



Episode 113: Being a First-Generation College Student and Law Student

Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today, we're here with Law School Toolbox writer, and 2L Shirlene Armstrong. To talk about being a first-generation college, and law student. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically I'm here with Lee Burgess.

We're here to demystify the law school, and early legal career experience. So that you'll be the best law student, and lawyer you can be. We're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the Catapult Career Conference. I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#).

If you enjoy the show, please leave [a review](#) or rating on your favorite listening app. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the [contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com](#), and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back, today we're talking with Shirlene Armstrong. A 2L at Wayne State University School of Law, and a writer for the Law School Toolbox. Shirlene is a first-generation college and law student, and we're thrilled to have the chance to talk with here about her experience so far in law school. So welcome Shirlene.

Shirlene A.: Thank you Alison.

Alison Monahan: We are excited to have you here. So first off, why don't you just give us a bit of background on your path, and how it is that you ended up in law school?

Shirlene A.: Yeah, so like you said I'm a first-generation college student, and lawyer, so law student. I actually grew up in a relatively small town north of Detroit. We're here in Michigan. In general, growing up, I've always had a really strong sense of ethics, and right and wrong. So, when someone would do something that was mean to someone else, it would never sit right with me, it would always bother me.

I always tried helping people, and I always from a young age understood the difference between right and wrong. And then when I was in sixth grade at my middle school excuse me, I had to do a thing called "career cruising" where it's a fun little survey essentially. Where you just answer a bunch of questions about yourself, and what you would do in certain situations.

And it gives you what your skills are, and what kind of careers would be best suited for you. And when I was in sixth grade all of my results were law related. So, I was kind of-

Alison Monahan: I think I did that once, and they told me that I should be a sheep farmer or something.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, they always have a weird one like a basket weaver, or a circus clown, and of course I had a couple of those. But I had judge, I think one was a litigator, and as a sixth grader I was like, "Well what are these words mean?" But so that was-

Alison Monahan: Right, so all of yours were kind of pointing the same direction.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, so that was just kind of the spark I guess. And I've always loved school, and I've always loved learning. I consider myself a lifetime learner, and so in high school I had the chance to take a couple of law classes. Nothing like law school, but just a little taste of what it's like, and I loved it. I could never get enough.

And then when I went to Grand Valley, I also took more law classes, and that just kind of solidified my decision to go to law school. And so now I'm in law school, and I'm still loving it. So-

Alison Monahan: That's awesome.

Shirlene A.: Yeah so, I've been wanting to do it for a while, but it's never really wavered. So, I've always really enjoyed it.

Alison Monahan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and would you say this is something that your family and friends had been supportive of. Even though it was a little bit outside of the scope of what they had done in their past?

Shirlene A.: Yeah, I would definitely say I'm very fortunate, and I have a great set of friends, and a great, great family. My parents obviously both did not go to school, and we're working class, so they ... I've known since a very young age that I needed to do well in school, because I needed to go to college, and my parents have always pushed me to be successful.

And so honestly my family is a very strong point in my life, and they've always been very proud, and supportive. and even my cousins, and my uncles, and my aunts, and all of those extended family are always like, "When are you going to be a lawyer?" So, it's really great.

Alison Monahan: That's good, and do you think it's impacted your experience so far, being kind of this pioneer? Or are you just sort of rolling with it?

Shirlene A.: I think it's a little bit of both. I definitely would say that it's kind of a challenge to be a first-generation college student in general, but law student it's a whole new world. And each person has their own experiences with it. For me, for example, my parents are working class, and they help out as much as they can, but money has definitely always been an issue for me.

I've had to work really hard, and in school normally I would work through the school year. Rather than just focusing on my studies. I've worked since I was 16, but I think it's definitely taught me the value of hard work, and it's given me this higher drive. And I would ... I've always been a very ambitious person. I have a very high drive in life, but I've participated in a lot of different organizations.

I've taken on a lot of different opportunities because I know if I don't take on these opportunities, I won't get them. So, I need to show that I'm willing to take that initiative, and take control of my life the way that I want to. So, in a sense it's a positive, and it's a negative. But there are definitely some challenges, but I would like to say that it's definitely been a strength for.

Alison Monahan: Right well I think it seems like you understand that no one is really going to hand you anything.

Shirlene A.: Oh yeah, no.

Alison Monahan: Which is actually pretty valuable. Today's economy I think that's a message we try to get across to a lot of law students. Whatever their background.

Shirlene A.: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: You've definitely got to be out there hustling, and making those opportunities for yourself, or they're probably not just going to fall into your lap.

Shirlene A.: Yes, I would agree 100 percent. It's definitely the manner of hard work, especially in the legal field to. You really have to work hard to show that you're willing to work hard so ...

