



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 47

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Rachel Dikovics: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler podcast series, the Women's Initiative Network: *Real Talk*. I'm Rachel Dikovics, counsel in Lowenstein's White Collar Defense practice group and a member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at [Lowenstein.com/podcast](#) or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, or SoundCloud.

Now, let's take a listen.

Lauren Russell: Welcome to *Coffee Chats with WIN*, a Women's Initiative Network series where we sit down with inspiring women to talk candidly about the choices, challenges, and moments that have shaped their careers. We're your hosts.

Jessica Stewart: I'm Jessica Stewart, and that's Lauren Russell. We're associates here at Lowenstein Sandler. In each episode, we'll share practical insights on risk-taking, building strong teams, and navigating the early years of practice, along with a few personal stories that remind us we're all human.

Lauren Russell: Pour yourself a cup and settle in as we learn how today's guest got here, what she's learned along the way, and most importantly, how she takes her coffee.

Jessica Stewart: Today we're joined by Julia, who I'll turn over to introduce herself.

Julia Sanabria: Hi, thanks for having me. I'm Julia Sanabria. I'm a partner in the real estate group. I've been at Lowenstein a little over two years. My practice is primarily commercial leasing, and I'm excited to be here.

Jessica Stewart: Tell us a little bit about how you ended up at Lowenstein and what your career overview has looked like.

Julia Sanabria: Sure. Well, I started at another firm as a summer associate with no idea what I wanted to do. Actually, thinking I didn't want to be a lawyer at a law firm, was

just trying to pay off my student loans. So, while I was there, I realized I actually really loved real estate. I started practicing real estate law more generally and then found out what I really liked was commercial leasing, so I started specializing. I went firm to firm for quite a few years with the same practice group. We moved as a unit.

And then I hit a point in my career where I was ready to break off and develop my own practice. A few years before that, I had actually met Lynda Bennett, who is our Chair of insurance recovery and head of our Women's Initiative Network at a women's initiative event. And when I was looking to move my practice, I remembered how much I loved Lynda and how much I appreciated all the things she said at our event about what she thought was important in firm management and how firms should be run. So, I cold called her and asked her to interview me. She did, and now I'm here.

Lauren Russell: Wow. So, in your career, what do you think is the biggest risk you've taken?

Julia Sanabria: So, it was that. It was moving my practice. I had been with the same practice group for over 15 years and was kind of ready to break out on my own and really start developing my own practice and managing my own team. And coming here based off of my interactions with someone who wasn't in the real estate group was not necessarily what I expected, but Lynda opened the door to Lowenstein, and then once I met all the attorneys here, it made a lot of sense for me to bring my practice here, but definitely risky moving a New York real estate practice to a firm that didn't have a New York real estate practice at the time.

Lauren Russell: When building your team and staffing your matters, what's something you look for in younger attorneys?

Julia Sanabria: So, when I'm building my team, I'm looking for attorneys that have really good attitude and want to work as part of a team. We have a really close-knit team in our leasing group, and we step in for each other frequently at all levels. I'll take work from our junior associates if that's what's required to get things done for the client in time. So, attitude is huge, but also people who listen and tend not to make the same mistake more than once. I always tell my junior associates, I don't expect you to know anything about what we do on day one because you're not taught it in law school, but if we go over something and we've taken the time to work through it, show that you're at least thinking about the next time, you're maybe not going to get it exactly right going forward from there. But you should say, "I know we did this last time," transferring your skills and critically thinking about what we're doing instead of just spitting back whatever it is that I marked up in your document.

Lauren Russell: So, Jess and I are both junior associates going into our mid-level. What's something that you wish you knew at our stage of your career?

Julia Sanabria: I think that it was okay to be myself. I felt really out of place for a really long time working in a big law firm for a lot of reasons, and I think a lot of that has to do with being female. And so, I was always kind of trying to fit myself in the box of business development that I saw all of the male partners doing. And it just didn't feel authentic for me, and it took me longer than I'd like to admit but at a certain point I realized, you know what, just talk about what you like and get to know your clients that way. And it really changed everything for me. And I wish someone had explained that to me a little bit earlier instead of trying to force me to do the things that everyone else had done coming up before me.

Lauren Russell: On a more personal level, where can we find you on an ideal Saturday afternoon?

Julia Sanabria: Well, definitely with my kids. I have a nine-year-old and 11-year-old. In real life, I'm usually at a soccer game or a softball game. In an ideal life, we love going to concerts together. So, I would say my absolute probably best Saturday afternoon recently, I took my daughter a few months ago to see Governor's Ball. So, it was fun to be at a music festival and also with my kids.

Lauren Russell: Oh, that's great. You'll have to let us know what the best artist was at GovBall. But the last and most important question is, how do you take your coffee?

Julia Sanabria: I take my coffee no sugar, a little bit of milk, and I'm pretty agnostic on the type of dairy. It can be oat milk, skim milk, whatever, but just like a splash.

