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These Four Women Helped Shape My Legal Career

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I was recently asked about which women in my life helped to shape my career. It was an idea I was drawn to because it is something naturally prevalent in most women lawyers' lives, but it really doesn't come to mind until someone sits down to take note of it. When I did just that, I discovered that there were four amazing women who helped make my career what it is today.

In Dallas in the 1980s, I grew up an only child who watched the struggles of my immigrant parents every day, particularly my mother's. My mother, Maya Palnitkar, was an immigrant to Texas in 1979 from Mumbai, India. The valedictorian of her graduating class at the University of Bombay, she spent 30 years as a research scientist at UT Southwestern.

My mother taught me by example that hard work can never be replaced. She fought every imaginable odd during very tough times to find a way to have money in order to raise me with my father and to make sure I got the best free education available.

She worked a scientific job, and she even worked weekends if the project called for it. On top of that she cooked all our meals, drove carpool, tutored other kids, took care of the house and mothered young immigrants new to Dallas. She sent money to her parents back in India. Everything.

She knew what she wanted, and that was to save money for me to get every opportunity possible. Sometimes I think she sacrificed her whole life so that I would have a chance. So I have always been determined not to let her down. I vowed to always work hard and be everything she wanted me to be. And I would always do this no matter how successful I was. Many years later, as an attorney, I find myself always working to do more, with clients, our office, our firm. Staying hungry is my mission.

During my time at the University of Texas in Austin, I interned for the late Sarah Weddington, the attorney who won *Roe v. Wade*. I heard her speak to a group on campus, and went up to her right after her speech and asked how I could work for her. She created a spot for me, because she liked that I just asked her for it.



Throughout my time with her, Sarah taught me to never forget to ask for what I want. As the head of Women's Studies at the University, Sarah found that women just didn't ask for the opportunities like men did, and she instilled it in me to never stop asking. I have seen that myself in the legal field, where many female attorneys seeking legal business from a potential client take a very gentle approach or wait for the work to come to them, instead of just putting it out there on the table.

Sarah also taught me about the importance of relationships. She wrote a note to someone every time she saw something that reminded her of them, even if she had not spoken to them in years. She told me that people will always remember how you make them feel. Sarah made others feel loved and remembered, and I hope to do the same. Not just in business relationships, but just as a way of life.

After starting my career at Greenberg Traurig over 13 years ago, I came across one of our powerhouse litigators, at first only by reputation. Lori Cohen is considered one of the "winningest attorneys" in America and a master of the courtroom. Early in my career I was lucky enough to work with her and learned quickly that customer service is one thing that distinguishes her from others. No fact unexplored. No legal move left unpondered. No days off.

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Lori and her team have curated a beautiful algorithmic approach to her practice and have mastered the art of anticipating client needs far in advance. To Lori, the key within a team is communication on every topic, large and small, with technical perfection. She thinks on multiple planes all at once, from what the case requires tomorrow to what it needs a year from now to what we need to watch out for.

When I subscribed to her thought process, I was able to sharpen my practice and am better able to meet our clients' needs — before the clients themselves even know what they need.

A few years later in my career, I was seated at a luncheon next to Jamie O'Banion, the literal embodiment of a Beauty Queen. Her cult beauty empire BeautyBio is famous for changing skin care at home. Both of us were late to that luncheon — we rushed in and took multiple business calls during the two hours. I learned she also had three kids and was juggling it all at once. At that moment, I felt as if I had found a soul sister, just a blonde version. The day before I was seated with her, Jamie found out she needed legal counsel for various items, and luckily, I was right there at the table to take them off her plate. I certainly asked her for it right then and there (thanks, Sarah Weddington).

Over the years Jamie has become not just one of my best friends and an amazing client, but an irreplaceable sounding board. She is the contemporary I needed at that point in my life, as I was the only woman in our office with very young children and on the brink of partnership. She shared the same insane work schedule and career goals, along with the dreaded guilt when missing out on family life. To this day we still counsel each other on everything from how to handle complex board meetings to the most effective use of your time at the kids' school.

Experiencing this journey side by side with someone you admire in the same situation gives you strength in your hardest moments. We have both accepted that we can be nonstop in our careers, but on some days we may not be picture-perfect mothers or wives — and that's OK. There is no ideal balance, and you won't always be there for everything, but the family will be stronger for it watching you. Like I used to watch my mother. Thanks to Jamie, I put in the effort in without guilt.

I have found that there is an understood level of respect among all women in our industry, even if we are opposite sides of a deal or a case. It is a delight to see more women enter the legal field each year and even more so to watch as they rise to the top ranks in corporations and Big Law. To me, this

means there are just that many more women available to help shape the future careers of those new to the profession.

Bina Palnitkar is a principal shareholder at Greenberg Traurig, wife to Dallas neurosurgeon Nimesh H. Patel and a mother to 3 young girls. Prior to her career as a lawyer, she was one of the few women on the floor of the Chicago Board of Options Exchange. She is the national chair of Greenberg Traurig's Asian Affinity Group and helps run GT Dallas' associate programming. Bina's practical experience and approach to legal counseling covers a number of disciplines and industries, including funds, financial institutions, consumer goods, health care, startup firms and technology. Her national and international practice focuses on resolving complex business and intellectual property disputes through litigation, arbitration, and alternative dispute resolution.