Alison Monahan: Yeah exactly. It's definitely not a career path for the lazy-

Shirlene A.: Oh definitely-

Alison Monahan: Whatever your background.

Shirlene A.: Oh god no.

Alison Monahan: Alright well let's talk now about some of the more practical aspects about going to law school, because you've written a lot of really great stuff on the Law School Toolbox website. We encourage people to go and read some of [your posts](#), which we'll link to here. But first off let's start by backing up a little bit,

and talking about the application process. So, do you have any general advice for people who are applying to law school? Particularly for people who aren't coming from this kind of more typical law student background.

Shirlene A.: Well, just in general know that you actually want to go to law school. It's a big-

Alison Monahan: Excellent advice.

Shirlene A.: Yes, but that sounds a little bit of a stupid part of advice I guess, but not really. But a lot of people, and not a lot, but there are some people ... And I have friends, which I obviously won't name names, but they've gone to law school because they felt like they needed to. And law school is a lot of hard work. It's a lot of money, it's an investment in your future. Both in time, and in money.

So, if you're going for the wrong reasons, you're not going to enjoy the experience, and you're going to get burnt out. And so, definitely first just step one make sure you know you want to go to law school. And it's okay if you decide that it's not your path, but know that you want to go to law school. Don't put yourself through the stress if you don't have to. But also-

Alison Monahan: And do you have any thoughts on how people can sort of figure that out? That are thinking, "Well everyone's telling me I should be a lawyer. I like to argue." How should they figure this out?

Shirlene A.: And that's kind of leading into my next thing. Know what you're getting into, and know where to get help, and what your resources are. For me, like I said, I've always had this kind of interest in law. But interestingly enough, I discovered the "Girls Guide to Law School" when I was looking into it, and that really helped me because I found the advice, and the support that I was kind of looking for.

As especially a first-generation college student. First generation law student, had no clue what to do. What the process is, but being a lawyer, being a law student, going into the legal field is a lot different than how people perceive it. A lot of people think of "Law and Order" or "Legally Blonde" or whatever, and they think, "Oh okay, so it's just you go to court all the time, and you argue."

Which that's actually not what lawyers do on a daily basis for the most part. There's a lot office work, there's a lot of paperwork, there's meeting with clients. There's calling people, it's an office job, but that doesn't mean you're never going to go to court. Some lawyer's actually do, and some don't, but just know that-

Alison Monahan: Most don't.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, exactly-

Alison Monahan: But some do.

Shirlene A.: Some do. Some like to hang out in the court, but a lot of it is actually in the office. And a lot of people don't realize that, until they actually get into it. I actually had a friend who once told me she had, had aspirations to be a lawyer, but I knew she had worked at an office at my old university, Grand Valley. And she told me she never wanted to work at an office again.

And I kind of looked at her, and was just like, "Well, being a lawyer is all about being in an office. It's-" And she's like, "Oh I'm going to go to court all the time." And I said, "Okay, good for you. Whatever you want to do." But definitely do your research, would be my number one suggestion on if you want to go to law school.

Because if you know what you're getting into, especially if you don't ... You're just kind of on the fence, it's much better to do that extra step of doing that research, and then knowing, "Oh okay, yeah. This is the right path." Or, "Oh, okay you know what I think I'd be better suited somewhere else."

Alison Monahan: No, I think that's great advice, and it's often what we tell people as, "Look you've really got to understand what you're getting in to here." Because I think that people do have a misperception often times from TV, or reading books, or whatever about what being a lawyer is about. And I think particularly for people who don't have parents I mean ...

Lee, my business partner in the Law School Toolbox, both of her parents were lawyers. So, she kind of grew up in court, with her father who was a criminal defense lawyer, or a prosecutor. Basically, they didn't have anywhere to take her when she was five or six years old, before school. So, she would go to court with them.

And so, she really had an understanding of what this is like on a day to day basis. But for somebody who doesn't have that, I mean for me no one in my family was a lawyer. I think off in the distant past there was someone who was a judge or something, like in the 1800s.

Shirlene A.: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: It wasn't, "Oh yeah, I have an understanding of this." And frankly, I mean I'm not really sure I did have an understanding of-

Shirlene A.: And I didn't either.

Alison Monahan: What exactly it would be like.

Shirlene A.: To be honest, until I did my own research, and I knew ... Because I would say I was a late person. I thought, "Yeah, lawyers go to court. Judges, they make

decisions." I mean you can say that with any profession though. You don't know the profession, you don't know the job until you've done your research. Until you know, or you've experienced it.

But I would completely agree. I had no idea until I was actually like, "Okay what is being a lawyer like?" And even just a lot of lawyers ... Well I cannot say a lot, but there are lawyers out there who will meet with young aspiring law students, or even pre-law students. And let them shadow them for a day, and show them, "This is what we do every day. This isn't a show. This is what we do." So ...

