

# INSIGHT



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## Taking a different path

I didn't follow the 'script'. I became a mother straight after matric. This meant that while my peers filled lecture halls, I was working at a bank and raising a child. I stayed there for six years, steadily working my way up, but always feeling like I was capable of more. When I decided to make a change and pursue a career in law, it wasn't about passion – it was a practical choice because I needed professional and financial stability, for my daughter's sake.

## Being a student and a mom

At 24, I walked into my first lecture hall. Most of my classmates were barely out of high school. I frequently found myself soul-searching in tutorial rooms, while still having to pack lunchboxes in the morning. Balancing parenting with studying wasn't a cute juggling act; for me, it was a matter of survival.

While my peers were buying their first cars, I was catching taxis to class. I had to remind myself that it wasn't a race. I wasn't competing. I was building something big.

A turning point came in my second year when I applied for a vacation programme at one of the top law firms in South Africa. To my surprise, they accepted me without question. That exposure was everything. It opened my eyes to what was possible. After that I went on to do vacation work at various top law firms every six months.

## The shift from university to legal work

Even though I worked hard at university and achieved excellent results, nothing prepared me for the reality of doing articles at a top-tier firm – nothing!

It was like being flung into the ocean with only the theory of how to swim to keep you alive. I was the oldest in my intake, I was married and I had a child. However, when you're serving articles, you aren't seen as a top student or given concessions for your personal circumstances; you're an extra pair of hands and are expected to carry quite a load when it comes to legal work. It requires great humility and an understanding that you're at the bottom of the food chain, which can be challenging.

I wanted to quit. The culture, the long hours and the fast pace drained me. My self-esteem was shredded. I was working myself into the ground, and it still didn't feel like enough. When I finally finished my articles, I left practice to think about my career path. It was a low point, and I was convinced that I was done with practice.

Then, I joined the Competition Commission as a junior merger analyst. That opportunity was my redemption. While working there, I felt valued and was able to rebuild my confidence. My career flourished at the Competition Commission, and I discovered something crucial: I was good at this, and I wasn't done.

## Staying at the table, on your terms

We don't talk enough about how many women leave law practice and never return. I get why. This profession is intense and requires a lot of sacrifice. If you don't have mentors, a support system, or a reason bigger than the next promotion, you will struggle.

Becoming a Partner and a member of the Executive Committee at CDH was really a special milestone for me, but they weren't the pinnacle of my career. The real achievement has been learning to trust myself – knowing that I don't just give legal advice to clients, but that my advice determines some of the most important decisions in large and, sometimes, international organisations. It is this kind of impact that I did not foresee when I was studying.

Now, I mentor young lawyers, especially women. I ask them questions that no one ever asked me during articles: *"Is this what you really want, and are you willing to work hard to grow in the profession?"* I've seen people change their lives because of those questions. Law has many paths. You don't have to choose the one everyone else is on.

Law is not for the fainthearted. It's not glamorous. You will not suddenly become influential, prestigious or full of purpose the day after you graduate. It's a calling that demands all of you, especially at the start of your career. And if you're a young woman, particularly a young black woman, that demand can feel endless.

My story is one of disruption, determination and discovery; it is not a story of despair. I hope that my journey will inspire others to follow the legal path that works for them. 

