You are listening to Tell Me Your Story where we connect to HLS staff on a personal level.

Hello everyone, this is Edgar Kley Filho from the Office of Equal Opportunity. My pronouns are he/him/his and today, we are talking to Ellen Shapiro-Smith, who is a program coordinator for the HLS First Year Legal Research and Writing program, who will tell us about her life, how long she is in this position at HLS and the work she does. Thank you for joining us Ellen, and please tell me your story.

Thank you, Edgar I'm really happy to be here physically. This is an exciting opportunity for me. Where do you want to start?

Let's start from your family history.

My parents are of Eastern European origin. My mother has some Italian blood in her. My father has some Argentinian blood in him.

Really?

Yes and I think they both have some Holocaust history. On my father's side, there's talk of some of our relatives being in concentration camps. My mother's father is Jewish, but her mother is not, so she's not, she was raised catholic. My father's Jewish, so I am technically, depending on who you ask, not really Jewish, but I was raised Jewish. I grew up in a small town in upstate New York where there were not very many Jews. There were two or three Jewish families, and everyone else there had never met a Jew before.

When you were young, your mom being catholic she she adopted your father’s?

My father's belief system in order to get married and have his mother approve of her. She denounced her religion and came into the fold.

My dad did the same.

Really?

Well, that was his family, his father from Germany in the evangelical side Baptist. Mom, both parents totally Roman Catholics. Serious and for him to be able to date her and possibly marry later, he had to renounce the Baptist religion and be a Catholic in order to get married that you saying the opposite that your mom had to.

Can you imagine if my mother's family was like your mother's family?

Yes.

Where they both were arguing over who was what.

But I wonder if it is also region like in Brazil, because now I don't know, it has changed a lot. Christian is still very strong Christianism. Brazil is changing from being the biggest Catholic country outside Italy or to becoming more of evangelical. I think that is a big rise and I don't know how the statistics are right now, but I think it is much bigger and at that time, mom said that was extremely serious that there was no negotiation there.

I think that is becoming less so as families become more blended. You need to accept how people are different and you love who you love and it's not about what your parents think or what your religion tells you.

You mentioned North of New York?

Upstate New York.

Upstate New York so you were born in upstate New York?

Upstate New York.

When Boston happened?

I came to Boston when I went to college.

When you went to college?

The town I grew up in it was very small. No McDonald's, three stop lights. Very small and I felt very limited by that and when I went to college, I came to Boston, and I never went back home.

Growing up in a small town in terms of the childhood. Liberating, fun?

That's a really interesting question. I was bored out of my head and it wasn't really until I think I had my son that I started seeing benefits to living in a small town. I would have magazines that I would read, 17 magazine or whatever, and it would talk about going to Bloomingdales, and buying this and buying that and going to a certain store and reading a certain book. I couldn't have access to any of that. I couldn't go to a mall. We didn't have a mall. Bloomingdales, what's that? This whole other fantasy world and restaurants I'd never heard of and cultures I never heard of. The town that I lived in, people would graduate from high school, marry their high school sweetheart, buy the house next door to their parents, and stay there for their lives. I just felt I had to conform. I have so many different facets and I'm interested in so many different things that whatever I wanted to do that was comfortable for me might be seen as weird.

But even before, sorry. Maybe I'm projecting here because I also come from a small town, very distant from big areas in Brazil and for me, the childhood, until I would say when I was 10ish or something was amazing. I had a lot of friends and we would be play on the street or going to creeks and all that kind of adventure, nature kind of thing. Did you have that or not?

I did have that.

That was a good part of being in a small town?

Good is questionable. [LAUGHTER] It gave us something to do. A lot of freedom of running around in the streets. Walking to my friends houses, and we didn't have to drive anywhere. I'm going over to Karen's house and I just walk there and then my mother would call and I would come home, or we'd walk to the pool, or everything was very easy to get to and parents trusted us to be home when it's dark out. There were only 13 kids on my block, and we played kick the can and hide and seek, and there's a place called the alleys behind everyone houses that were overgrown woods which now probably doesn't look like anything. It's probably very small. But when I was little, it was this big, adventurous like jungle.

That's wonderful.

We would run around and climb trees so there's all of that. I don't think at that time in my life, I was aware of quality of life. This is great. It just is.

That's what it is. But at least I always compare to what we have nowadays, and maybe because you are in big cities and everything, or even I don't know what the dangers out there, but felt like you were free until certain age to be playing around and imagining things, creating things with our friends and have a lot of fun until that age.

Less anxiety also.

Exactly.

People left their doors open and everybody knew everybody.

Yes.

Now when I think about putting my son on the train, I'm like, what could happen?

Yes.

I think his life is a little bit more sheltered because there's all kinds of crazy things that happen in the city.

Yes. I think that's exactly.

[inaudible 00:07:14] scary things that happen are greater.

You go from kindergarten all the way to high school in a small town?

Yes.

How was high school? School in general in high school?

