting with articling and practice, I did just that.

**3. Practice excellence and cultivate a strong professional network:** These two lessons I always attribute back to the managing partner of the firm, John Sotos. Little did I then realize at the time that this was as innovative a firm as it was. In creating the firm, John wanted the firm's clients to have what others might consider a “big firm experience” without the costs and associated administrative requirements. He expected excellence from all of us – in our work, in our business practices, in our dealings and interactions with others.

From smaller files, to large groundbreaking opportunities (working with hundreds of franchisees in one file on a major litigation was a particularly significant opportunity as a junior associate). And this laid an incredible foundation for me for the balance of my career. In addition, it was John who constantly reminded us all at the firm that the practice of law was one part legal work and one part business work, and that cultivating excellence in the second aspect was equally as important as in the first. As a twenty-something-year-old associate, receiving a book by my managing partner on “Women Rainmakers” and having to create and regularly refine a business and marketing plan, set me on a path of appreciating this aspect of the practice of law for years to come (even in my later program development and teaching).

**4. Challenge yourself to learn new things and welcome feedback:** From the first week of my articling experience, my wonderful practice mentor Tom Karvanis, threw me into filework I thought was beyond me. I was terrified – what did I know about such matters? I had never before been to court to speak to a motion (even if it was uncontested)! Yet he encouraged me, and guided me, and always ensured I was as prepared as possible. The discipline of preparation was critical.

**"4. Challenge yourself to learn new things and welcome feedback"**



**"When I would think, or even say out loud, that I did not think I could do something, he would talk me through my doubts and push me forward into the experiences he knew I could take on."**

And would practice with me – I now realize that simulating and visualizing the experience before it actually happens is a significant experiential learning technique. I also remember returning from court many times, going over what happened with him, and Tom offering me feedback – both the bad and the good of what I had done (or not done) and as specific as possible. When I would think, or even say out loud, that I did not think I could do something, he would talk me through my doubts and push me forward into the experiences he knew I could take on. And apart from legal work that challenged me, Tom also modeled an excellence in managing client relationships that served me well, also throughout my career, both in and out of practice.

5. Find a balance for what matters most: In addition to and together with Lou, John and Tom, throughout my time with the law firm (and even beyond that when I moved to other professional positions), their strong and bright spouses offered important role models and professional lessons as well. Tula Alexopoulos was a Citizenship Court Judge when I first met her, and then subsequently worked in various senior provincial public service roles; Niki Sotos had a successful federal public service career; and Justice Andromache Karakatsanis had been a founding member of the firm before I joined, later rising through the Ontario public service, before being appointed as a judge, becoming the first G

Greek-Canadian judge of the Supreme Court of Canada in 2011. These women exemplified both professional and personal excellence and development throughout my career. And with their spouses, they all exemplified ways to balance and integrate their careers with their families – from discussions (and examples) of fun children's birthday parties, juggling after school activities with client and work demands to engaging with their Hellenic heritage and making room to celebrate, care for and honor family, including each other, children, parents and siblings, through both positive and difficult times. These were the lessons that were equally (if perhaps not more) significant to me as a first-generation Greek professional woman in Canada.

