HERE FOR A REASON

Could you tell us about your academic and professional background and what led you to a career in law enforcement/anti-corruption?

I did my undergraduate degree at Saint Mary’s College of Maryland, a public honors college, and studied sociology and anthropology. I went almost immediately to law school after graduating and got my Juris Doctor from William and Mary Law School in Virginia. My first job after law school was actually in the private sector; I was an attorney in a corporate defence law firm, working on employment discrimination and labour issues. I worked there as an associate for four years before going into the public sector at the Department of Justice (DoJ). I am still working in the same section that I entered, which I think says a lot about my interest in the work we do. I was not one of those people that knew from the moment they could walk that they wanted to become a lawyer (laughing). This came over time; that was not really where I thought I was heading. Initially, I had an interest in biology, but after taking courses in sociology and anthropology, I realized I had a skill set there. It was probably only towards the end of my junior year that I realized I would not want to work in academia, which can be the path followed when studying these subjects. I had an interest in human resources issues so I thought a legal career would fit well with my interests and skills. It is funny how much you change over time: at that time, I really had no idea I was going to end up in the public sector (laughing). I think when leaving law school, you may not be really sure about what you want to do. Different life experiences defined my path. Now, I am working in law enforcement, which I am not sure I would have envisioned either in law school. But it is the benefit of working in public services: it enables you to discover new things you are passionate about which you never would have considered.

When I joined the DoJ, I worked in what was called “the program unit” and one of their large focuses was on domestic victim asset return issues. I was in that unit for about four years, before joining the unit I am currently in, the international unit. Now, a significant part of my portfolio concerns anti-corruption and money laundering policy issues but also international assistance issues, which involves helping other countries with asset recovery in the United States. I felt that by joining the public service, and especially that first unit where I worked on victims’ issues, I would have a more meaningful impact; asset recovery interested me because it has that tangible impact.

“You are directly helping people and making a difference for them.”

It is looking for that bigger purpose and impact that pulled me from the private to the public sector and working within the government. At the beginning, I knew I wanted to work for the DoJ. What really attracted me to the unit I am in is that it brought to bear my prior skill set. I was doing civil work and those civil litigation skills are very much used for our work. Even though employment discrimination cases are different than asset recovery cases, you are still dealing with people, and you will find human complexities in both roles.

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*The interviewee is speaking on her own behalf and the information shared is not endorsed by the Department of Justice.
What challenge(s), fear(s) or doubt(s), if any, have you faced and overcome to reach your current position?

I tend to rather be in the background and do the behind-the-scenes work. But I think what I have gained along my personal and professional journey is a willingness to occupy the room.

“I realized the necessity to speak up.”

Often, when you are starting your career, it is easy to get intimidated. You think others have more experience, are older and wiser than you. And I think, at least for me, this resulted in not taking those opportunities to share my opinion. In a way, I would take a backseat and wonder “is my opinion going to be good enough; is it going to properly address that particular need; etc.”. But I found that by overcoming this and being willing to occupy the room, you realize that through your own individual experiences of being a woman, or a woman of colour in my case, you have a unique perspective to share. Even when others have different opinions, at the end of the day, all those perspectives are complementary. I think I overcame this tendency, but I still continue to work on it and stay aware of it. You have to make sure you occupy the spaces and rooms you are in. Your thoughts and opinions are needed.

“You have unique things to say that need to be shared.”

Another challenge which I think everyone experiences, all the more if you are a parent, is maintaining a work life balance. Figuring out the right balance between nurturing your family and your home, and nurturing your professional career, takes time. I think this can sometimes be a unique challenge that women in the workplace face.

What achievement(s) are you the proudest of?

There is not one thing I can point to. I have had the chance to work with incredible colleagues, not just within my agency but also with domestic and foreign counterparts, and with members of various enforcement groups we are part of. Having the opportunity to really advance asset recovery and anticorruption work, to put those topics on the agenda, to have discussions at an international level and to simply be part of that work, is very fulfilling. Like I said, I came to the department to have that tangible impact. Being part of those discussions in trying to shape policies and strategies for addressing corruption is very rewarding.

“For whatever role I may play in shaping discussions on corruption related issues, hopefully what I am doing makes a positive difference.”

I am proud to work in the anti-corruption space and to work on developing the ways we are conducting asset recovery. Of course, this is a real team effort, but being part of those teams and doing something that will make a difference for others, is an achievement. There are not only professional but also personal achievements.

On this note, having a daughter, and knowing that she sees the work I am doing, in itself is an achievement. Your kids do not necessarily let you know that they look up to you, and in a way, they keep you humble (laughing); right now, all she really wants me to do is to drop her off and not go into rooms with her (laughing). But to know that she is watching and there is something I am doing that hopefully will influence her path and how she shows up in the world, it is an achievement.

Given your successes, hurdles and experiences to date, what advice would you give to women working in the field of law enforcement?

This relates to what I said about challenges. My main advice would be to speak up. Be willing to share your opinion; be willing to occupy the room because you will realize that you have good things to say. Sometimes, you will bring perspectives that others may not share, but that is necessary.

“I encourage every woman in law enforcement to not shy away from speaking up and leading on an issue.”

You were hired by whomever hired you for a reason. You were hired because they saw
something in you, they saw the capability and the necessary skills in you. So, you need to own this and occupy the space you were given. Be confident in your abilities. You are here for a reason, and what you have to say can positively contribute.

I do not think there was one key moment in particular that made me realize those things. I had the benefit in both of my prior roles and in my current role of being put in positions that forced me to get out of my comfort zone, taking roles I would not necessarily have taken and being at the forefront. As a young attorney, I also had mentors, people who sometimes believe in you more than you may believe in yourself. I think having those experiences makes you realize “I do have something to say; I can contribute to this project”. Accumulating these experiences, seeking them, or being pushed to have them will really make you go above your own limits.

“Uncomfortable experiences will make you realize that you are here for a reason. You have a perspective to share, and people need to hear it.”

It is funny because sometimes mentors can be very specific persons, someone might have been assigned to you; but along the way, some mentors also come naturally. I probably have people in my life right now who would be shocked to realize they are mentors to me. I think that is one of the benefits of the workplace: you learn a lot just by working alongside certain people, getting to know them, and seeing how they have handled and addressed issues in their career. I have been so fortunate to have mentors throughout my career. I have had the benefit of encountering so many interesting people with qualities I can look up to. I would encourage others to be open minded as to who is possibly a mentor and seek those relationships.

In terms of gender equality and representation in anti-corruption law enforcement authorities, what changes do you hope to see in the future?

I am starting to see more women taking space in the anticorruption world and this is exciting. I am now seeing more women taking leading positions or roles in representing their countries. Obviously, I think this trend is going to positively impact discussions.

I think international bodies could have a crucial role in accentuating this trend, for instance by showing that it should be a priority for countries to be inclusive of women and to encourage women to lead in this space. Having this message come from an international level will have a positive impact. But I also think more things could be done, even at the national level. Countries can positively influence each other by being more proactive and inclusive of women in discussions. When we get together in a room and look at the composition of other delegations, seeing diverse representatives can encourage other nations to follow the same path.

“Diversity of delegations and individuals working on anticorruption issues is crucial.”