



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with Hafsa Mansoor – one of the creators of [FirstGenJD](#) – about thriving in law school as a first- generation law student. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically, I'm 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.

Together, we're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the career related website [CareerDicta](#). 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 to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with Hafsa Mansoor – one of the creators of FirstGenJD – about thriving in law school as a first-generation law student. So, welcome Hafsa.

Hafsa Mansoor: Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Alison Monahan: Oh, it is definitely my pleasure. Well, first up, could you tell us a little bit about what FirstGenJD is and how it came about?

Hafsa Mansoor: Yeah. Essentially, this came from the product of a bunch of frustration among first- generation law students of just constantly feeling like we're reinventing the wheel and like we're at a disadvantage because there's all of this information that people whose parents and grandparents, and you are the sixth generation line of attorneys, feel like they already know, and we are struggling to keep up. And so, FirstGenJD is a website that is meant to be a survival guide for first-generation law students to navigate all of the challenges that being first-gen brings, both in your personal life, but then also academically and through your career.

Alison Monahan: Awesome!

Hafsa Mansoor: And I was... Sorry, go ahead.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I was just going to ask, if people are interested in checking that out, where would they find that?

Hafsa Mansoor: It's FirstGenJD.com.

Alison Monahan: Okay, perfect.



- Hafsa Mansoor: And I was able to co-found it with three of my other classmates through a program at our law school that allows for community engagement projects.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, cool.
- Hafsa Mansoor: And so, Mai Hamid, Tatiana Laing and Melissa Walker are three fabulous, fabulous, fabulous people who I was able to work with on this project.
- Alison Monahan: Nice. And where are you guys in law school?
- Hafsa Mansoor: Seton Hall Law. Class of 2020.
- Alison Monahan: Perfect. Alright, well, on that note actually, can you tell our listeners just a little bit about your own background? What was your path to law school, what goals do you have, your legal career, that type of thing. Just for some context.
- Hafsa Mansoor: I'm actually originally from St. Louis, Missouri. I went to an undergrad at Webster University around here and I was a Human Rights and Political Science double major. And I knew that I wanted to do public interest non-profit work, I just wasn't sure exactly what path I was going to take. And I eventually decided that international human rights law was where I was looking because I feel like the law has this great enforcement mechanism of ensuring that civil and human rights are actually actualized. It turned out that my dad's dream for me also was always to go to law school, and so when I combined this passion for international human rights with this idea of going to law school, it created this really beautiful synergy in Seton Hall, which has this great human rights clinic, and that's actually one of the things that drew me there. I'm now 3L. I'm hoping to graduate in the next couple of months.
- Alison Monahan: Crazy!
- Hafsa Mansoor: I know. It's gone so fast. At 1L, over the summer, I was at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, which is a non-profit that does policy work around voting rights, criminal justice reform, and economic mobility. I was also a judicial extern. And then this past summer, I was at White & Case, which is a BigLaw firm in New York, and I will be going back there after I graduate.
- Alison Monahan: Alright. I noticed on your website there was a really excellent series of posts on getting those BigLaw jobs. So, if anyone is interested, we can definitely link to that. Did you struggle, coming from wanting to do public interest work to doing OCI and taking a firm job? I know with a lot of my friends in law school, that was a perpetual struggle.
- Hafsa Mansoor: That was definitely one of my biggest concerns. One, just on the first-gen side of trying to figure out what this whole OCI process is and understand what it even



is that I'm getting into, and what BigLaw even means. But on the other side, I really struggled with this moral and personal dilemma of, am I selling my soul for this? We have to pay off student loans and support our families and just pay the bills. And so, I felt like BigLaw was at least going to give me the opportunity to do all of that. But I really, really struggled with just the idea that I was doing it in the first place because for my first year of law school, I was really never a BigLaw person, where I just thought, "This is not for me." But then once I really started looking at what career opportunities were out there and the idea even of going non-profit in the long term, the fact that having BigLaw on your resume is a big boost, eventually convinced me that that was something that I needed to try first. And I'm really fortunate that I found a firm that also believes in pro bono and public interest work, and so I was sort of able to mesh those desires.

Alison Monahan: Right. Yeah, I know it's something that I definitely have had a lot of conversations with various friends about, that struggle. So, what kind of challenges do you think that students who are the first in their family to attend law school – or in some cases actually college as well – what kind of challenges do they face and how can they find support and really overcome some of these issues?

