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CYNTHIA MARTIN

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Jasmine Daya is the managing principal of and personal injury lawyer at Jasmine Daya & Co.

CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Jasmine Daya, 39, is the managing principal of Jasmine Daya & Co. and a personal injury lawyer in Toronto. A few of her specialties are claims involving minors, bullying, cyberbullying and club assaults involving bouncers and nightclub security.

My parents had high expectations. It wasn't, "Are you going to university?" It was, "What university?" South Asian, they'd immigrated from Nairobi in 1974, working hard to send my brother and me to private schools in Toronto. As a teenager, I was getting into trouble so they shifted expectations to him, hoping I'd just finish high school.

I watched law shows on television, could see myself in a courtroom. My father had a low opinion; lawyers were "ambulance chasers." My mother hoped I'd pick medicine. I went to Johns Hopkins for a pre-med program, my first time away. But I [decided] to major in economics, what I'd loved in school. I [wasn't] spending four years doing anything science-related. Wearing scrubs to work every day? I wanted to wear a skirt, heels. My mom was horrified.

Going to Southern Methodist University made me feel I'd accomplish great things. The southern United States was a culture shock. I did summer school to graduate early, lined up job interviews – then 9/11 happened and employers said, "We can't offer you anything."

I [became] a financial analyst – loved it – already toying with the idea of law school and applying by the deadline to start the following September. [But] I left Dallas for a master's in economics in Ottawa. As soon as I got accepted to Queen's [University], I dropped the master's. I took my mom to Queen's open house; she started feeling a bit of pride about me in law school.

I helped my parents with their [restaurants during the] summers, [also] helping in [my then husband's] family hotels in Montreal. The second summer I [also] took an international law course at McGill University. In moots my last year, I realized I loved arguing on behalf of clients, bored out of my mind drafting contracts.

I got pregnant my last semester. Not planned. Babies meant you're not serious about your career. I didn't want to tell a future employer I couldn't start in September – "that's my due date." I thought it responsible to drop out of interviews. I was sick for six months. I'd go to class, home, nap, get up, study – everyone else hitting a patio. I did the bar admissions course, then exams in Toronto, everyone staring at me. I was embarrassed, writing a chick-lit book under a pen name to keep my mind busy.

I didn't pick personal injury, it picked me. [Students] didn't know personal injury, didn't have classes. I thought I'd want something that fit more of my economics, finance and business backgrounds, put feelers out for litigation.

I had my child September 14, started articling October 31, saying, "I haven't come this far to not get called to the bar." I realized my first few weeks in that every client was injured. Oh my God! I'm an ambulance chaser, exactly what my father didn't want. But I realized how much I love it. People come in their greatest time of need, often with cultural and language barriers, workers, no trust fund or big bank accounts, needing an advocate. I get to be that person.

One of my favourite areas is to represent minors. I have three children. It's changed my outlook; when any minor comes in, they're automatically "my" kid. Given how many hours I work, friends ask how I can cook almost every day for my family, so I share easy Indian recipes. I'm also a certified barista.

Growing up, we lived in Markham, my dad an accountant. I'd commute with him to school, my brother in the back seat. From Grade 5 until I was 16, he taught me about balance sheets, income statements, spreadsheets, shares and corporations. Suddenly – those car rides, working at my parents' restaurants, my education – my experience enabled me to run a profitable law firm.

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