Alison Monahan: And is that something you actually did? I think that's a great idea.

Shirlene A.: I didn't actually. I did have a lot of conversation ... I didn't physically go into an office, and shadow someone. But I did have a lot of conversations. I do have friends who did shadow. Unfortunately for me I had a very busy schedule between work, and organizations, and going to class. So, most of my typical business hours were unfortunately packed. So, I did not pursue that.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Shirlene A.: But, I do have friends who did. And I had numerous conversations with lawyers, and judges, and people who are paralegals. So, it was a very helpful experience to kind of get that first-hand perspective.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think that's totally valid too. I mean always encourage people to go and do informational interviews-

Shirlene A.: Oh definitely.

Alison Monahan: Ask people, "What's your day like? What do you like? What do you not like?" Talk to some ex-lawyers, not just the people who stuck with it. And really try to get that rounded perspective of, "Okay, this is what my life would look like. This is what my job would look like. These are the things I would need to ... Skills I would need to develop." Or whatever it is.

Because sometimes frankly law school, and or being a lawyer, just isn't going to be a great fit for someone based on what they like, and what they're good at. And for some other reason, maybe they're doing it, and you just want to be like, "You know what? Go be a programmer if that's what you're into. That's a perfectly valid career choice. You don't have to be a lawyer."

Shirlene A.: No, and I think that a lot of people they think lawyers, and they think, "Oh, they make a lot of money." But there are some lawyers that I know that make 40,000\$ a year whatever, or they're-

Alison Monahan: It's pretty typical.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, and a lot of people don't understand that. They think, "Oh lawyers make big money." Because they have all this schooling, and they have all this knowledge, but I mean that's not always the reality. So, do your research.

Alison Monahan: No, in fact on the Girl's Guide I have a [post](#) about ... With a graph even, very visual. About the bi-modal nature at least of starting salaries, where most lawyers who come out of law school. Most new lawyers are making around \$60,000 a year, and then you have this jump, \$160,000 a year, which is the big law money. But a very small percentage of people are making that.

So, I think you're right. People like, "Oh lawyer, yeah you're going to be loaded." A, you're probably going to have substantial debt-

Shirlene A.: Oh yeah.

Alison Monahan: I mean we're talking \$150,000 or more, is not unusual. That's a lot to pay back. On a starting salary of \$60,000. So that's one of things I always encourage people too. Particularly if you don't have a lot of family resources to fall back on, is you've got to be realistic about the finances.

Shirlene A.: Yes.

Alison Monahan: Alright, well let's back out of that for a second, and talk a little bit more about the application process. What do you think people should think about with respect to their personal statements? For example, are there topics that are good? Things to be avoided. Kind of how personal should these be? I mean they call it a personal statement, but is it really a place to dump all of your personal stuff. And then how can people frame life challenges that they might have faced. In ways that can appeal to the admissions committees?

Shirlene A.: Yeah so, yes personal statements they are personal, but they don't want your whole life story. Definitely I think in general that you don't want to tell them about you, but you want to tell them the story of you. Don't tell them everything about you. They don't need to know every heartbreak. They don't need to know every failing paper.

But what you should do is you should frame it in a way, to describe what is unique about you. What you're interested in. So that they remember that part about you. So, you do have a lot of freedom with the personal statement, because it is a personal statement. It is about you, it is the story of your life. But it is a chance for you to introduce yourself to this law school.

So, you are trying to impress them, so you definitely want to be persuasive in it. You want to show them I can be a good law student, I can be a good lawyer. This is my first impression. This is how I want to be perceived, because unfortunately they will judge you, but that's the unfortunate part about life.

But and you can add personal touches. I believe that during my ... When I ...
Way back when, it wasn't even very long ago, but-

Alison Monahan: Back in the day.

Shirlene A.: Back in the day when I wrote my personal statement, but I think included a story ... I had talked about obviously being a first-generation college student, because that's always a highlight. And that's a big part of my life. So, I kind of shaped that around ... Like I said I have a very close family. I have a close family tie, so I kind of shaped that around how my family has supported me, and how that shaped me to be that hardworking person.

So, you definitely want a story with an edge, a persuasive paper. Just think of it as your first legal argument.

Alison Monahan: Right I think that's a great point.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, and in addition so challenges are just that. They are challenges. So, and no one's perfect. People have things from their past, and you could be coming from undergraduate. You could have had a job for 20 years, and now you're coming to law school. That's the cool thing about law school, is it's very diverse in ages, and backgrounds.

So, you definitely ... I believe in a ... Not a full disclosure, but an appropriate amount of disclosure. Because if you think they'll find out about it, they probably will. Especially something bad like if you had an issue at your university. Like let's say you got reprimanded, but you can flip these, and show, "Yes I made this mistake. Yes, this is what happened. I'm here to clear the confusion, and I'm going to tell you what I learned from this experience, and how I've grown, and how I've improved from it." So ...