Hafsa Mansoor: I think the first piece of it is just understanding what it even means on a personal level to be a law student. It's such a big struggle. All of the stuff that we've done for FirstGenJD was born out of our own struggles and difficulties navigating law school. I am both a first-generation college student and a first-generation law student, so I know that a big piece of just the entry level understanding of law school was conceptualizing of myself in that area of the law and really struggling to connect the people who are still my friends, and my family, with this new environment that is so divorced from anything that's non-legal, and trying to bridge those two worlds. And so, there's a big struggle, I think, for a lot of law students, just trying to navigate those interpersonal dynamics, come to terms with the stress and anxiety that the law brings. And so, that's a big piece of the website and trying to understand what those challenges are. And then we also try to understand that just the academics of law school are so different from anything that people have experienced before. Undergrad does not operate the same way as law school does.

Alison Monahan: That is definitely true.

Hafsa Mansoor: Yeah. I mean, outlining and case briefs is all new to everybody, and then suddenly there's this 100% final exam and everybody's panicking because your entire life seems to rest on this one three-hour session.

Alison Monahan: Right. It can be a lot.



Hafsa Mansoor: It's definitely a lot. And then, I also think that... So, I come from a blue collar family, and one of the things that I really struggled with was this idea of professionalism in a white collar background. You grow up your whole life thinking that you've got this basic understanding of how the world works, and then suddenly, you're thrown into this environment that's completely different and people are telling you that you're eating wrong because you're using the wrong utensils, or you broke the bread in the wrong way, or you put your drink on the wrong side. It's just this whole new level of etiquette and interpersonal relations that to me was just so unmanageable. And I think that really also creates that anxiety around, "Is this really where I'm supposed to be? Is this something that I can do?"

And then the fourth piece, we sort of talked about a little bit already, which is this idea that career advice is so niche in the law that you really can't understand how to get ahead in the law by talking to anyone other than a lawyer. How BigLaw operates doesn't really translate to any other profession. And there are some things that you can do to get ahead, like networking – it's just sort of a universal white collar thing, but the way that the law promotes certain positions and what sort of qualifications you need is also, I think, a big source of frustration for first-generation students who don't know how to find those resources and how to get ahead and understand all of that information, other than learning it once more for the first time.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think everything you've said is completely true, and definitely something we've had a lot of conversations about. I know you have a lot of this stuff on your blog. Do you have other resources that you would suggest people kind of go to? Or how do you start to navigate that, if you haven't ever been to sort of a fancy dinner and suddenly you're expected to go to this recruiting dinner, and there maybe are 10 forks and multiple glasses and you just have no idea where to start?

Hafsa Mansoor: I think the first thing is just to recognize that it's a problem that everybody faces, and not assume that it's a one-off, that you're the only person that this affects. And then it really goes to just talking to people. Find your mentors, find people in your law school who've been through the same experience, and other folks in your community who are willing to just be open with you about having gone through these struggles and willing to share how they've overcome it. And don't ding the online resources like the FirstGenJD, like Girl's Guide to Law School, like the Law School Toolbox. There's so much stuff out there and I think there's always an opportunity to find it if we look for it. And the other piece, I think, is just representation. Just find other first-generation lawyers who have made it. Going even outside of the law school community, but actually to find other people who have been through this, who've overcome it in the sense of now they're very successful attorneys and they have all of the resources



available to talk to you about. And we're more than willing to provide that advice for you.

Alison Monahan: That was excellent advice. And I feel like almost at this point, you can pretty much Google or YouTube, find a YouTube video on anything. So if there's a specific problem that you have where it's just, "I don't know what fork to use" – well, that's a problem that YouTube can probably help you with, or a blog. And there's nothing wrong with not knowing that. One of the questions that I always found useful to ask myself in these types of scenarios was, "Is there any reason that I would know this? Okay. No. Let's just go find the answer." Alright, you touched on this earlier actually – law can be kind of a conservative, arguably kind of snotty profession. To what extent do you think law students and young lawyers need to conform to this perception, and how can they balance that with feeling authentic?

Hafsa Mansoor: I think a big piece of it is just recognizing where we have to be cookie-cutter law students and where the opportunity to really be ourselves shines. And I think a big piece of that I've recognized is that there's a difference between the interview and a difference between going to work every day. I think in law school, for the most part, there's no real restrictions on how you can dress, how you can act and who you want to be. And I think it's really a time for you to hone your authenticity as you're developing your legal skills. Once you switch to the work environment, I think once you're in that interview mode, you need to be as close to what they expect a law student to look like, to act like. I know one of the things that I really struggled with was that I was told that when you're dressing for an interview and when you're presenting yourself, you should look as much like any other law student as you can, so that everybody focuses on what you're saying, rather than what you're wearing or how you're acting and what you're doing. That was really difficult for me, because I'm a brown woman who is also a Muslim and wears a hijab. And so, there's basically no way for me to look like most other candidates. That was the sense of like, "Wow! This makes me more different than everybody else. Is this really what everybody is going to be focusing on?" And it was definitely, I think, more built-up in my head than maybe it came out in some of these interviews. I'm not saying I didn't have some horrible interviews where people said some inappropriate, racist sort of things.