Elementary school was fine. I think I did well academically. My brother was three years older than I was, and he was a straight A student and did everything teachers told him to do. He was good in class, and so he sort of set the path for me. I didn't have much choice, but I also was following right behind him. I didn't have to work very hard to be good at school. Elementary school high school as well. I had a lot of friends in elementary school, high school was I think really traumatic for me. I think I still carry my own scars from that, which is embarrassing, but I really wanted to be part of the popular crowd and I was not. I was like a goody two shoes brainiac type where I got good grades, I didn't drink, I didn't party with people. I did some athletics, but I wasn't good enough to be a star athlete and I was so desperate to be with the popular kids, and it never materialized and that acceptance of myself as not being a popular person. I think that's followed me around. It's really weird. I was not very confident, I don't think and I was anxious about being judged and I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know what I was doing so I think I was very shy at that point.

Do you think that the desire of being popular is a fantasy that in our age, we create in terms of what they are cool, they are?

I think everybody wants to be a rock star so it's that kind of thing where their lives look exciting and amazing and you want to be whatever you think they are.

It is what shows.

You see their outside.

Because you mentioned that you and your brother were academically.

Very smart, but not like we were cool so the cool kids had their own way of dressing and speaking and did their partying and they went skiing and they did all this stuff and I'm just like, can I read a book. I just want to read a book. My brother was the same way. My brother was even less social than I was. I wonder too if people who went to high school in bigger cities had as much of a difference between clicks as there was in my high school. I graduated with 300 people, and we all went to the same school from kindergarten until graduation all together so people I knew in kindergarten I was sitting next to at graduation from high school. It's very insulated and if you did something bad in second grade, everybody knew it when you graduated from high school. They still knew who you were. They still knew you were that kid that kicked the kickball on top of the roof, and so we had to stop playing kickball for that day. Everybody remembered all that stuff so I don't know, if you went to Bronx School of Science or if you went to Boston Latin, what were the clicks like? At Boston Latin that's a smart school and the schools that catered towards kids who did all their AP classes. Probably was very different socially. I have no idea, but I have to imagine that it's different and maybe everyone there is smart, so everyone there is cool, I don't know.

Then you leave high school that was not the most pleasant experience and then how was college?

College was a whole entire new world.

That's when you come to Boston?

Yes.

I end up on campus where I don't know anybody. You come to college, you don't know anyone, you're okay, am I going to do this? This is the first place I'm going to live in a campus of where I don't know a single person. What does that going to feel like, that's terrifying. But I ended up making friends with people who I am still friends with now that first year, just because we're standing in line at the registrar's office. What are you taking, I don't know what are you taking, what are you from, and you become best friends? From that beginning.

From freshman year, very close friends with people that I met that year. The one thing that was different is that people appreciated me at face value. I wasn't carrying any of this history. What did I do in second grade, what did they do in fifth grade, what did they do in ninth grade?

Yeah.

Everything was fresh. I think at that point, I had figured out what the recipe was for, cool.

Yeah.

I was able to project that somehow. College felt this is where I belonged, it felt like I had my click of people, and who were all cool. Maybe it was just so big that nobody really cared what the clicks were, I don't know.

We are just guessing here and trying to go into psychology thinking, but do you think that being free of judgment, like you said, you were in a place that you didn't know most of the people, probably nobody there, fresh start? People were going to get to know you by who you really were, instead of, and maybe you didn't have to be words so much in terms of being cool for the cool sake. You think that would make a difference or not?

Before I went to Brandeis, which is largely Jewish. I think that helped somewhat in that, everyone's a mensch. Everything knows that in culture Judaism, you tend to stick with other Jews. A Jewish person will do that. Do you have a Jewish accountant, do you have a Jewish dry cleaner? It tends to be culturally accepting just based on that. I think that was a way where everyone was accepted, I think that might have made of a difference. It was 60% Jews, many Orthodoxes, and then some people who were born in Christian or from states where there weren't a lot of Jews to round out the diversity at the school. But the summer before I went to college, I came to Harvard to go to summer school, and I lived in Cambridge in the dorms in the yard. My first experience was. Everything in Cambridge wear whatever the hell they want, They do whatever the hell they want, they look however the hell they want. I was amazing, I could wear crazy stuff, and no one would look at me was when I walked past them, that was a revelation for me. I could express whatever I wanted to express and it wasn't weird. That was my first taste of freedom.

Wow.

College was a little bit like there are some conformities in the Jewish culture.

Yeah.

But it was big enough where no one was judging me. The question you asked me about judgment, I want to be some place where there are enough people with enough different ideas that what my ideas are and how I want to express myself is not unusual and not judged and there's a lot of xenophobia in small cities.

Yes.

That was what I was running into. In here, I met people from all over the place, people who spoke English people, who had different disabilities, people who are gay.

Different backgrounds, culture, backgrounds.

There were no black, where I grew up, one black person. I was exposed to all the stuff, all these different cultures, and I love that. I could be whoever I wanted, I didn't have to conform to this little tiny set of standards that if I didn't conform to, I was a pariah.

Wow.

Coming to Boston was the best thing ever.

Two things that you are saying that brings me to think about also two topics. One, Brandeis, when you said, you found your own identity there with the majority of the students there being Jewish. Then the sense of belonging feels more satisfying because you don't have to explain yourself too much, everybody knows because they speak the same language.

Exactly.

Then on the other side, when you find diversity in Boston and Cambridge, that's another phenomenal thing that you're just explaining how many different folks around you dressing whatever they want to do or talking or hair or whatever is the expression and nobody cared because that's, hey, be who you are.