Alison Monahan: Right and that can be a great use of the addendum as well. I think sometimes people think they have to put all this in the personal statement ... I think the point you make about the personal statement being your first impression is a great one. Do you really want to be talking about that sophomore year arrest for drinking on campus, in your personal statement? Probably not.

Put that in the addendum so you know this was a mistake, here's how I handled it. Whatever you did to handle it, great place to put it. But again, the personal statement is about you, but it also has to make it clear why you want to go to law school. Why you want to be a lawyer. Why you're going to be good at this. I think that was all great advice, and ...

Shirlene A.: Oh.

Alison Monahan: Go ahead-

Shirlene A.: Or yeah, I'm sorry, and I was going to say I do remember. I completely forgot about the addendum part, but yes that is your time. And they do want people to put those on there. That adds an extra personal touch, and yes don't fully go off about, "Oh yeah, I got an MIT junior year, and let me tell you about it."

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and some of this you do ... I mean the thing about the application is you would need to read the questions really carefully. Because if you don't disclose something that you should have disclosed, this can come back to bite you when you've graduated, and you're preparing to take the bar exam, and they start asking questions. And then they realize you didn't disclose something you should have disclosed on your law school application. Believe it or not, they actually go look at them.

Shirlene A.: Oh yes.

Alison Monahan: So just be careful. Make sure that you're being straight forward, etcetera.

Shirlene A.: One thing that my school has done a really good job at letting us know, is that when you go to take the bar, and apply for the bar. Is they will do a full check on you. And if you have to disclose something, they will find it out, and they'll ask questions.

So, you can always come back to your student services, and if you miss something on your application don't panic. You can always go back, and talk to your student services. They normally have some sort of form that you fill out, but it's definitely-

Alison Monahan: You're like, "Oops!" Okay great, and what about the money aspects of applying. Because this can be a big issue for a lot of people. Do you have any advice on handling application fees? LSAT cost, that sort of thing?

Shirlene A.: Yes, I will say that it does cost a lot of money. And that was one thing that going back, I would have loved to know about way before I did. It does ... because you know you have to take the LSAT, which is the standardized test in order to get into law school, and that costs close to 200\$. There are some regular fees, and it kind of adds up. And by the time you're getting ready to start school, it could be upwards to \$1,000, \$2,000 just to apply to law school.

One thing that I did find in my own personal research, is that some fees especially with the law school ... The LSAC, and you can find more information on the website. But some fees can actually be waived, especially if for example you are a first generation working class ... You're struggling with money, whatever. You're on your own. And I believe that there's an application you can fill out, and you have to go through certain processes.

But there are some fees, especially on the LSAC website, that can be way of some application fees. Some schools in order to get you to apply, they will waive

the application fee. But it can be very expensive. So, if you can't get them waived, or if you missed the deadline to get fees waived, or if you paid things already, and now you can't get it waived ...

Definitely try your best to space out the cost. If you can. That makes it a lot easier, rather than dumping 1,000, because most people can't do that. Especially if you're coming from first generation, and unfortunately sometimes family can't help. But I'm sure ... And I guess I can't say I'm sure, but some family if you ... Instead of getting a Christmas present, if your grandparents, your parents whatever could chip in on your application fee. Or chip in on your LSAT registration fee or something. That's always great.

And then personally for me in order to get ready for law school, I was fortunate enough to graduate a semester early from undergraduate. So, I had from January, 'til I started in August to work full time. So, I worked full time and put a bunch of money away. I was living at my parents' house at the time, so that was great.

So, if you can it's perfectly okay to take a gap year. A lot people suggest taking a gap year, but definitely think about money. Because it is a lot, and it's a lot up front. So definitely try to plan ahead.

Alison Monahan:

I think that's great advice, and also if there's a school you're really interest in applying for, I think it's totally fair to shoot them an email, and say, "Hey, I'd love to apply. I don't really have the money for this. Is there any way you can waive the fee?" And I've heard a lot of times they actually will.

So, it's worth again, advocating for yourself hustling, and seeing what you could do, because a lot of schools would love to have applicants like Shirlene ... Alright so once you've hopefully gotten into some schools, what should people consider as they're deciding where to go. What kind of factors do you think they should be looking at? On just okay, this is a top X school.

Shirlene A.:

So yes, each school is different. That's one thing you need to know. Each school has their own setup. Has their own curriculum. There's general things that will overlap, but you definitely need to research what school you want to go to.

But something to consider is, where do you want to practice? That's an important thing to think about, because once you get into law school, unless you're intending on transferring, which, I mean, personally, I don't suggest. But everyone is allowed to do whatever they want ... lots of people do that and do fine, but that's just too overwhelming for me.

