

Daya pours heart, soul into personal injury practice

By Kate Wallace, AdvocateDaily.com Contributor



When Toronto personal injury lawyer **Jasmine Daya** was 12, she told her parents she wanted to be a lawyer. They were horrified.

Immigrants of Indian descent who came to Toronto in the 1970s from East Africa, they had visions of her being a doctor or taking up another helping profession.

"My father was like, 'No way, that's not what I want for you,'" Daya, managing partner of **Fireman Daya & Co.**, a boutique Toronto personal injury firm, tells **AdvocateDaily.com**.

"As immigrants, they needed lawyers, and all they saw was their bills," Daya says. Plus, her mother suffered an unpleasant experience as a legal secretary in Nairobi.

But science classes didn't come easy to Daya, not the way business subjects did. And she balked at scrubs.

"I told my mom, 'I want to wear a skirt and heels to work. This medicine thing is not happening.'"

She pivoted to a job in business, graduating in 2001 with degrees in finance and economics from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, then completing the Canadian Securities Course.

"I wanted to be on Wall Street," Daya says. She likely would have been if not for 9-11, which put the kibosh on a work visa. Looking back, she's thankful she never accepted those job offers from ill-fated Enron and Arthur Andersen.

Instead, she went to law school at Queen's University and loved it. Her path took another dogleg when she became pregnant in her final year. Newly married, with big ambitions, a baby was not initially part of her plan. While her friends partied and studied for the bar exam during a final summer of pre-career freedom, Daya wallowed.

She put the word out that she'd be looking for an articling position as soon as the baby was born.

Daya went home from the hospital with her infant son to a voice mail about an interview with Jack Fireman — a litigator with more than 50 years' experience — who had just started his own firm.

"I cut a deal with them," she says. She got a paltry stipend for her articles in exchange for being able to get home in time to relieve her nanny. That was 2005 and Daya has been there ever since.

When she started out, she knew she wanted to be in litigation, but not much else.

"I didn't even know what personal injury was," she says. Her first week, she joined a meeting with a catastrophically injured client.

"I didn't know what catastrophically injured meant, I didn't know that's what we were representing. My first week, I was like, 'What the hell? I'm an ambulance chaser?'"

But she quickly grew to love the work and realize that label was unfair.

"This is exactly what I wanted, to be in the thick of things," says Daya. "My clients really depend on me, and I appreciate that. I'm there with them 100 per cent. I can make a difference. I'm not just a cog in the wheel."

Her practice runs the full range of personal injury cases, but her focus is on catastrophic claims involving motor vehicle accidents.

A current case involves a family of adult siblings whose motorcycle outing was cut short when a pickup truck plowed into them.

"My file is now 25 people who were involved," she says. "It's like a small village."

Her office looks like a scene from a police procedural, with flow charts and whiteboards full of details.

When she visited her main client's wife, who lost a limb at the accident scene and was in hospital in Kingston, the woman begged Daya to have her moved to be with her husband, who was lying in a Toronto hospital in a coma and with an amputated leg.

She did.

"I've told my staff, we aren't just lawyers here. You need to be a person, you need to recognize the human element of what we do."

One of the most challenging areas of focus are cases involving minors.

"Many lawyers don't like doing them because you don't have a witness, and you need to get judicial approval," she says. "But they are some of my favourite cases to do."

She also devotes herself to matters involving nightclubs. She loves going out and knows the scene.

"I find those cases fun because I get to deal with really interesting characters."

Her practice is busy, but Daya is home for dinner every night. She'll soon launch the website, JD in the Kitchen, with advice on making time for family meals, as well as sharing her mother's recipes which she is compiling into a cookbook.

She's also finishing her first novel, *Law Girl's Bump in the Road*, a self-published chick-lit story she began 12 years ago, chronicling funny incidents during her pregnancy.

"I started writing but shelved it. Between having a kid, getting divorced, building my practice, getting remarried, having two more kids and becoming partner, it just wasn't happening."

Once she set her mind to it, though, in typical Daya fashion, it was happening. It is as good as done.