Lauren Russell: Great. Thank you so much for joining us.

Julia Sanabria: Thank you so much for having me.

Jessica Stewart: Before we jump into our next interview with another inspiring woman, we want to hear from you.

Lauren Russell: How do you take your coffee? Share your order in the comments on our LinkedIn or Instagram post.

Jessica Stewart: Hi Nicole. Thanks for joining us today. Can you introduce yourself?

Nicole Fulfree: Sure. Thanks so much for having me. I'm Nicole Fulfree, I'm a partner in the Bankruptcy and Restructuring department at Lowenstein, and I've worked here for about 11 years now.

Jessica Stewart: Give us an overview of your career. How'd you end up here today?

Nicole Fulfree: I was one of those people that always knew that I wanted to be a lawyer. And so, when I was in college, I asked my aunt who works at a boutique bankruptcy firm in New Jersey, if I could come to her firm, just see what it's like to be a lawyer. But I started out as a receptionist, which was extremely stressful, by the way and I would do filing so I could learn what court pleadings looked like. Eventually they started to throw some research projects at me, which was pretty cool because then I got to get my feet wet in the actual law. And I really liked the bankruptcy work that I was doing there. That turned into them giving me a letter of recommendation to work for one of the bankruptcy judges in New Jersey.

So, after my 1L year, I did an internship with Judge Steckroth; he's retired now, but he was a bankruptcy judge in New Jersey. I loved working with him. I continued to really like doing bankruptcy stuff, so the following year, I went back to my aunt's firm, the boutique bankruptcy firm, and I worked there. And then after I graduated, I clerked for the same judge, Judge Steckroth that I had interned for after my 1L year.

After that, I was looking for a firm job, and it just so happens that my best friend from both undergrad and law school was working at Lowenstein. She was loving it here. And she was like, "Let me hand in your resume so we could work together and be best friends at work." And so, she handed in my resume and I had my interview and then I've been here ever since.

Lauren Russell: Wow. So, what do you think is the biggest risk you've taken in your career?

Nicole Fulfree: I went back and forth about telling you guys this story because it's not one of my proudest moments. I mean, it resulted in exactly where I wanted my career to go, but it was a really hard decision. So, I'm going to share it with you guys. But it was switching directions on the clerkship that I accepted. Like I mentioned to you before, I had interned after my 1L year, with a bankruptcy judge, with Judge Steckroth, and it was my dream to be his clerk. It was perfect for my career trajectory where I wanted it to go, which was ultimately to be working at a firm in a bankruptcy group. And so, I really wanted to work for Judge Steckroth. I loved working with him during my internship, but I submitted my resume and I hadn't heard back. And so, I was like, well, I guess it's not happening because it was, I forgot what the timeline was, but I guess it was like January or February of my 3L year and I hadn't heard back.

And I had a couple other offers from other judges and I was kind of like, I have to make a decision now. I can't wait forever. And so, I accepted a position with another judge who was wonderful. And then about three weeks later, I heard

back from my judge that they wanted me to come in for an interview, which I did. And then they offered me the position. So, then I was in the very awkward situation of deciding whether to go back on my acceptance with another judge.

At first, I was like, that's not an option for me because integrity is a big thing to me, and I gave the judge my word. And so, I really struggled with the decision. I pretty much decided that I wasn't going to do it. And then I talked to a few people, ended up making the decision that I had to do what was best for my career, even if it was going to make things uncomfortable for a short time or potentially make me look bad to the judge that I accepted the position with.

So, it was a really hard decision, but I did it and it was a tough phone call. It was a risk because I didn't want to burn a bridge with the judge that had offered me a position. So that was a really stressful situation and a difficult decision, but it actually ended up being the best decision that I could have made for my career.

Jessica Stewart: Was that other judge also a bankruptcy judge?

Nicole Fulfree: No.

Jessica Stewart: So that helped you?

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah. So that was really the deciding factor because I wanted to do bankruptcy, but that would be a slightly different path, potentially make my path more difficult if I didn't have that bankruptcy clerkship.

Jessica Stewart: When building your team and staffing your matters, what's something that you look for in younger attorneys?

Nicole Fulfree: A couple different things. I think it is super important for me to work with juniors who are eager and proactive and enthusiastic because I think one of the problems that I have is I struggle to delegate things sometimes because I'll look at what's on my plate and if it's just easier for me to do it, let me just do it. But if I have someone who's eager to help and proactive, and if we get an email from the client, they respond to me and say, "Oh, do you want me to do this?" It's so much easier for me to say, "Okay." They're already thinking about it. They know what to do. It's just easier to say yes, then once I start thinking about the task, oftentimes I'll just put it on my plate and then it's not really making my life easier.