Alison Monahan: Really?

Hafsa Mansoor: But I think... Yeah. We have some interview stories... I think if you ask a lot of diverse law students, they will have at least one sort of interview from hell story to tell you.

Alison Monahan: I was always shocked, even just as a white woman, the things that people would come out with. In one case I refused to do a call-back because of the situation.



The recruiter asked me why and I told her, and she was just horrified. But if this is a person you're sending out to do interviews, maybe you need to not send them, or get rid of them, or at least talk to them about this.

Hafsa Mansoor: Absolutely. And I think career services offices, especially for OCI, are really sensitive to this and they work on trying to find people to come to the school and talk to students in a respectful manner. They're definitely there to hear those comments and concerns.

Alison Monahan: But for you, I assume that you did continue wearing your hijab and people dealt with it.

Hafsa Mansoor: Yeah, and I was really fortunate that I was able to find a place where diversity is very important to them, and that came through in the interview. And obviously those places that were less than willing to sit there and interview a woman in a hijab was not a place that I was going to continue to interview or try to find a job. And what I found is that even though there's that expectation that you're a little bit of a cookie-cutter in the interview process, that expectation does not continue once you go to work. So, you may be in a full business suit during the interview, but you're in business casual every day at that office. I think that sort of translates to your personality and your authenticity as well, and there's a lot more opportunity on case-by-case basis to figure out how much you can jive with that environment and how free and willing you're able to be to be yourself, if that makes sense.

Alison Monahan: Oh, absolutely. And when you were considering firms, were there specific things you were looking for, were you going on a gut feel, were there statistics? How did you kind of navigate, "Okay, this might be a comfortable and safe environment for me to be in"?

Hafsa Mansoor: I think part of it is just the people. You meet so many people during a call-back interview in particular that the way that the office looks at candidates, what it expects from its attorneys, the way that it treats diversity, it all becomes apparent. So there is that gut feeling piece to it. But I also know that there's a crazy amount of statistics online about basically every law firm. Vault and Am Law publish statistics every year, and I was able to look through those to get a feel on how diverse that firm really is, what sort of work they do in terms of diversity and inclusion, if they have working groups for different affinity groups. And then pro bono is also really important to me. As I mentioned, I really want to be a public interest attorney and to impact litigation, to the extent that firms are sort of a bastion for that big class action impact litigation. I really wanted to make sure that I found a place that was invested in doing pro bono work, both on that individual client basis but then also at the impact litigation level. And again, there's a wealth of information online about that stuff.



Alison Monahan: Let's switch gears a little bit. I want to ask you about something you've got some posts on the blog about, which comes up a lot for people I think, which is impostor syndrome. What is this and how can people really deal with it, particularly if they feel like maybe they do not come from a group that traditionally belongs in law school?

Hafsa Mansoor: The dictionary definition is the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills. All of which is really to say that it comes from this larger sense of feeling like you don't belong, wherever you are. It's this inability to feel like you deserve to be where you are. And I think that comes out a lot more in students from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds in the law. It's obviously common among all law students, which is why there's so much conversation happening right now about impostor syndrome in law schools, in law firms, in all sorts of legal environments, but it's really acute in terms of folks who don't see themselves represented in the law, people who don't look like them or people who look like them to practice the law. That sort of doubles down on this insecurity and feeling like for some reason my background doesn't mesh with where I'm at right now, and as a result, I don't think that I deserve to be here.

But I think the thing to keep in mind first and foremost is that you do deserve to be here. Somebody picked your resume out of a pile of resumes, probably multiple someones, and thought, "This is exactly the person that we want here." Whether that's your law school, whether that's your law firm; somebody said, "This person among all of the other candidates that we found is the person that we want." I think that's so important to keep in mind and that's something that I've constantly had to remind myself as I'm going through law schools, as I'm going through firms, is just understanding that I deserve to be here and multiple people recognize that I deserve to be here. And then on top of that, it's so critically important to find your community, to talk to other people about what you're going through and not hide it as a stigma or a shame; to recognize that this is such a common facet of the community and that everybody is going through the same process. I think just finding other folks that you can talk to about these issues is a huge weight off your shoulders. That's been really important to me and it's been one of the things that has been so wonderful about working at FirstGenJD, is finding that community and helping to create it among other first-generation law students.

