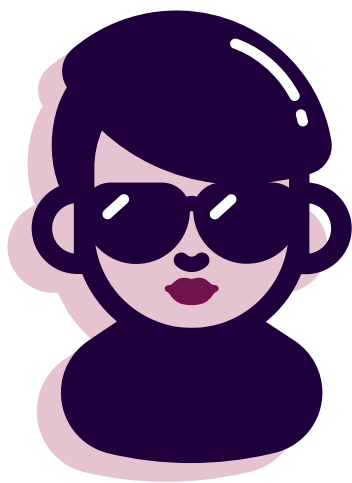


Unexpected Opportunities

Stories from three BYU Law alumni whose careers have unfolded in unplanned and unexpected ways.



Winding Path, Bright Future

NICOLE THOMAS DURRANT, '00

The year 2000 was a banner year for me. I graduated from BYU Law School, passed the bar, bought my first suit, and got married. I was working for a small firm in Salt Lake City, and the job felt like a golden opportunity. I was doing work that I liked—ERISA litigation for healthcare and disability plans—and the hours were reasonable. I made close connections with my colleagues, and I had a mentor who guided me with attention and care. I even managed to work through two pregnancies and the baby years.

All seemed to be going according to plan—until the wheels slowly started coming off. My two sons were diagnosed with a rare, chronic illness. I found out I was pregnant with my third child. We bought a fixer-upper house. And my husband started working longer hours with his job. It was all too much. My stress levels were sky high, and my family was not doing well. My husband was very supportive of my continuing to work, but in the end, I decided to leave my job and focus on our family.

In certain ways, leaving my job was the best choice. I was able to lower my stress, help my kids get the medical care they needed, and be there when the tile guy showed up. But it bothered me that I wasn't practicing law. I stopped telling people I was an attorney. When my occupation did come up—often at school pickup when I was in yesterday's yoga pants, a Hogwarts T-shirt, and flip flops—I could see people's confusion. They would always ask with concern why I didn't go back to work. It was one of the questions I asked myself often.

Was I a feminist sellout? Why had I worked so hard

just to sit at home and make cookies for my kids? Couldn't I hire a nanny, "lean in," and have it all? But with high childcare costs, numerous medical visits, a newly discovered radon problem in the basement, and complicated insurance claims, the answer was no. So I took on odd jobs: I worked yard duty at my kids' school, I taught English to adults, and I worked as a librarian. And I took writing classes at our local community college. I kept reminding myself that Sandra Day O'Connor took five years off to raise her sons, and look where she ended up.

Years later, when my children were older and in better health and when my husband's job was in a good place, I tried to relaunch my career. I bought a new suit and rehearsed what to say about the lost years on my résumé. I was hired by a small firm to practice immigration law part-time. I was excited. A month later, I received a call that my son had been in a boating accident and had suffered a serious concussion. His recovery was long, involving various therapies, doctor visits, and medications. I quit my new job and home-schooled him for a year.

Miraculously, my son made a full recovery, and once again I found myself searching for a job. I was hired as a legal intern for Al Otro Lado, a nonprofit organization that helps asylum seekers at the Mexican border near San Diego. As a legal intern, I have learned the complicated tangles of asylum law and have been able to offer real help to refugees. I am incredibly grateful to have a new chance to do work that is so meaningful to me.

Even though I have been an attorney for more than 20 years, my résumé is riddled with holes. Yet despite my setbacks, I am trying to approach my new beginnings in life with humility. For many years, I felt like I was weak for quitting my job to take care of my family. But after recently reconnecting with old law school friends, I have found I am not alone in taking a different career path than the one I imagined in 2000. Along the twists and turns, I have been able to use my skills to help my family and the people in my community. I am trying to give myself grace and to acknowledge that I did the best I could. I don't know how my legal career will unfold, but I do know my future is bright.

Bottom 50 Percent

BY JENNIFER FUENTES LANGI, '09

I never wanted to go to law school or become a lawyer. I had other plans. When the Columbine High School massacre happened during my senior year of high school, I couldn't fathom how two boys could get to that point without anybody noticing how deeply troubled they were. As a teenager, I had struggled for a year after moving to Utah to adjust to the culture, and I missed my friends in Mexico, but it never crossed my mind to do something like those boys did at Columbine. Suddenly, I felt I had found my passion—I would work with youth, particularly young men, and prevent senseless violence in the process.

The summer before my senior year at BYU, I got a job with Lightning Peak, a diversion program within Utah's Division of Juvenile Justice Services. I helped supervise a dozen teenage girls who were spending the summer building buck-and-pole fences to work off their court-ordered community service. In the evenings, the other supervisors and I ran group activities on female empowerment and other topics designed to help the girls course correct and be all they could be.

But the girls I worked with didn't seem to care about the empowerment the program was offering them. They saw no problem with their life choices, other than their punishment interfering with their summer plans. Looking back now, those girls saw right through us, and if I could go back and do it over again, I would spend more time listening and less time teaching. I failed to connect with any of them. Except for Amy.*

Amy had been through a lot. She had been prostituted out

among the members of a local gang. To gain more street credibility, she had given herself a lisp to come across like English wasn't her native language. But she was also charming, kind, polite, and such a hard worker—pretty much a younger version of the persona I worked so hard to project. I was eager to pour all of my future-social-worker self into helping her. Then she ran away from the program, hours after I thought I was finally getting through to her, and part of me broke. I suddenly found myself facing senior year with the awful realization that social work involves helping people who don't want to be helped. My results-oriented, people-pleasing self couldn't handle it.

