

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Letter To My Younger Self

Dolly Mirchandani talks about her life to date.



New York Partner and Head of the Global Infrastructure, Transport and Logistics Industry Group, Dolly Mirchandani talks about her background and career so far.

My family history and early childhood could best be described as a story of the British Empire.

My father was a young child when India was partitioned at the time of independence in 1948. He and his family were forced to flee the Province of Sindh, which is now part of Pakistan.

Their business and trading relationships led them to move to Nairobi, Kenya, where he met my mother, who happened to live next door.

The British Empire again interceded in my family story when Kenya gained independence. Residents who wouldn't give up their British citizenship were told to leave.

So, together with my older sister, Sangeeta, they moved to Hong Kong, which was where I was born.

My mother didn't want to raise a family in Hong Kong, so within two years our family moved again, this time to London.

When I look back, I wonder how my parents coped with so much change as they traversed continents and cultures over the years. As someone who grew up in England before moving to New York, I now appreciate how challenging it must have been for them to raise children in a different culture and adapt.



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I grew up as a first-generation immigrant in a very English junior school in Surrey, but we moved to north London when I was 11.

It was a very vibrant and diverse community by comparison and with more than half of my school being Jewish, it turned out to be a great cultural training ground for living and raising children in New York.

Law wasn't something I considered as a career path initially. Stereotypically, Indian children are often encouraged to become doctors, lawyers or engineers, but while my parents insisted on a strong education, they didn't push me in that direction and were happy for me to make my own choices.

Originally, I wanted to go into musical theatre because I loved singing, but I was also very academic and interested in both science as well as the humanities. Back then, there weren't many roles in the theatre for South Asian actors, so I decided to take the more academic path.

Finding it difficult to choose among my favourite subjects, I was drawn to studying law, which you can study as an undergraduate in England, as an interesting lens through which to study society.

I was accepted onto a Jurisprudence degree course at New College, Oxford, where I became interested in constitutional law. So, when I talked to my tutors about my desire to continue my education with a Master's degree, they suggested applying to US law schools, given the long established constitutional law tradition.

I'd never been to America, but I decided to apply to the five law schools my tutor had recommended.

I was accepted by Harvard and was fortunate enough to be one of two people from the UK to win a Fulbright Scholarship, which meant I could study there without incurring any debt.

I'm a firm believer that while you always have to work hard and develop your skillset, one needs the humility to acknowledge the role that luck plays in any educational or career journey.

I felt really privileged to live and study in the United States and to experience an entirely different pedagogical approach with extremely broad and rich course offerings.

When I graduated in 1996, I still had a year left on my visa, so I interviewed with several law firms, including White & Case, where I was interviewed by then Chair Jim Hurlock, who had also studied at Oxford and made a point of interviewing Oxford candidates. He was a formidable personality and made quite an impression on me.

With hindsight (considering I ended up at the Firm in 2016) the straighter path would have been to accept the job and join White & Case in 1996, but instead, together with two classmates, I joined Sullivan & Cromwell in New York, thinking at the time it was a short-term move for a year. I had every intention to return to London but, towards the end of the year, they asked me if I'd move to Hong Kong, where they were building an Asia project finance practice with a focus on energy and infrastructure.

The idea of living and working in Asia really appealed to me at the time as both an experience and adventure from which I had much to gain and little to lose. I moved to Hong Kong in August of 1997, right after the British handover to China and the commencement of the 50-year agreement for one country, two systems.

Barely a month later, the Asian economic crisis unfolded which turned out to be a brilliant time to learn a lot as a young lawyer. I ended up staying for two years and then relocated back home to London in 1999.

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While Sullivan & Cromwell was interested in building its energy and infrastructure practice, everyone was a generalist by design. I was seeking to build depth of expertise as a mid-level associate, so I joined Freshfields in London, then getting married before returning to New York in 2001, where I have been settled for the past 22 years.

If I told my younger self that I'd live and work on energy and infrastructure projects in Hong Kong and London and then build a career in New York bringing up two American kids, she'd have thought I was crazy, but life brought me back here.

