



HOW A VOLCANO CHANGED MY LIFE: REFLECTIONS ON LEGAL STUDY

Claire von Hoesslin¹

Introduction

‘All the effort went into getting there and then I had nothing left. I thought I'd got somewhere, then I found I had to go on.’² I knew when I was five years old, that I would study law in England. I had no comprehension of the place, the people or even what justice meant yet; I just knew it was my calling. I was born in South Africa and raised by the two most dedicated parents I could have asked for. My father would sleep in the car waiting for me to finish swimming lessons, my mom volunteered for the PTA and they both worked tirelessly to afford my ballet classes. My aspiration to study law dwindled with each passing year as I worked harder to become the one thing that would make my parents proud: a ballerina.

Growing up in South Africa on the Stage

I was the talkative child in school and if you ask my peers now, I'm still the loudest in the room! I would often miss out on learning in lessons, because my teachers would send me outside for bad behaviour. They didn't see in me what my mother saw. Instead of punishing my behaviour, she would sit up late at night turning my boring written work into pictures, so I could understand it. The early years were the most difficult when I didn't understand why I wasn't liked for being myself, when my parents celebrated me so much. I learnt hard work, determination, time management and dedication through ballet. My family sold their home and our little three-piece family moved to London. My sights were set on the West End stage and I would work harder than I ever did before in my life to make that happen. Falling asleep each night, trying to unwind and get the song lyrics “FAME” out of your mind before you repeat the show the next day. This became my life, and I loved it.

How a Volcano Changed My Life

¹ Claire is currently in the final year of her law degree

² Alan Bennet, *The History Boys* (Faber, 2014)

In 2010, as a surprise for my best friend's birthday, his parents paid for me to travel back to South Africa. When I was due to return to the UK, I received an email to say my flight had been delayed and then another, until finally the announcement was made that due to a volcanic eruption in Iceland causing an ash cloud over the UK, all flights to the UK had been cancelled. As a result, I was stuck there for over a month. One morning at 2am I received a phone call from my mother, asking "Can we move your stuff?" It was not until I had flown back to the UK that I realised my family had moved from London to Devon!

I began my first degree at the University Campus of South Devon, studying Performance Practice and Events Management. However, due to the high fees since I was classified as an international student, I made the difficult decision to leave in the second year of the course. Losing the stage and everything I had known took a toll on my mental health, as I tried to navigate a new life for myself. I began to feel as though I had lost a piece of myself that I did not think I would ever find again. I began a supervisor role in a retail shop and was quickly promoted to assistant manager, before becoming the acting manager. The shop became my world and I lived for the support of my team. I became a satellite manager, overseeing three busy holiday shops in Padstow, Rock and Salcombe at the age of 27. This was to be my dream. I walked along beaches to get to work and travelled around England, learning new skills and developing new shops. However, I hardly saw my partner and we had stopped prioritising each other. It took us both to breaking point before we decided to leave our jobs and move back to Devon. Whilst travelling back on the train from Cornwall, I asked my partner to hold my jacket whilst I carried Bernard, our adventure-seeking goldfish, in a Sainsbury's bag. Once we arrived in Dartmouth, we discovered he had left my jacket on the train platform... with my passport in it!

Losing My Best Friend, But We Didn't Lose the Goldfish

After saying, "I don't know anything about boats but I know people," I found local work in Kingswear, in an industry I knew nothing about, yet my fascination for learning made me progress quickly. I would stay up late at night reading motorboat manuals and electrical handbooks to understand what my customers needed. I had changed my life again, until I received news one day that my dearest friend from South Africa had passed away. I had been his birthday gift and now I would never see him again. It was then that I opened my laptop at work and googled 'Law degrees near me', as it was now or never.

This was my chance to study again, this time with the help of student finance, as I was no longer considered an international student. However, since my passport had been lost, it

caused a delay of over 6 months before I received any student finance. This became a nightmare, as it seemed my dream of studying might come to an end before it even began.

From Break Out Rooms to Isolation

For three months, I had a stressful life at the University Campus of South Devon, hiding from finance until my tuition fees were finally paid, whilst trying to navigate life as a mature student who was a decade older than my classmates. March 2020 came and we received the news that we were no longer going to be able to see our tutors, classmates or even families anymore. The beginning of lockdown spelt out a very lonely time for everyone, adding extra stress for those on furlough and weakening our bond as a community. I had only known my tutors for a few months before our relationship turned to learning the judicial system with cats on our laps, whilst trying to keep them from eating Bernard. The friendships we had started slowly began to unravel, as we all got caught up, trying to keep our families healthy and happy during this isolating time. A future in Law did not seem important when worrying more about being able to give mom a hug again.

I completed my foundation degree in Law with a First, but had not fully experienced what it was like to have a debate with my fellow students or learn practical advice from my tutors. I came on to the second year of the LLB at Plymouth knowing no one, and remained that way throughout the year, completely isolated from my new peers. During the final months of my second year, I learnt how hard it was to live with the darkness of mental health issues. My little safe haven became the desk upstairs, tucked away in a corner where I could shut the world away. I buried my thoughts in journals and books, as my brain absorbed more and more information. I developed migraines from staring at the computer screen for too long, wondering if my dream of becoming a solicitor could ever become a reality.

“It’s Not What You Know, It’s Who You Know”

After suffering from loneliness throughout my university experience, I put myself out there and became the Secretary of the University of Plymouth Law Society. This is my final year and my last chance to prove myself and make everyone proud of me. Although I still feel the dark cloud of mental health in my personal life, I have tried to focus on university life by moving to Plymouth. It was a hard decision to leave my support system for half of the week and I often rush home to Dartmouth, to give my partner and my pets a cuddle. These last four months have given me back the confidence to believe in myself. Mental health does not need to be a monster under your bed, that you hide from when you’re afraid to ask for help.

There is great support available from your peers, tutors and the Student Hub to manage the stress and pressure of university life.

Through meeting practitioners within the legal industry, I have learnt we are all human. I put myself under immense pressure in my first three years to be the best. There was nothing wrong with aiming for this, but I never let myself be the best me. I became fixated on my grades and forgot who I was. This year I gave myself a new challenge: to talk to people. I lack work experience in the legal field and have pushed myself to volunteer time I know I do not have in my final year. It was not until last week that I had the fortune of speaking to someone I admire greatly, who told me to rely on being myself to get a training contract and identify what experiences I have, rather than those I lack. I had built an entire career prior to study, and the transferrable skills I have learned, including communication and business skills, are invaluable to firms.

Conclusion

My advice is to reflect on every job or experience you have had, and relate these to how you have developed into the person you are today. Firms will want to know how you dealt with good and bad situations. Your legal studies will be one of the most challenging experiences of your life, but you are not alone. Ask those around you for help and guidance. From my experience in networking with practitioners, they want to help you. From the bright lights of the stage to the paper cuts on my fingers from library books, it has been a fantastic adventure in learning who I am as a person. As I said at the beginning, "All the effort went into getting there and then I had nothing left. I thought I'd got somewhere, then I found I had to go on." Just as life is a never-ending journey, we are always learning and changing, and so too is the legal profession.