Exactly, the funny thing is when I think about what people wore, I remember looking in fashion magazines and seeing all this really cool clothing, but I had no way to buy it. In the little town I grew up in, there were no stores that sold anything other than the conformative sweater T-shirts, button up shirts. I made a lot of my own clothes, and I was a weird dresser in high school because I don't know, that's how I wanted to express myself.

Yeah.

When I came to Boston, I was like, look at all these stores. Look at all these boutiques, look at all these different ways of dressing, look at all the stuff how I can express myself. That was okay, this is how I want to be, and it was completely fine.

Yeah.

It was easy to do, and there were other people that did it. People dyed their hair and I had one ear pierced, and people would say, you only have one earring on, I'm like, so what?

Yeah, exactly.

Very funny. I grew up in a small town, I was one of three Jewish families, one of three Jewish kids who graduated with 300 other kids. Then I came to Brandeis, which was mostly Jewish, but again, lots of Judaism that I did not know about. Orthodox Jewish had different customs, and they didn't answer the phone on weekends, and they didn't use electricity on Saturday, and there was Shabbat, and there were things I didn't know about as a Jew whose mother was Catholic.

Yeah.

We were Jewish, and we did Hanukkah, we did Passover.

Yeah.

I didn't know any other holidays in between. I think I knew about Yon Kippur, but when I got to Brandeis, every weekend for the first two months was a Jewish holiday, and I had never heard of any of them.

Wow.

There's a holiday called Sukkot where people build a little called a Sukkot, it's a little hut.

Well, we have here, the students have one here at Harvard.

Sukkot you have all your meals in there, and I was, what's going on with the construction over there, what are they doing, that looks like a shack. People would explain to me, oh, that's the Sukkot for Sukkot, I'm what Sukkot? Still, even though I felt more accepted because I was Jewish, there was still a lot of diversity there. I was exposed to all these things I never heard of. There was a kosher dining hall. Many of the people that I knew only would eat at that dining hall, and I would eat at the other one, and I'm like, that person is not going to sit with me at lunch because they're going to be at the other dining hall and the non-Kosher one had more options. You had to get used to what you might run into, having not known what real Judaism is.

Wow.

Yeah, I thought, now I'm going to be in the majority, I'm going to be one of 2,300 Jewish, and I was, but then there are striations.

Yeah, whatever your history and whatever you learn about that in your own way, different from the other ones that practicing that for families for history.

That was surprise.

Wow. How was having this experience, which was already much better, thinking about your high school experience in your small town. Then you mentioned Cambridge, that's another layer. How did you feel in terms of still learning about Judaism and living in that community that also touch you so much in terms of that, but then the experience with Cambridge in a completely different way that has nothing to do with the religion or the customs that you used to and being.

I think I was much more comfortable in a setting, Cambridge, where anything goes. I didn't want to conform to what anyone else was doing. I wanted to be still exploring what am I interesting in, who am I, what draws me? Experimenting with the way I dressed or the way I spoke or what I ate or what activities I did gave me the opportunity to see, okay, what do I want to do. Being in Cambridge, there were lots more opportunities for all crazy stuff, and Brandeis had some, but a lot of it was centered around Jewish culture.

When you said that you were here for the summer, but you came back for others or Cambridge was just one experience.

Well, when I came here for summer school, I lived in the dorms. I am coming here to this town for college, I don't care where I am. I'm probably not going to apply to Harvard, I was here for Harvard summer school. I'm not going to apply to Harvard, but I'm going to live in Boston, that's it. I couldn't wait to get to college, and I think one of the first things I did probably was go to Harvard Square. Harvard Square was my favorite place to be until when it got real, probably maybe when I had my son. Things I get different. I loved Harvard Square. I think when things in Harvard Square started to become the same stores you see everywhere else.

Yeah.

Then I wasn't interested in it.

Was different?

Eventually.

Yeah.

When I came back to college, there had only been a year and a half between when I was here for summer school, and they had college. I'm like, remember when we used to go to Elsie's on Mont Alburn Street and at three o'clock in the morning and get bagels that were cooked on the grill, and they were all greasy. All little shops were very near and dear to my heart. Worst House, the tasty, all of these things in Harvard Square, I was just in love with that diversity there, crazy little shops that sold all kinds of stuff, and they were mom and pops.

Cheaper as well?

Cheap records, yeah.

Wow, no, sorry. I meant in terms of these small places that were around here, if they were more accessible for students in general.

There wasn't anything else. Harvard Square was all these little mom and pops. There was no Starbucks, I'm trying to think what else was it. There was Urban Outfitters.

Yeah, I remember.

I'm trying to think of some of the other, there was a Gap, but everything else was, well the bookstore, what was it Paperback Book Smith was huge. The Coop was amazing, I love the coop.

Yeah.

I have a book that was published, I don't remember, maybe 10 years ago, that has all of the photographs of Harvard Square as it's changed through the year.

Oh, wow, that would have been amazing.

I take it out, and I look at it like, oh, remember that coop. It looked so weird, and it had that weird basement, and it had the only public bathroom at Harvard Square. There was always a bum living in one stall.

Wow.

Do you think that the books are still there?

I have a copy of it.

You do?

You can probably get it at the library.

That would be an amazing thing to see some pictures of those. Because I am always curious about when I see pictures of many years ago, compared to what we have now.

Yes.

I remember how much changed recently, I'm here for 20 years only.