In 2005 I became a partner. Around that time, the United States was beginning to embrace the idea of private investment in infrastructure, so the experience I had from my time in London working on public private partnership techniques proved invaluable.

It wasn't planned, but the things I'd learnt earlier in my career (the deals I worked on and the places I'd been), all meant that I was one of the few lawyers in New York who had experience of negotiating these partnerships, and so I found myself in the right place at the right time. Having worked with a lot of emerging market companies often on first-of-their-kind projects in my early career, it set me up well for similar work in the United States.

I spent the following years having two children and building a US-focused infrastructure practice before joining the Firm in 2016.

People often joke that I should have joined 20 years earlier and spared myself the journey, but I realize that, had I done that, I may not have built the niche expertise that's been so useful in growing our US infrastructure practice.

I was attracted to the Firm because I believe we walk the walk when it comes to our values. For instance, I really appreciate the amount of impactful pro bono work we do. We are also far ahead of many of our competitors when it comes to diversity.

In fact, the first person I met when I reached the 43rd floor at 8am on the day I started was Maureen Donovan who had been a very senior partner of the Firm. What struck me was not only how welcoming (and well dressed) she was, but also the fact I'd never been at any institution in my career where a woman of her seniority would have existed.

The other thing that impressed me about White & Case was the depth of our practices in the UK and Europe, as well as America and across the globe. The Firm had cracked the trans-Atlantic code, which is something few firms that claim to be international have truly achieved.

I also appreciate the governance structure of the partnership, which is based around transparency, equality and consistency, where all partners are treated equally wherever in the world they are based, and where partnership decisions are meritocratic and based on the value someone brings to the Firm.

In recent years, our US infrastructure practice has grown and established a profile in the market. It is currently ranked Band 2 in Chambers, which is important recognition for the hard work the whole team has put in. I view this as a real achievement, given we were unranked five years ago.

Over the years I've become a bit of an infrastructure nerd. I've loved working on ground-breaking public private partnerships that combine the resources and innovation of the private sector with the resources of the public sector. We are heavily involved in structuring the risk allocation and commercial arrangements and ensure the contracts are drafted in a way that holds these projects accountable for the public money they are spending and incentivizes them to be delivered on time and on budget.

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Another significant development in the Firm is the recent creation of a Global Infrastructure, Transport and Logistics Industry Group, one of three new global industry groups launched last year.

I was privileged to be asked to lead that group, which comes at an exciting time for the infrastructure sector with a large amount of both public and private capital being raised and deployed towards innovative infrastructure projects, including to combat climate change.

The global industry group will help us collaborate and integrate our product offerings for clients focused on the infrastructure sector across multiple asset classes and geographies, so we can combine our strengths and better deliver a commercially relevant client experience that sets us apart.

Even without the support and focus of a global industry group, we've consistently topped league tables and been named global law firm of the year in various infrastructure industry awards, so I'm excited to see what we can accomplish collectively now.

If I was to offer advice to any young lawyer, it would be to tell them that it's important to find sponsors and mentors. Sometimes this might happen naturally but, if not, be purposeful about it and find people who will take you under their wing and help support your learning curve.

I'd also advise them to make close client relationships early in their career. To this day, I'm still working with clients I've known for more than 15 years.

Finally, there's no substitute for getting deals under your belt, doing and seeing, so you become a sophisticated practitioner as soon as possible. That's when you can start to add real value and it's when this job becomes really interesting.

There are so many days that I'd love to relive, but I could never pick one. I'm someone who doesn't believe in looking back – I prefer to be present in the moment and be grateful for every day.

My parents still live in the UK. They visit us regularly and now, with the kids being older, we enjoy visiting them too. As they become more advanced in age, we're increasingly mindful not to take our time together for granted.

I'm conscious of making sure my kids especially benefit from my parents' life experience and wisdom. It's important to me that they understand their cultural heritage and how different things were for them.

My kids have lived their entire lives in the United States, which has been wonderful, but I think it's important that they explore the world and travel widely and learn to appreciate different cultures and environments. Joining the family events at the White & Case Global Partners Meetings has been a great place for them to start!

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