But think about where you want to practice, because you're going to be setting up your network, wherever you're going to school. You're going to get those connections, you're going to meet a lot of people. For example, for me, I go to school in Detroit. I plan on practicing in Detroit, but if I went to school at

Michigan state, which is in East Lansing, but I wanted to practice in Detroit. All of the people I've met, all of the places I've worked were probably in East Lansing.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Shirlene A.: So now I don't have those connections. so that's a definitely important consideration, and then also think about what you want in a law school. Some law schools have different programs. Some law schools have a really good mock trial team, court team, law review. Some have specialties on certain types of law. Certain curriculums. Certain professors.

And then there's also dual degrees that you can take too. So definitely do your research, and think about ... Kind of make yourself a list on what specifically do you want in a law school, and what kind of experience do you want, because ... And obviously go for a tour.

So, it's very similar to undergraduate in the fact that yes, you need to go take a tour. You need to go see the campus. You need to see what the school life is like in order to know what you want in the law school. But definitely also other things to think about are in longevity terms of, where you want to practice. Where you want to setup your network, and what is the area kind of like, so ...

Alison Monahan: Mm-hmm (affirmative) no, those are all great points. Sometimes people come to us say, "Well I got into school number 30, but then I got into school number 40 in the area I want to practice. I should go to 30, right?" And we just sort of, "No I don't think so." You need to start making those connections.

Shirlene A.: And ranking, and peoples ... I will say that a lot of people are concerned about ranking-

Alison Monahan: Which is valid.

Shirlene A.: Which is valid, because there's top tier, middle tier, lower tier, and kind of un-ranked, which just kind of blends into lower tier. But and those are important, and those will tell you different things about the law school. But if it's a couple points, or whatever, but don't just go to a school because of it's ranking. Unless it's top tier.

Alison Monahan: Right exactly.

Shirlene A.: If you're deciding between a school that's 80, and a school that's 70, there's not going to be much of a difference besides ... If you're going to be happier at the 80 school, because that's the area you want to practice in. So yes, rankings are important, but there are other considerations that you should think about before you decide, "Oh yes, I'm going to go to this law school." But you can always transfer.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You just transfer. Alright, so now let's talk about school itself, because you did a really interesting series for the Law School Toolbox site last year. Where readers could almost walk alongside you, literally when you were starting your first weeks of law school. So, looking back, what if anything surprised you about the early days of law school? And is there anything you'd wish you'd known before you started classes?

Shirlene A.: Yeah man, that was a trip. That was almost a year ago, so I'm kind of getting more flashbacks. But I mean I have always been a very dedicated student, and I've always been a hard worker. But I was very overwhelmed my first couple weeks of law school.

I can remember sitting in my apartment, and just going, "Why am I doing this?" But I definitely wish I could have told myself back then ... I wish I could tell my former self, "It's going to be okay. It's going to be fine." I'm not going to lie, it's a lot of work. It is a lot of studying. I've always studied a lot, I've always worked really hard, I've always done the work I've needed to do, but this is studying times 10.

So that in general, and I'm no means to scare you. Because they will also scare you in your first couple weeks, but everyone's going to fail. I think they said the first ... During orientation, "Look to your left, look to your right. By the end of the year, or by the time you graduate, one of you won't be here." And you're just like ...

Alison Monahan: And they still do that?

Shirlene A.: I'm sure they are still doing that today.

Alison Monahan: Wow.

Shirlene A.: And I mean first, the 1L year they say they scare you to death, and it's true. It is really true. It does get better as you go, but it is a lot of work. Law school is a lot of work, especially in your first year, because you're not only trying to learn how to be a law student, and you're not only just trying to learn how to be a future lawyer, or learn the law, you're just trying to learn everything.

And you're kind of overloaded, and they really do front load you in the first couple weeks. It kind of calms down a little bit, and then it increases again before finals hit. But just know that it will be okay. You need to find your balance, and you kind of need to take time for you. And you will ... As you go in law school, you will figure out what the best strategy is, and how to survive. I think is the appropriate term. But it definitely will overwhelm you, and if you're not overwhelm, congratulations. You are amazing, I look up to you, but-

Alison Monahan: I think that would be pretty rare.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, it's going to be overwhelming, but you will make through it. It is a lot of hard work, and I will tell anyone that. And I will tell anyone who is trying to apply to law school, it will be a lot of lot of work. You will learn a lot, you will do a lot. You will read so many cases, but it is all for a greater purpose. And just remember that this is your first step of being an aspiring lawyer. Being a doctor in training. It's all worth it in the end, but know that you will be front loaded, and overwhelmed.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that sense of overwhelm, and just sort of panic, and "What am I doing here?" Is definitely pretty common. I mean Lee tells a story about getting a bad grade in her legal writing class, and just sitting on the floor sobbing about, "I can't believe I gave up my job for this as a working professional. What am I doing?" That's pretty normal. Everyone kind of has to go through that.