When I was in Cambridge the first time, the Red Line stopped at Harvard Square. It didn't go beyond. They were constructing the space between Harvard Square and Alewife. Where Out of Town News is right now was a parking lot. We would take a school bus from Brandeis, and they would drive us and park there and we'd all get off and run around the square and be back at the school bus at a certain time. Those days are so near and dear to my heart.

Yes.

That Harvard Square has just been such a a wonderful part of my life. Here I am still at Harvard Square.

Exactly, but when we started talking about that, it brings me with you just imagining going late at night to a place to eat bagel. It's such a different time in place and feels so much more interesting then now you feel worried that if you are walking at night, some things change.

I would go to Starbucks I guess I'll have a Muffin or have but I could have any of the Starbucks or no.

You mentioned you had just one sibling, just your brother?

Just one brother.

You go to college, good experience. Did you have already in your mind a path that you want to go or just you exploring?

That's an interesting question. My life is a series of two extremes where I'll do my two favorite subjects in school were math and art.

Math and art?

Yes. When I was in high school, there's not really an art thing. It's not really considered a real subject. I did a lot of math in high school. In college, you could do either. I wanted to be an artist. My parents said, hell no you're going to do math stuff. When I got to college, I did a little of both and I studied math for three years and it became theoretical. I could do applied math. I loved to applied math. But when it became theory, I had no experience with that at all, and I was like, I don't understand this. I do not get it. I made it up to the third year and like, I'm out. I don't understand what this is about. It was too not concrete. I changed majors to art history in my last year of college, and I had enough classes that I had taken along the way to graduate with a degree in art history.

How was the conflict with your family when you made the change?

Really, I think they were not happy.

Both your parents were?

Both my parents were teachers. My father was a professor of organic chemistry. My mother was a special education administrator and she had been a, I think a biology teacher in elementary school at some point. My father wanted me to be a scientist and science was okay. Math was my thing. Art unacceptable, you won't get a job, you won't be able to support yourself.

But art was your calling, you felt like it was what was dragging from inside.

Yes.

How was that? How did you manage to make the transition and even because I feel like we have a calling, inner calling to say, I love this. But you also have an inner feeling of guilty. Don't disappoint them.

This subject comes up in my life a lot. I will do math stuff. Like a couple of jobs, I've had, investment baking jobs and then I did some graphic design for a while and then I came back to law school. All this back and forth between the art that I love, that's subjective. I'd throw myself out there and I let people judge me versus the math side, which is, I know what the answers are, or I know the exact answer somebody wants. It's not subjective at all. It's very concrete. I go back and forth and I'm like, oh, my God, I don't want to be judged anymore, I can't stand this. Please tell me what to do when I'll do it and then I go to the job where they tell me what to do when I do it.

Varies. Yes.

I really want to express who I am, but I'm terrified of being judged. Again, high school. I was very judged for being different and weird and nonconformist and that was very painful. Even by my parents, I think, judging me as wanting to be an artist, or you can't do that. That's not good enough.

Where you would look for support in terms of can I?

Thank goodness I had math to fall back on. That made them happy. I think living with my parents, I did a lot of things to make them happy and it wasn't till I got to college, well, I'm going to take all the art courses. I met at Liberal Arts College. Yes, I'll take Math, how I'm going to take all the art courses that they offer because art was a thing in college. That was liberating, and they didn't have a choice. I'm in college I can register for whatever I want as long as I'm here. I think when I changed my major, they wanted me to graduate at that point. If you don't graduate on time, that's worse than death. When I changed my major in college, my parents didn't have a choice to be disappointed. Too bad. You won't have to pay college tuition anymore. I'm graduating. But as I went through college, so studying math for three years, I was able to get a part time job near campus at an actuarial consulting firm because I had been studying math for three years, and I was a math major for three years. I got this job that I was programming in basic, I was doing statistics, whatever they needed me to do. They taught me and that led to my first job out of school, which was working for an actuarial consulting firm in Hancock Tower. I did it. I liked it. I really didn't like the corporate environment. Nobody talked about art. There was a giant art theft the year I was working at that actuarial firm, the Isabella Stewart Gardner. A painting stolen. I was mortified and I'm like, oh my God, I'd get to work and say, do you know what happened? They were like, what are you talking about? Like, did you see this? The art world's changed forever, and they're like, what are you talking about?

Nobody cared.

I can't do this anymore. The side of me that is calling me about art.

Screaming

The political piece of that was, I can't. When I was working at this actuarial firm, I went to art school at night. I went to the museum school, which is also another place where you can do whatever you want.

This is after college?

Yes. My first job out of college, I work 9-5 wore suit and at night, I would change my clothes, bring my portfolio over to the museum school and do whatever the hell I wanted. The museum school is a giant maker space. You can use any material to do anything that you want. Art is a very loose term. You can do whatever you want and you paint on the walls, and it was really wonderful. Open environment where anything went. I would make things out of string. I would make things out of paper pull, this was the world you can do whatever you want.

All sorts of crafts and expression and everything else.

The first class I took there was called Art Foundation's workshop, and it was all about making marks. It wasn't about making art. Can you make a mark with a pen? Can you make it with a water bottle? Can you make it with a tissue? That's wet. How do you create with anything that you could? And that was just amazing. I made art out of a pair of shoes. We had some really wonderful assignments. That person who taught that class, I am still friends with her. I see her every once in a while in a different community. I remember that exercise you gave us where we had to find an inch by inch part of the school and draw it in three foot by three feet. Remember that? It really expanded my understanding of what art could be. I didn't have to be an illustrator, I didn't have to be a photographer. I could make marks.