My brother Alex Fuentes, '06, was at BYU Law at the time and suggested that I speak to the assistant dean of admissions, Carl Hernandez. I visited with Dean Hernandez and shared my woes. I wasn't built for these micro-level interac-

tions, but I still wanted to help make people's lives better. Dean Hernandez shared a vision of what a law degree could do to make my dream happen and offered me resources for an LSAT prep course. I took the LSAT in December of 2005, and by February of 2006, I had been admitted to BYU Law.

The first semester of law school was brutal. The semester would have been difficult regardless, but I was also the student president of BYU Living Legends that year. This position involved a 20-hour weekly dancing and leadership commitment and several performance tours throughout the semester. I doggedly worked to meet all my commitments, but when grades came out, mine fell below that 3.3 curve we all know well. I read the soul-crushing phrase: "You are officially in the bottom 50 percent of the class." I had never struggled with school before. Being above average was just a given in my life. That phrase destroyed me. I marched

over to the office of Dean Hernandez, the man responsible for my pain, and told him I was dropping out.

Dean Hernandez seemed surprised, but I realize now I was not the first nor the last student to show up at his office with that announcement. He shared something with me that day that changed my life. He told me that my grades would absolutely matter for many opportunities, such as paid positions my first summer of law school or certain job offers after graduation. Outside of that, he said, what would matter—and what would make me a good lawyer—was if I was a people person and a problem solver. Those were the keys to success.

Dean Hernandez's counsel kept me in law school. Later, his words and my husband's encouragement led me to sign up for the bar exam again after failing it the first time. Their belief in me enabled me to apply for an immigration attorney position in Dallas, Texas, in 2015, six years after graduating from law school, when I realized it was time I used my degree to be the advocate I knew I was all along. Their confidence in me helped me start my own firm in October 2020 after COVID-19 forced my old firm to close my department.

Even now, when my insecurities bubble up and my imposter syndrome whispers that a half-Mexican half-Lumbee Indian, first-generation college graduate has no right to have a thriving immigration law practice with 10 employees and 140,000 TikTok followers in its second year, Dean Hernandez's words calm. I am a people person and a problem solver—and that makes me a lawyer.

*Name has been changed.



Leveling Up

BY NANCY KENNEDY MAJOR, '07

Law school was both a marathon and a sprint, requiring long stretches of mental endurance and short, intense periods of mental strain. It taught me to level up in the short term and hold on for the long ride in between. I went to law school with a vision of starting an estate-planning firm that would specialize in charitable gift planning. I spent one summer in law school doing estate planning and another summer working in philanthropy. But estate planning, it turned out, was not nearly the creative, dynamic catalyst for community-changing philanthropy that I had imagined it would be. After graduation, I happily took a fundraising job. Those skills have been invaluable to me since I graduated, though I haven't applied them in the ways that I expected to.

A year after graduating from BYU Law, I met my future husband, Sam, who had just graduated from pastry school and was working as a pastry chef at a ski resort in Park City, Utah. While we were dating, Sam made the offhand remark that he wanted "boys and girls and a bakery." I had always wanted a big family. Boys, girls, and a bakery sounded like a great plan!

Sam and I were married in 2009, and by 2017 we had two girls and two boys and had purchased a well-established bakery. We thought all our dreams had come true.

But over the next four years, despite our earnest prayers, the support of family and friends, and our Herculean efforts at home and at work, everything that could go wrong did go wrong. People never asked us,

"How are you?" Instead, friends and strangers alike would go straight to "Are you okay?"—based, I assume, on our haggard faces and bloodshot eyes.

Then, in March 2020, shelter-in-place orders were issued in response to COVID-19. Over the next three months, we laid off 11 of our 14 employees, closed our retail store, and lost my mom to a sudden non-COVID infection. Those were truly dark days.

Our response to these difficult circumstances required skills I had developed in law school and have cultivated since: creative problem solving, confidence, flexibility, decisiveness, and stamina. We decided to transform our bakery's most popular cookie, an iced shortbread, into an at-home cookie-decorating kit unlike anything on the market. Our new business, Color My Cookie, was born. We pre-iced the outlines of the cookie shapes in black and white, like a coloring book page, turning each cookie into a creative canvas. We developed a line of edible watercolors and created a cookie to be the paint palette. Our first sales were to loyal customers of our

retail shop who were eager to support a struggling family business, especially one that sold a product that would occupy their children during the early days of work-from-home life.

Starting a business from scratch left no room for doubt or uncertainty. Everything I had learned with our storefront bakery had to be applied to the problems at hand. It was an opportunity to prove that those early years of intense learning, both in law school and afterward, had not been in vain. I addressed every challenge with a confidence I had lacked with our first bakery.

Nevertheless, by the time we were building Color My Cookie, Sam and I were both exhausted from the previous four years of trying to make our storefront bakery work. We were tired, financially strained, and nervous about our business revamp. The nights and the days ran together during the early days of Color My Cookie. Sam was salvaging and rebranding the wholesale division of the bakery we had essentially lost. All four of our children were under 10 and were home from school full-time. What we were building required

our minds to be nimble and for us to move from one task to another, switching gears almost constantly.

Sam and I were both keenly aware that there was no time to waste. We could not spend a lot of time gathering data or identifying the best of all possible options. We had to make quick decisions, armed with the best information we could gather and the confirmation we sought through prayer. I truly believe we have been inspired as we have laid the groundwork for the businesses we built.

Despite these challenges, we leveled up and pressed forward with an eye to the future. In the nearly two years since we started Color My Cookie, we have grown our staff to more than 20 people, shipped tens of thousands of cookie kits to all 50 states and Puerto Rico, and been featured by Food Network, the *Today* show, *Good Morning America*, and more than 100 other digital and print media outlets.

My life is a lot different than I had envisioned in my first year of law school, but it is a sweet life I treasure, and one made possible by skills I honed at BYU Law.