Alison Monahan: I think that's absolutely important. I wrote a [post](#) super early on, which is still quite popular on The Girl's Guide, basically saying you've got to find your people, whatever that means to you. I think certainly those opening weeks of law school, at least my experience was I was sort of looking around saying, "Who are these people? These are definitely not my people." But then I found the people who were and became really good and close friends with them in



some cases. But it's a very weird environment in law school, at least in my experience.

Hafsa Mansoor: Oh, I agree.

Alison Monahan: I'd done a different graduate school and just walking into law school was very, very different. And on this idea of belonging, personally I think someone who comes from an underrepresented background probably actually has a bigger claim in some ways to belong, because obviously it was more difficult for you to get there. But that can be difficult to remember in that moment when you're feeling like, "Oh my gosh, I just failed my midterm, and no one around looks like me. What am I doing here? They've made a mistake." It's like no, they didn't make a mistake.

Hafsa Mansoor: And I think that's why representation is such an important piece of the law. If you can see other people who've done what you've done, then you can recognize that you are as entitled to be here as that person and as a result, as any other person in the law. I really believe in this idea of standing on the shoulders of those who came before you, and then paying it forward. Once we've succeeded as law students, it becomes incumbent upon us and it's our duty to then turn around and mentor other students to give them the opportunities that we were fortunate enough to have, so we aren't constantly reinventing the wheel.

Alison Monahan: Right. No, I think that was such a motivation for me. And starting The Girl's Guide to Law School too, which is like, this is something I wanted to have when I was starting law school – someone to tell me, "You're not crazy. These things really are happening, your perceptions are correct. And there are people who've survived this and gotten through it, and you can survive it as well." Right. You're very open on FirstGenJD about your coming from an under-represented marginalized background. You've even written an [article](#) for example asking "What does a lawyer look like?", which I think is a fantastic question that reflects on representation in the law. And we've touched around this a little bit, but do you have any specific advice for students from diverse backgrounds for trying to feel comfortable in law school, particularly in our current political climate, which is challenging?

Hafsa Mansoor: That's an understatement. I think, first of all, that article actually came from the same conversation that I was talking about earlier in our "Dress for Success" piece, where I was told that for interviews, I needed to look like everybody else and I just sort of sat there in frustration and anxiety thinking, "I literally cannot look like anybody else."

Alison Monahan: Did people actually advise you, for example, not to wear the hijab?



Hafsa Mansoor: Nobody said that I shouldn't wear the hijab. It was sort of a group conversation about what you are supposed to wear to an interview. So it wasn't directed specifically at me, but I still felt like there was sort of a spotlight on my head because I knew there was just no way that I could conform. There was no way that I could follow this advice.

Alison Monahan: Right, it's just what's happening.

Hafsa Mansoor: And so, in my head I'm thinking, "Oh God! What have I gotten myself into? This is not possible for me, and this is your most basic piece of advice that you want me to take away? What am I supposed to do with this information? How do I navigate around it? What does this mean that I was supposed to do in an interview? Am I supposed to apologize for this? Do I have to change? What is happening?" So, that article "What does a lawyer look like?" was really me struggling with my own understandings of what representation in the law is. When I was actually applying to come to law school, I had initially almost not applied because I thought I don't look like any other lawyer I've ever seen before in my life. I've literally never seen a person in a hijab standing in front of a court room, so what do I... There must be a reason for this.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Hafsa Mansoor: And so, I was concerned that if I ever represented a client, that a jury or a judge could potentially hold it against the client. I was fine with a reckless disregard for my own future, but the idea of potentially threatening somebody else's interest, somebody that I was supposed to represent and do the best for – that was the thing that sort of stuck. So, I was worried that if I came to law school and I became a lawyer, that it would become an impediment, not to my future but to somebody else's. I became my own biggest obstacle because I was constantly worried about those what-ifs. And so, I decided, "Alright, I can't do this anymore. There's no way that this could possibly be for me. If nobody else has done it, then it's not mine."

But I guess the process of Googling it and just recognizing that there are other people who had done this. And also, if nobody else had done this, then somebody else clearly needed to be the first. My dad's dream was for me to become an attorney, so I thought even if nobody else had done this, I should be the first person to do it. Obviously, that's not true; there are other Muslim attorneys. And I've become more enmeshed in the Muslim Bar Associations now that I am a law student, and that's really given me a perspective on representation in the law. But I think part of my dream in becoming an attorney is this idea that if I can make anybody else's dreams, even one more person's dreams seem more attainable because I've gone to BigLaw, because I've graduated law school, because whatever it is, then I think that is part of my success as an attorney. I have to pay it forward to that next generation.