You're free again.

I was free.

How long does work and the night studies went together?

That was six years.

Together?

After six years, I decided I don't want to work in corporate anymore and at that time I was married and my husband had his own lovely income. I decided to go back to school and I went to MassArt to get a degree in graphic design, and then I started offering my services in graphic design for free to anybody who would want it. I think that was two and half years, maybe three years and when I got that certificate, I went in to work for myself as a graphic designer. I did that for 10 years. Again, so now I'm in a subjective space. Do you like my work? Do you like my design? Are you going to pay me for it? You don't like it. I'm horrible. It was difficult because I didn't like being rejected, of course. I didn't like it when someone said, I don't like what you've done, or if they had very specific guidelines as to when I wanted to put. I wanted to do crazy design, fold out boxes that were a postcard or something. That was what we all aspire to in design school. But in the real world, people don't want that. They want a business card, they want a brochure, they want something simple. I did have one client who said, you need end report, but you can do whatever you want. I worked for them three years in a row to do their three end reports, and I did whatever I wanted. It was great. They're very cutting edge.

After all these years, working with graphic design. You took another degree?

Yes.

In art?

Yes.

And that was mostly working later with graphic design.

Yes.

What else did you do after that before you got to Harvard?

Well, my son was born at the end of my graphic design career, and I stayed home with him for five years. When I wanted to get back to work, the whole graphic design field had changed. [OVERLAPPING]

For five years.

Well, the work I did was all print. I took five years off and everything was Internet.

All right.

Everything was HTML. I was like, I don't know what any of this is. What? I can't hang out a shingle and go to work when I don't know what HTML is. I don't know what the web is. I don't know any of this. I felt very, what's the word? Scared, I think and I would have to reinvest, one of the programs I used every single day was gone.

Completely gone.

Completely gone. Replaced by another program.

All the investment that you made in a profession that you could be working with with the advent of Internet and the chains that they have.

Completely different. I could either buy a new computer, buy a new software, reteach myself or reteach myself again, the new software and I'm like, I can't do that again. I need to do something else. I got a job at the Law School Coop. $10 an hour. I can be flexible and take my kid to school. I did that for two and alf years.

When was that?

2008.

2008.

Then from that job, I was hired by one of the law school publishing companies, Aspen. I knew all the books in the bookstore. We talked to the publishers all the time, we knew what to order. I ordered all the books for all the classes. I knew a lot of the professors. I talked to the faculty assistants on the phone, what do you need? That led into working for the publishing company where I was their customer support person. There were two or three of us, but I would talk to the folks here. We need a book in digital format for a disabled student. We need an extra copy for a professor's TA. The FAs would call me, the people that I'm friends with now. Some of them, like Carolyn Hubbard.

Really?

At that publishing company all the time. When I came here, like, "Oh, Hi, Carolyn." She was like, "Oh, you Ellen? Now I know what you look like." So there's still people here that I talked to when I was in the customer service at Aspen, and that led me here to the law school. Just a natural progression, all of those things in terms of working in the bookstore, understanding law school books, understanding what the students wanted, understanding what subjects were criminal, what do the first year students take? Where do those books belong, all the lingo about 1L and 2L and the MPRE and the Bar. I was introduced to that culture at that point, and then the publishing company was introduced even further to like oh, there's other publishing companies and then there's digital and then there's flash cards, and then there's this. I talked to law schools all over the country.

Wow.

It was a really amazing job. I was one of two or three people that did that, and no one else really wanted to do that and everyone else had their own stuff going on, so I could pretty much do what I wanted there in a way as well.

Wow.

I said, before I leave, I'm going to make sure that this company can do this one thing with digital books that all the other companies are doing, but we're not. Before I leave, I'm going to make sure that's done. Everyone is like, yeah, that's what you want to do, go ahead. At some point, I saw the writing on the wall in terms of print books. Everything is going digital.

Another change again.

Yeah, another change. This company's going down. We're not going to be able to keep up because digital people don't want to pay $300 for a file. They'll pay 250 for a hardcover book. But for a file, so I'm like, this company is going to tear itself apart, and then I was like, I got to find something else, and I ended up here. It's just the natural progression of where I was.

Where did you start here? Where you are right now?

No, I started as a faculty assistant. Debbie Gallagher hired me, and I was a faculty assistant for Andrew Crespo, and Daphna Renan and Naz Modirzadeh. I was so really excited to be here.

Really?

I worked for Naz and Andrew and Daphna for five years. Then the pandemic came and people retired. Karen Thomas, who had the job before I did. She decided she was going to take early retirement.

Karen Thomas. Oh my God, yes, I do.

I went out for lunch one day. She said, "Do you want my job?" I'm like, yes. I didn't think I was ever going to get it because that's not how it works, but she retired. I applied. A couple of other people applied. Here I am. She trained me at her house during the pandemic.

That's wonderful.

When I was working for the publishing company as their customer service, I talked to Rob Sitkoff several times.

Sitkoff?