So, when someone's eager and willing to help and thinking about in their own head, what are the next steps that need to happen in the case, it just makes it easier for me to delegate, makes my life a lot easier. And so those are good

qualities for me to have in a junior working with me. I also think it's really important that the junior be a trustworthy person. I'm not meaning I think they're going to steal from me, it's not just worthy, but I need to know what you're saying is true and that you know what you're talking about.

Because I think an unexpected question and they're not prepared to answer it, sometimes people could be inclined to say, "I think it's this," and speak out of turn when they really don't know. And so, one of the things that you need to count on juniors for is to be able to trust what they're saying. It's okay to say you don't know. I just need to know if you know or if you don't. And I think that's one of the things I think you have to know as a junior, one of the most important skills you can have is to know what you know and to know where the line is as opposed to what you don't know, because that's where things can get dangerous.

If you're doing a memo or doing a recommendation that you're getting into a territory that you're not completely comfortable with, wrong decisions can happen if you're not realizing what you don't know. And so, it's really helpful to have someone that knows where that line is.

Lauren Russell: That's great. So, what is something you wish you knew at our stage of your career?

Nicole Fulfree: I'm laughing because there's so many things that I wanted to jot down for this. There's so many. I think one of the most important things is that it's okay to find your own style in being a lawyer. So, when I was a junior, I feel like I had this idea in my head of what a lawyer was supposed to be like and talk like, what their presence was supposed to be. And I found myself kind of trying to copy what some of the senior attorneys that I was working with were doing and whether—I guess in some cases that was being super adversarial in calls with opposing counsel, but there was something about it that didn't feel authentic to me.

And so, I feel like I started to learn as I got a little bit more experienced that it's okay to emulate some characteristics that senior attorneys that you're working with have, but it has to be authentic to you. And so you can pick and choose little pieces of other things you like about the senior attorneys you're working for that work for you, but you have to find your own style that is authentic to who you are as a person because otherwise it just, it comes off as fake.

And I think it's also helpful to play to your strengths. And so for me, one of my strengths is I just feel like not being super adversarial in a conversation with opposing counsel, it's more genuine for me. I think I kind of approach it in a problem-solving way. How do we solve this problem together? We don't have to

puff our chests out and fight about it if there's a resolution that we can both reasonably talk about. And I feel like being understanding to the other side's views and being reasonable is a better way to reach a resolution. And so that's kind of, I play to my strengths. I'm not going to be fake and pretend that I'm mean and mad at you when I'm not, which just doesn't work for me. So, I think it's okay to find your own style and be comfortable.

Another one that I think is really important that I think about quite often, even at my stage, is not everyone is as big and as bad as they would like others to think that they are. I think I used to walk into a room, for example, where there was a deposition being taken in. It was a huge conference room and there were all these experienced attorneys and I was a third year and I couldn't get out of my mind like everyone in the room knows so much more than you. You know nothing, you have no experience. If anyone asks you a question, you're going to be an idiot, and you don't know anything. And that would be what's playing in my head.

And then as I continued to be in rooms like that, I would realize that people are different. Not everyone has as much substance or as much skill as they may like others to think that they have. Not everyone is amazing at their job. Not everyone is an excellent attorney. Not everyone reads all the documents and knows all the facts. And so, as you get more senior, you can kind of see through some of those facades that opposing counsel might like to put on. And so, I think it's important to remember that everyone else wants you to think that they're the best and they're the greatest, but it's not always the case and that you shouldn't have those kind of negative thoughts playing in your head about your lack of experience.

I mean, I think one of the things I experienced a lot as a junior was the 60 plus crowd, usually men, not always, but usually men, saying as a counter argument to something that they would say, "I've been doing this for 40 years and that's not how it goes." And those kind of statements are just meant to intimidate you because they see you're young and that's what they want to do. And I think it's important to know that if you're good at your job, you shouldn't be intimidated by people just for being people. They have to earn the right to be intimidating.

Jessica Stewart: On a more personal level, where can we find you on an ideal Saturday afternoon?

Nicole Fulfree: This question's a little bit different nowadays. I have three really little kids, a four-year-old, a two-year-old, and an almost nine-month-old. So, my fun Saturdays now are looking more like being at the zoo or doing a fun holiday thing, just spending time with my kids.

Lauren Russell: Alright. And now most importantly, how do you take your coffee?

Nicole Fulfree: I take my coffee five or six times a day and with way too much cream and cinnamon.

Lauren Russell: Ooh. All right. Well, thank you so much for joining us.

Nicole Fulfree: No problem. Thanks for having me guys.

Lauren Russell: Thank you for joining us for this episode of Coffee Chats with WIN. We hope that today's conversation offered you a perspective you can use, whether you're charting your next move, mentoring the next generation, or simply looking for a dose of motivation with your morning brew. If you enjoyed the episode, please follow the series and share it with a colleague. Until next time, keep investing in your growth in your community and don't forget to tell us, how do you take your coffee?

Rachel Dikovics: Thank you for listening to today's episode. Please subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcast or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, or SoundCloud.

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