So yeah, you just have to sit with that. Be upset for a while, and then move on. Alright so next up let's talk about how did you find your people in law school? Because I think at least for me, having those relationships in law school. My friends, mentors, maybe with professors, those ended up being really important. How about you?

Shirlene A.: And I would agree that finding your people, and finding these relationships, and mentorships are very, very important. But I do just want to disclaimer. If you don't have them initially, don't panic, it will come to you. For me I guess I would consider myself and extrovert, so that kind of helped. I'm outgoing, I am told that I can come off as intimidating sometimes though. So that kind of-

Alison Monahan: Well you're a smart woman so. That kind of comes with the territory.

Shirlene A.: I am an ENTJ if you know what Myers-Briggs are, so but for me ... Well I joined the Women's Law Caucus right away. I knew that I really enjoyed that. I had signed up for a mentor at the beginning of the year, the student board of governors at my school. So, for law school they do a mentorship, so that was great. I had an initial mentor, that I got to meet with. I got a mentor for the Women's Law Caucus, who ended up being the president, and she's like a big sister to me. So, for mentors, they are out there, and I can speak of the 2L I will help any 1L that asks for help-

Alison Monahan: Nice you heard it here first. Everyone go find Shirlene, if you're at Wayne State.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, just come find me. Email me, call me, whatever you need. Call me crying, it's okay I'll help you through it. But honestly, as for friends and study groups you really ... There are definitely a lot of people at law school. It's a very diverse group of people, and you will learn that. Because there are people coming from very different background, but you eventually ...

I mean for me it was just kind of natural. Some of the friends that I had, and the nice thing about my school and my class is we were divided into two different

classes. So, section one, section two for the day program. And my section really became kind of a family, so that was nice. We're all kind of very supportive. Some law schools are very competitive, and I'm very aware of that. But essentially, I mean just-

Alison Monahan: That was more like my experience.

Shirlene A.: And each year is different too. Some years are very competitive...

Alison Monahan: True. I think that's really true.

Shirlene A.: I mean, and if you have a competitive school you'll still get through it. You'll still find people, I promise you. And if you don't, congratulations, I feel you it's great. But you will find those people who have similar interests to you, and have similar studying styles. But open yourself up too.

I know that law school's very scary, and one thing to just kind of put in perspective is, I'm sure you consider yourself an intelligent person. Because I mean you're in law school, that's a great accomplishment. But so is everyone around you. So, everyone is actually at equal footing. And it's really amazing, because you have this great group of people who have different backgrounds, different perspectives, but you have a group of very intellectual people. And it's great.

So, you'll find people, it's just kind of in life, in general. You'll find people who you click with. There's some people who you may not, but you will find those people. And then as for professors, they have office hours, and honestly even if you're at a competitive school, or a top tier school, or anything like that. I promise you your professors want you to come to their office hours.

They want to talk to you, they want to share their experiences. Not all professors are like that. There are ... And believe me I'm sure you will get forewarned, but they want students to be successful. They want people to come to them with problems, and questions about professional life. Because some professors are actually still in practice, and some have been in practice for a very long time, and now are being professors.

But, they want to share their knowledge, and they have literally been sitting in your seat. So, I had this one professor who was great. She was probably one of my favorites, I'm actually taking her this coming semester. For a different class, but she told us a story about her first law school exam, and how she had gone in, and she was getting ready, and she's about to start, and then she passed out. She fainted.

So, and you just have to remember that professors literally were in your spot, and most professors really do want you to be successful. And really want to help you. So, just kind of participate in class. You can be a gunner, but some

professors don't like that as much. Some professors give participation bonuses, some don't, but get to know them. Definitely make that connection, make that initiative, because that can lead to greater things, and greater opportunities.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, they're definitely people too. So, on this note, working with your professors. So pretty soon after class has started, you faced a major personal challenge. Where you had a death of a close family member. Do you have any tips for people who are facing that type of situation in the midst of law school? I mean is there anything you would have done differently looking back?

Shirlene A.: So yes, unfortunately my mima, she's actually my mom's eldest sister, but I didn't have grandmothers growing up. They passed away before I was born. So, she took on that role as a grandma, so it was very sudden. And it was kind of ... It took a real big blow to me, because she's probably the second most important woman in my life, second to my mother. So, it definitely took a big hit.

But, unfortunately life does not stop when you're in law school. Life continues to go. The bad things happen, the good things happen. So, one thing is that professors will understand. Like you said they're human. Professors are human, believe it or not.

Alison Monahan: Believe or not.

Shirlene A.: And I did take one day off. The day that it happened I went to class, so that was one thing that if I would have gone back ... If I could go back in time, I would have taken that day off anyways. But I was taking a ton on, and was petrified of failing. So, I decided to go to class instead, but so definitely know when you need to take a break, and when you need to take time for yourself.