Yeah and he ordered 20 copies of his book, and they got delivered to the wrong place. He wanted them delivered to his house and they got delivered to school, something like that. The next time around, he ordered 20 copies again. I made a joke about, like, where do you want them sent? We're going to use it for doorstop where they showed up last time, what happened? When I was looking for a job, I sent him my resume. I said, "Would you please give this to whomever?" It was Debbie Gallagher at the time, will you please send this to Debbie? He walked it down and gave it to her.

Wow.

We connected over that little mistake online, when he was ordering for me and that he was happy to walk my resume down, and I think that's what helped.

I think these things are also amazing the connection they will make. What I tell people sometimes. Sometimes people focus too much in positions or titles or this or that. Yours is a different story because it was just a connection with a professor who ordered books from the company that you worked for. I always tell everybody, pay attention in connection from everywhere, any level of hierarchy that you see in the place where you are. Because a secretary, a front desk person, a custodial, a person from the cafeteria, if someone asks about you, they can say very cool things, or bad things, depending on how you treat them.

They say you're not crazy, and you do your best. They will refer.

Then those are influences that you can have and could make a difference. Professor Sitkoff, we admire a lot. The time when I was in the US, he was I don't know if you say the president, but the person who took care of the Ad board. My God, I learned so much the discipline that he had, the way that he dealt with everything, materials, I used to take care of the scheduling for Dean Sells. How he decided scheduling and the number of important folks in that group, and the way that you say, I need this and here is what it is. I always loved that because it was such an easier way for scheduling. He would ask for holding space for sometimes two, three weeks and with a good number of folks don't give you 15 minutes. It was amazing to see that. I don't know if discipline is a way, but that vision of what we need to have this done. Here's what we need to do. Choose from this list of dates, and let's go. In other things that he did too, and Jeff McNaught was working with me at the time, two years to laugh about Professor Sitkoff has a meeting, he needs this. Then learning that, with this connection and HLS faculty really took what you said and went to talk to Debbie or bring your.

I had never met him in person.

Really?

Even when I was here, I didn't know where his office was. I knew what he looked like, his picture's on the website. I was at the Museum of Natural History with my son, and I saw him there. I went up to him and I said are you Rob Sitkoff? He said, yes.

Wow.

I'm Ellen Shapiro Smith. You brought my resume to Debbie Gallagher and every year at Thanksgiving, for the thank you cards, I wrote him a thank you card saying, thank you for bringing my resume to Debbie.

That's wonderful, Ellen.

I don't know if he remembers any of this.

That's really cool. Tell me a little bit, what's the work that you do whatever you can in terms of the job that you do.

The First Year Legal Research and Writing Program is also known as the Climenko Fellowship program, and it has two functions. One, we hire young lawyers who want to be law professors, and they come to our program, and they teach the first year legal research and writing program to all of the 1Ls. They get to experience teaching. They probably have some teaching experience, but they get a whole year of teaching experience, and we also help position them for professorship someplace else for a

professorship. While they're teaching, they're also working on their resumes, they're working on their job papers, they're working on other papers that they're writing. They're trying to get their scholarship in a comfortable place so that they can offer themselves to other schools to be law professors.

Wow.

I coordinate a lot of things. I don't do the interviewing, but I set up all the interviews. I make sure everyone's office has the right name on it, and the offices are clean. I order the books for everybody. I don't do their scheduling, they do their own scheduling. They're fairly self sufficient. They're younger folks. They're pretty tech savvy, but I do see every single 1L come through my office twice a year when they have conferences with their teachers. So 550 students come in office.

Wow.

Hi, have a seat. Yes, you're next in line, and they're all knocking on all the doors of the faculty to talk to their professors about the conference. It can be very busy.

It is a mandatory?

Yes.

All 560 have to go?

Yeah, and they also have to do an oral argument at the end of the year as part of their credit for this class. One of my big jobs, and this is my favorite part of this, which might sound crazy, but there's 550 students, 14 sections. There are two arguments and there's two sides to each argument. I have to match them up with an opponent, and it can't be somebody from their section.

Wow.

It has to be the person on the other side. Then I have to book rooms for all of this. It's 17 rooms for four days in a row for the Ames. The Ames is four days long.

Oh, so you participate in the whole process for Ames as well?

Well, this is the 1L Ames. It's like a real competition. This is the one for the 1Ls. It's not a competition necessarily. It's just that they need to get credit. I don't know, they don't get any accolades. They just get credit for their class. But scheduling them is this giant spreadsheet. Wow.

It has to be whittled down. First it's by day, what days are available, and what rooms are available. Then I get lists from the professors about who's on this team and who's on which side. It has to be calculated. You have to have an even number or the right number of opponents for each section. I have this giant spreadsheet and sorting all these different ways and matching it up all these different ways, and then it has to be presented in different ways. It's presented, we post it online by team number, and your team number is your section, which would be 1A or 2A and 1A or 1B plus an odd and even number. The odd numbers are the appellants, the even numbers are the appellees. I've given this information 14 different times.

Then I have to put it all together, and then come out with this schedule that says, by team 1A1, 1A2, 1A3, who's your opponent? What time is your argument? Where is your argument?

Oh, my.

It's cross reference. That's one spreadsheet that they can look at. They can also look at one by day of the week. Who's presenting on Monday in what room? There's four pages to that one Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Then there's another one which is based on what argument you're doing. Before I get everybody's team assignment, there's a sign up sheet if you have a conflict with any of those nights of the week.

