



DISCOVERING IDENTITY THROUGH VOCATION

BY ALEXIA PAUL

THE JOURNEY TO
PROFESSIONAL
CONFIDENCE
WITH ATTORNEY
DENA GIVARI.

Dena Givari was only nine months old when her mother relocated her and her sisters to France, leaving her dad to work as an attorney in Iran. For the next seven years, the family traveled back and forth between two worlds—both of which were fixated on the female form, though from utterly opposing perspectives. Driving to the airport as a child, Dena recalls billboards featuring beautiful, sexy, semi-clad women selling French lingerie. Hours later in Tehran, female flesh on public display was an abomination, punishable under law. Being exposed to various forms of these fixations, Dena remembers, “My mom worked really hard to make us understand that whatever attributes a society associates with our gender, those do not limit our inherent potential for success.”

Holding these two realities simultaneously in her young mind was confusing and unsettling. For Dena, early childhood was a bewildering cultural whiplash.

“The struggle for me was the constant shifting and trying to make sense of the world around me and trying to find my place in it. It wasn’t until my teens that I started to feel like I identified with a society. I feel more Canadian than anything else.”

Now 30, Dena is a litigator handling corporate and securities disputes at Crawley MacKewn Brush, a top firm in Toronto. An impassioned attorney determined to help others, Dena acknowledges that carving out this identity for herself took years to accomplish.

How does the daughter of hardworking immigrants settling into a new country become a rising star at one of Toronto’s leading law firms? Like so many stories of immigration, one courageous foot forward at a time.

Choosing to Have an Impact

Dena’s path to practicing law seems inevitable in hindsight. At last reunited with his wife and children in Canada, her father encouraged her writing skills, relying on Dena to craft persuasive letters on his behalf—a task made doubly arduous as this required her to translate his Farsi into English. “I’d be 16 years old writing to Air Canada because they messed up our baggage,” she laughs.

In school, she was the girl with her hand raised high, questioning assumptions and lazy conclusions, willing to live inside the discomfort of pushing back. Despite occasionally feeling alienated among her peers, the roots of her future as an advocate began here, speaking up in the classroom, insisting on raising issues that made others uncomfortable.

An interest in science led her to major in biology in college, a choice Dena now sees as a minor rebellion. After receiving a graduate degree in applied statistics, the law began to brighten in its appeal: “Law gives you a path toward a larger platform and a higher-level conversation about the values we maintain in our society and what’s worth fighting for.” Encouraged by her master’s advisor, Dena considered this

career swerve. She thought to herself, “Wait a minute. I’m a people person, and I love communicating. I want to have an impact. I want to feel like I’m doing something where I can see the effect I can have on someone else’s life.”

Discovering and embracing one’s identity is a lifetime’s work, one that Dena sees as a deliberate, personal evolution that informs her career path. In August 2019, after three days of intensive interviewing, she made the leap from her first job as an associate at the corporate firm Blaney McMurtry to Crawley MacKewn Brush, a move she feels will enable her to capitalize on her unique strengths: advocacy and public speaking.

“I didn’t realize that there was a part of me waiting to come out,” she says. “It’s one thing to do a job and to even be good at it, but it’s another thing to really capitalize on those attributes in yourself that you value. That gives you another sense of fulfillment.”

In the weeks leading up to her departure from Blaney—a place where Dena felt at ease and supported—she questioned whether or not she was doing the right thing. But by the time she walked away from her all-too-comfortable office for the final time, she had no doubt that whatever challenges lay ahead, this move was a necessary step on her path to becoming her best self.

“It doesn’t matter how much people value you in a role. You really need to feel like whatever it is you’re doing is a reflection of those things you value in yourself.”

Mentorship is the Key

The cases Dena tackles today are complex—often David vs. Goliath entanglements that require a deep understanding of case law as well as robust intellectual creativity. She defends people—and their savings and futures and livelihoods—against enormous conglomerations whose oppressive tactics can be ruinous to individual lives. It’s serious work that demands she push through feelings of insecurity and vulnerability as a young female associate in a male-dominated field.

This ability was in part a gift from a person who Dena dubs the “mentor of a lifetime,” Dan Giantsopoulos. An attorney at her previous firm, Dan’s advice and support empowered Dena’s burgeoning career in part because he



Attorney Dena Cívori has persevered in a male-dominated field by way of self-reflection and a passion for advocacy. She recently accepted a position at Toronto’s leading law firm, Crawley MacKewn Brush, where her practice encompasses a broad range of civil, commercial and securities litigation matters.



was willing to come clean about the emotional realities of practicing law. For Dena, having someone who was her senior be forthcoming about feelings of vulnerability normalized her own insecurities and gave her the courage to keep pushing forward with confidence—even and especially when she’s the only woman in the room.

For Dena, mentorship is not something she takes lightly, and with a grateful heart, she passes on insight and advice freely. “I can’t think

Dena attributes much of her success to Dan Giantsopoulos, the person she calls, the “mentor of a lifetime.” To pay it forward, Dena strives to help young lawyers and female entrepreneurs through personal mentorship. “I want to make life easier for the next generation of women.”



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of any stage of my life where I haven’t had at least one person outside of my family share their experiences with me and really help,” she says. Shining a bright light on the “impostor syndrome” felt by assistants, associates and CEOs alike neutralizes its dark power—and this is a lesson she wants to pass on to the women she now mentors. Over the phone, on coffee dates, at networking events, Dena makes time for younger lawyers as well as a host of female entrepreneurs looking for guidance.

“I bend over backward to leverage whatever network I’ve been lucky enough to build as a lawyer to help them,” she says. “As much as it is about substantive conversations, it’s a lot of cheerleading, a lot of hearing the same hesitations in someone else and giving them that push that what they are feeling is completely normal and they can accomplish what they want to accomplish, maybe not in the way they thought—but they can do it.”

Dena has had the help of so many people—from her parents to mentors and friends—to build her own identity as a woman and to thrive. Today, Dena passes on that gift through her hard work and commitment to helping lift up those strivers coming behind her.

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