Even if it's not a death. It could be an illness, just know that your professors are going to understand. If you have those people in your life, at law school, some friends and stuff, and as long as you're not in a super competitive school ... I had friends where if they missed a day I would send them my notes. If I missed a day, they would send me their notes and stuff.

And people are willing to do that for you. Especially if it's obviously a death of a family member, a serious illness-

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think even at my school people would have given you notes. If you had a really serious problem.

Shirlene A.: And people are human. So, your law school is despite being competitive, or whatever. They're still human too. So definitely just know ... You know yourself, and don't push yourself too hard, because I would definitely say looking back ... And I would have taken more time for myself, because it was again it was seriously the first couple weeks of law school too. So that was unfortunate, and

I was petrified ... I already was scared, so I'm like, "I'm going to fail." So, I would have taken more time for myself.

So even if you do go through a hardship, just know that it's okay to take time off. Don't take too much time off, because unfortunately if you miss a certain amount of classes, they can't give you a grade. But just know that even if it's maybe you have to take a semester off, you can always go back, and start again. But just know that you have to do what's best for you.

Alison Monahan: Yeah exactly, and everyone's different. I mean for me the first week of my clerkship, right after I graduated, taking the bar. Literally the first weekend my father died, suddenly. Out of the blue, and I literally didn't even have contact information for the judge for emergency contacts. And this is one of these you're like-

Shirlene A.: This is great.

Alison Monahan: "Oh my gosh. How is this going to play out?" But I mean obviously I dealt with it, I went back to work. Things were, well I won't say they were fine, but they were as fine as they could be-

Shirlene A.: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: But I think people understand obviously, and if you're in these type of situations, you just have to do what's best for you. And if that means you take some time off, or you go back to class because you need the distraction. Whatever it is, is an okay choice.

Shirlene A.: Exactly, and just know that, that's okay. Just know whatever you need to do, that's okay, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Just make sure that you know what's best for you. Don't do something-

Alison Monahan: Right.

Shirlene A.: Because you feel like you have to do ...

Alison Monahan: Well, and then there are probably more important things in life than going to law school classes, or going to your new job.

Shirlene A.: Or, but take time for your family. But it's understandable if you need that distraction. Just you know you the best.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. Alright, well once classes started, did you feel like you were facing any kind of special challenges? Because of your background, or did you feel like you were kind of a pretty typical law student?

Shirlene A.: Yes, but no. I think is the best answer. So, I don't have any lawyers, or connections, or anyone to go for advice. So, in general, I felt kind of at a disadvantage, because I do have friends who have lawyers in their family. And so, in my mind I'm just like, "Oh great. I'm not going to get a job. And I'm going to fail. But so, it's kind of that.

But I mean I would say that the transition from high school to undergraduate was a little bit more hard. But in general, it's like you don't have anyone that you can fall back on, and be like "Well what did you do mom? What did you do dad? When you were in school." Or so ...

So, I would say in general that, but it's all about finding your own path. But I will say that a lot of ... I mean there are law students that do have lawyers in their family. But there are some law students who aren't first generation. They have parents who have gone to school or whatever, but they don't have any lawyers in their family either.

But so, everyone kind of comes from a different background, so it's like yes, you do have some challenges. Where you have that fear of being successful, especially because it is a lot of money, and you're going out on a limb. And you don't have these connections, so there's kind of that extra added fear and anxiety.

But I will say that a lot of your classmates are probably feeling similar. Even if they do have those connections, but it makes it easier when you can fall back and be like, "Well I think my dad's firm will hire me."

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's always a nice one, "Well I think I'll just go work for my father." Oh okay, how nice for you. Well on that note, tell us a little bit about your summer job, and how you found it, and how you liked the work.

Shirlene A.: Yeah so, I have a summer job. I work as a law clerk at a personal injury firm in Southfield Michigan, which I'm sure most of you probably don't know where that is. But, it's a big personal injury hub in Michigan. So, I actually started working part time there in February, and then I switched to full time during the summer, because I didn't take any classes. And then I will actually be continuing there, after summer is over again.

So, how I got the job, I actually ... I was very fortunate I think is the best way to put it. I'm a Lexus Nexus rep at my law school, and my Lexus Nexus associate Liv, had gone to school with my now supervising attorney. And I was talking about being anxious about finding a job, and for summer, and how I was interested in personal injury law. But I didn't really know what to do, where to go, blah, blah, blah.

And she had just asked me about what I was interested in, and she's like, "Oh, well I have a friend who their family has a law firm. And they're always really busy, and they're always looking for help. Let me get you in contact-"

Alison Monahan: Perfect.