With the possibility of a conflict.

Yes, sometimes it's during Ramadan, sometime it's during Passover.

Oh, yes.

Sometimes it's somebody has a wedding, somebody has another class. Sometimes it conflicts with class. About 70 a year, students email me and say, I can't do this night. I have to organize all of that by what nights they can't do and then when I have this spreadsheet already, make sure that none of those people have been scheduled for the nights they can't do. This is my favorite project.

Tell me one thing because we were explaining in my mind I was saying, my God, which part takes more math and which part takes more art? Because I feel like you are drawing things.

It's both, it's really both. Like at the end, I have to make sure it's legible. Make sure the font is the right size, make sure that people know how to read the columns or rows so they don’t get stuck.

Yes.

It has to be formatted the same way so that this team has a slash between their names and this team doesn't have a space. It has to also have a slash. Like everything has to be looking easy to read and presentable and consistent. I love that piece. The spreadsheet piece, I think is my favorite part where I'm like, Okay, first, I want you to sort by, what side of the argument they're on. Then I want you to sort by what time it is. Then I want you to sort by what room there, that stuff. I love Excel. This is really weird.

But you do that every year.

That's only the spring semester. The fall semester is organizing the materials for the professors or the fellows who want to go on the market. It's getting their resumes together, getting their job talk papers together, getting a list of all of the openings in all the law schools in the United States. People will post what jobs available and I keep a list of what school, what job, what do you need to do so that our fellows can look on here and say where do they want to apply. I don't help them fill up the application, but they fill out an application so that they can tell the world that they're on the market or helping them, take care of their class, take care of their students, organize what they're organizing, and then do this other part. I support in any way they need to make sure they get on the deadline, they've got their things filled out, they've paid their fee. I do all their expenses. I do some of the budget for the clinical fellowship. I love working with the young people. The young learners are really quite exuberant.

How did the students in general? How?

I don't interact much with the students except for those two weeks. All the students at the law school had been perfectly lovely. I never met a student that was not.

I don't remember having that issue as well when I was in the US, and you were in a place where all the complications and all. I think you have to see people and try to imagine or at least.

Where they are coming from.

Yes. Well, it's hard to just say that as a norm. Because people have different experience for whatever reason that they see. But all the ones that I felt that could be what sometimes people call difficult, there was always something behind that drove them to becoming anxious or angry for some reason or whatever it was. I always felt in a small conversation at the front desk. There was room to diffuse that a little bit.

I think it has to do with whether you can empathize and whether you can, I feel like when I speak with somebody in person, I get a vibe. Where they are.

Yes. The energy, right?

And they're anxious or or they're depressed or something and what does it feel like for me to be that way and then I'm going to treat them as if I wanted to be treated if I was feeling that way.

Yes.

And just to understand that somebody's coming from a different wounded place, for whatever reason and I want to help them, especially on the emotional side. Hey, let's get some perspective. I had to do all that stuff with myself, get some perspective, and think about what's going on and how important is it and know how much does it matter in the real world and try and get to baseline so they can make a decision with their thinking brain rather than their emotional brain. I think that there probably are some people who don't have that empathy. I think the students are being rude. Whereas I see them when I go, where they're coming from? Oh, this must be horrible. Whatever they're feeling or they're going to get kicked out or whatever. Let's calm down and deal with what we have to deal with.

How you put your mind to try to.

I think some of it is curiosity.

Yeah, I guess.

You want to learn? How does this work? I don't understand and I think a big part of it is putting yourself in someone else's shoes and realizing that their motivation is not a personal attacker. That's a very difficult lesson for most people, most women to learn, I have struggled with that myself. It's work, it's business. What do they need? They're not saying I'm a bad person, it's not the way they want it. Do something different and the piece of rejection, I think, being rejected from high school follows me around all over the place and I feel very sensitive sometimes when people are saying, you can do this right. I'm like, I'm a horrible person because I'm used to being rejected from high school or something.

Does that make, because sometimes I feel like experience that you had that were not comfortable in the past, sometimes help you to understand better or other environments when you are dealing with sometimes what you're doing.

It takes a certain amount of self awareness that some people don't have. I don't understand what self awareness is. But if you can think about it and tease it out like what does this feel like, I remember. Then think about what it reminds you of and they go, that was this and that meant that, I can bring it back into the present, and, of course, I'm thinking about this in a distorted way.

That's really nice. I'm glad that you left this small town.

Me too.

It feels like you are in a good place where you work right now, what you are doing at Harvard right now, it is an important work that you are doing as well.

Yes. Very satisfying.

And you also work with a horrible person that I know.

I have the best boss in the world.

I love Susannah Barton Tobin is one of the faculties that when I was in the OS. I don't know. Her personality because coming from a different country, being here for a while. Being working at law school. When you see this faculty, you know these people are going to be on TV or writing books or so your vision of them for me is like in a different level. I just Susana always went to the University because she also runs BSAs? Yes. She would be in your office probably all the time talking to Evon.

Yes, with Yvonne, which was another horrible person as well. They're all horrible. But Susannah never came with the title.

She's very down to her.

Isn't that amazing. That's what I think is incredible.

Makes her successful at her job in many ways. Yeah. She's not intimidating. She's honest and she's real and she really wants to help you. Yeah. Cares an enormous amount about the student.