Alison Monahan: Well, let's turn it around a little bit before we run out of time, because a lot of the stuff that we've talked about is challenging both on a personal and professional level. What kind of practical tools do you turn to when it all just seems a bit much to deal with? Do you have any self-care favorites that you can share with us?

Hafsa Mansoor: First of all, never neglect sleep. Sleep is probably one with my favorite things in the world and it is incredibly necessary to succeed as a law student. Get your full eight hours to the amount that you are capable of doing while navigating a full-course load. But the other thing is just, it's okay to treat yourself like a five-year-old. One of my other favorite things is just ice cream, and it's totally okay for me to tell myself if I finish reading Crim Pro without throwing the book across the room, then I get to have some ice cream.

Alison Monahan: I'm glad I'm not the only one who...

Hafsa Mansoor: And then I guess the third thing is just, don't lose contact with who you were before law school. If you were a dancer or a singer or you painted, keep doing those things. Don't lose contact with your non-legal friends just because your schedules don't line up anymore. Make sure that you're still in contact with your family. Just stay close and true and authentic to yourself as much as you can while you're going through law school. Don't think that you have to change who you are to become an attorney, because who you are is important and valid, and is part of the reason that you're going to become a successful attorney, not in spite of it.

Alison Monahan: And if people would like to find out more about FirstGenJD, about what you guys do, what resources you have, let's just tell them again where they can look.

Hafsa Mansoor: We are at [FirstGenJD.com](http://FirstGenJD.com).

Alison Monahan: Great. And that is basically a blog, you have a variety of contributors. Tell us a little bit more about what's available on the site.

Hafsa Mansoor: We have four buckets of information – the academics piece, and then we have the career advice and the professionalism that I was talking about earlier – one being how to navigate a white-collar environment, and the other being specifically career advice around the law. And then we have that personal component that's talking about anxiety, that's talking about diversity and what it means to actually feel like you're an attorney. And we also have profiles on successful first-generation attorneys, so that we can see ourselves more as successful attorneys.



- Alison Monahan: Great. Do you think this will continue after you guys have graduated? What's the plan?
- Hafsa Mansoor: We're working on building up some more articles and trying to get more contributors to work on the site, so that we do have that network with people. And we're also always interested in getting more points of view and more perspectives on the site. We're hoping that it continues once we graduate. I know that our schedules will be busy though, so hopefully it'll keep going but we'll see what that looks like.
- Alison Monahan: Either way, it's an amazing resource. I was very impressed, particularly, with the [article](#) I looked at on navigating a fancy table. It had pictures, it was very impressive. If you're not sure which fork to use, I actually learned some things. So definitely, that was one of the better articles that I've ever seen on that topic, and I think I've even written some. So, it was very impressive.
- Hafsa Mansoor: Thanks to the other fabulous ladies who work on the site. Melissa wrote that and it's incredible. We also have lots of amazing stuff from Mai, who is herself an immigrant who came to this country. Tatiana also is a first-generation lawyer and has written some amazing pieces about how to get involved in law school. So please, just check out all of the amazing work.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think the entire site is actually really fantastic, so highly recommend that people go there. Well, thank you so much for joining us. Any final thoughts you want to share with people before we wrap up?
- Hafsa Mansoor: If I could speak to every first-generation law student and just say one thing, I would say that there are two things that you can never forget. First of all, you're not alone. If you are facing a challenge in your law school path, you're not the first person who has experienced it and you're not the only person who's worried about it right now. And secondly, you belong here. Just because you're facing an obstacle doesn't mean that you're not supposed to be in law school, and a bump in the road doesn't mean that this whole thing isn't for you. You're going to be an amazing attorney, and these struggles will only make you more resilient. So please, keep going and please believe in yourself, because this is exactly very supposed to be.
- Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, on that note, very uplifting. Thank you very much for joining us.
- Hafsa Mansoor: Thank you so much for having me again. I really appreciate it.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, my pleasure. With that, unfortunately, we're out of time. If you enjoyed this episode of The Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app, because we'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions



or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at [lee@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:lee@lawschooltoolbox.com) or [alison@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto: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:**

[FirstGenJD](#)

[What Does a Lawyer Look Like? Reflections on Representation in the Law Etiquette 101: Divisive Social Rules that Cause Anxiety, But Don't Have To Survive Law School: Find Your People](#)

[Podcast Episode 113: Life as a First-Generation College and Law Student \(with Shirlene Armstrong\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 207: Navigating Networking Events as a Law Student](#)