Shirlene A.: Really, it's kind of networking. So, you kind of just have to put yourself out, and you never know who's going to lead you to a job. So, I've been very fortunate. Honestly, I love my job. I love the firm I'm at, it's a smaller firm. There's a little under 10 attorneys I believe. And we actually just trained a new part time law clerk, so he was the second law clerk-

Alison Monahan: Nice.

Shirlene A.: And we got a new paralegal today too so, we're slowly growing. But I really love it. I fortunately with this experience I do a lot of pre-lit stuff. I do what kind of what a younger attorney, or a summer associate would do. I handle all the discovery tracking. I write complaints, I talk to clients, I meet with clients. I talk to insurance companies, but I really enjoy it. And that's just kind of solidified my career path, thank god.

but I really do enjoy it, and I've been very, very thankful for my experience. Because there is that anxiety of finding a job for summer. Especially as a one L, when you're trying to still pass your classes, and still find a job for summer. And have some sort of job security, because unfortunately that's not even a real thing anymore so ...

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it definitely sounds like you are very busy during the school year. When you're doing your work, and doing your classes, and everything else. But I'm glad that it's working out well. Well we're almost out of time, but one article ... Actually, we're way out of time.

Shirlene A.: I know.

Alison Monahan: One [article](#) I really liked that I want you to say something about, is something hardly anyone thinks about before they start law school, which is commuting. So, tell us about your commute, and how you managed to make it productive, or relaxing, or just really how you deal with it.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, so commuting is definitely a struggle. I am actually fortunate enough that I just bought a house about 15, 20 minutes from my law school. So that's a fortunate thing.

Alison Monahan: Nice.

Shirlene A.: So, my commute is less than it was, but beforehand I was traveling about 30 miles to and from school. So that's a good amount of time. And one thing is it's

very frustrating sometimes. Sometimes you leave at your normal time, and there's traffic, so you're late, and that's frustrating. And it takes time away from studying, so that's frustrating.

So, my suggestion is always to kind of plan ahead, and make kind of an experience of it. Personally, sometimes I would treat myself. In the middle of the week, I'd get myself a coffee, rather than brewing it at home. I would listen to audiobooks, or podcasts during my drive to kind of minimize the amount of time that I'm focusing on, "When am I going to get there?"

Alison Monahan: Right.

Shirlene A.: And it's nice because there's a lot of ... Obviously there's a Law School Toolbox podcast that you can listen to, but there's a lot of helpful tools, and websites. Especially for law students, and it's where you can listen to things, and kind of get an overview of, "Oh, okay today I'm going to contracts, and we're going to be talking about the UCC." Or something like that, "What do I need to know about that?"

And then you can go, and learn a little bit more before you go and actually learn about it. But so, if you are a commuter, I am sorry. Because I understand your struggle. But definitely kind of make an experience of it, and try to do things that you can ... I mean personally I know when rush hour is. If you've ever been to Detroit, and had to deal with rush hour, it's not a fun experience.

So, try to plan ahead. If you know that you get out of class at 5, maybe stay 'til 6:30 and study in the library. And then go home, and eat dinner. So-

Alison Monahan: Right.

Shirlene A.: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely not a fun element of anyone's life, but kind of inevitable for a lot of people. Alright Shirlene, so what final advice do you have for somebody who might be listening to this episode, and they're considering going to law school. But nobody in their family, maybe even no one they know is a lawyer.

Shirlene A.: Yeah, so overall like I said before, it will be challenging. It will be scary at sometimes. And sometimes it's really frustrating, but just know that you can do it. I don't have any lawyers in my family. I don't know anyone that's a lawyer besides people I work with now. But yeah know you can do it, and you will do it. And it's all about pushing yourself to do it.

You have to take those challenges, you have to get advice. You have to research. You have to do those things. You sometimes have to take the extra step, and it can be frustrating, because some of your friends, or some of your classmates

don't have to do that. But that's what makes you one inch stronger, so and that honestly makes you a little bit different from the rest.

So, embrace the challenges. Take on those opportunities. But just know that you can do it, and if you ever need anything, there are people who are willing to help you.

Alison Monahan: I think that's great advice. With that we are unfortunately out of time. Thank you so much Shirlene for joining us.

Shirlene A.: Thank you so much, it was a pleasure.

Alison Monahan: It was really our pleasure. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox Podcast, please take a second to leave [a review and rating on iTunes](#), or your favorite listening app. We would really appreciate it, and be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. Typically, our new episodes are out on Monday.

If you have any questions or comments, don't hesitate to reach out to Lee, or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com, or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com, or you can always contact us via our [website contact form at lawschooltoolbox.com](#). Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon.

Resources:

- [Law School Myth #1: Lawyers Make a Lot of Money](#)
- [The Battle of Commuting to Law School](#)
- [Shirlene's Articles](#)