Which I think is amazing. She always made me feel sometimes people pass by you when you were in a front desk. I had all this experience of working there. Sometimes people see you there and talk to you and the same way that when they see you on highways. I had people who passed by me, and I was just in my position there. I am fine, Hey, that's what I'm working here for. But I have the ones that saw me there. That when you have those kind of people, that hierarchy that identify you there, that say I see you, how are you doing, it makes a huge difference.

Try and see people as people before they are anything else. I try not to pay too much attention to the hierarchy. Sometimes that's difficult. But I want to realize that we're all walking wounded in our own way. We're just trying to all get along. Be who we are and be people and have human being emotions and, get raises and whatever. That everybody wants to be seen. So I try and make sure that I talk to people that may be marginalized in some ways.

It is true.

I want to say hi to the people that clean our office, we need the notes all the time, we need the extra.

That's really cool.

Thank you. Thanksgiving, I left a note in Spanish. I speak Spanish, but I left a note Spanish “thank you for cleaning our office, our bathrooms and everything”.

That's really nice because that means a lot to these folks. That's what really really matters because they work hard, our custodis, folks in hurds, the trades, folks, even the landscapes that I was there. I remember people stopping by and greeting and saying stuff about how place looks nice, clean, beautiful, whatever it is. It is that is always, you feel good about that. You feel like you are being seen. That's important.

I know how it feels like to feel invisible. I don't want anyone to feel ins.

Yes. Exactly.

That's a big part of my person as well. One thing I have to mention that people may or may not know about me is that I'm a swing dancer.

Really?

Yes, I've been dancing for 20 years. As many nights of the week as I can. There's a bunch of different places. There's certain organizations that.

Wasn't there one near Imman Square or not?

Yeah, there's a church over here on Garden Street, that's the first church on the corner on Garden and Mason. There's a dance there on Mondays. There's a ballroom in Alewife Q Ballroom. There's dances there on Fridays.

How is this open to folks in dinner, or anyone can go?

It's semi-choreographed dance, so you have to know what you're doing as partner dance, so it's lead-follow-based. So I've been doing that forever. That has really taught me a lot about people and group dynamics and about popularity and it's reminded me of high school.

Wow. That's interesting.

To Some of my high school fantasies about being popular. I mean, I became very good very quickly. So I was a popular girl for a little while.

You are popular now because you deserve the popularity, now,

That doing what you love draws people to you. Start out saying, what can make me popular? I'm going to learn how to dance. I dance really well. I'm gonna regiment myself so I can get to a certain level, it wasn't about that. It's about expression. Again, it's about expression. It's about authenticity.

That's a really cool thing. You said that there was one here in the church and by Garden st, one in Alewife. The ballroom. Some people go to watch or some people how does that work?

No one really watches.

You have to be part of?

You could earn $15 to cover charge to watch. Occasionally, there's live bands. Sometimes it'll happen in a bar where they'll be patrons at the bar, doing whatever they do, socializing, and the band will be playing, and then there's a dance floor also. A lot of places it's just dancing. So there's a live band in it.

The ballroom is just dancing in the Alewife.

There's no bar or anything like that. There's no food. Some places will have both.

You find another segment of art that you are enjoying?

Yes. It's taught me so much about people love, which sounds really weird. Yeah. But about connection. I know a lot of people and I love all these people that I dance with. I don't know any other last names. I don't know what political affiliation they have. I don't know anything else about them.

This is beautiful.

They're all my best friend.

Yes.

Because we dance together. So it's just like it destroys barriers. It's very leveling. Being an introvert, also, I would much rather be in a room of 100 people I don't know and dance with all of them. Than be in a room with 100 people I don't know and have to have a conversation with them.

That's a good point because that's what I tell people in certain social environments, if I don't know anybody, I will be in the corner or by a column that I can just stay there and feel okay and then eventually, you take not too long go. I learned. I got better about that a little bit. I think slowly, I don't know if because I'm here for too many years, but I feel more comfortable with that too, which is liberating in that same way. We have talked before. I'm just going to mention this because we are getting to the end of our conversation. That every time when you stopped by, we work here for a while and I never had a chance to. The first time when you talked about talking on podcast and I went to chat with you was just for half an hour and I think we went over an hour. And then today before you started even recording this, I don't know how long you did. I was saying, there you go again. I mentioned that we have to meet just once or twice a year.

Five minutes every day.

But it is good when you have this connection. When you feel like the conversation can go everywhere and feel free to talk about things. I really enjoy that. I am an introvert. I don't like social gatherings in general. But I love when you can have whatever people think about the conversation silly or not or whatever. You make me feel that way, and I really appreciate that that you bring that feel much.

These are my favorite people. You few and far between, but [inaudible

Ellen. Thank you very much.

You are very welcome.

For participating to come.

It was a pleasure for me. Thank you.

I really appreciate you coming and talking to us. I think it's amazing that you have folks with expertise. You talk We are going to have a chance to talk more about art and everything else, because I want to know more about what you like in terms of art, what expression and everything else. But for being here, for participating in this project, I think it's nice to have this information that people don't know, talk a little bit more about where you are right now, which is an amazing place. Anyways, there we go again. Half an hour.

Thank you very much. This is Ellen.

I really appreciate you taking time with us.

No, I really appreciate you for being here. For everybody out there, listening to our stories. Thank you very much. We'll be back soon with another one. Bye bye.