



Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have Sara Beller on the podcast, talking to us about life as an Assistant District Attorney. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess, that's me. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience, so 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 career-related website [CareerDicta](#). Alison also runs [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 reach us via the [contact form](#) on LawSchoolToolBox.com, and we'd love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.

Welcome back. It is my pleasure to introduce Sara Beller, a member of the District Attorney's office in Riverside County in Southern California. And she's also a tutor with the Law School Toolbox. Today, we are going to be talking about careers in public service, specifically working as a prosecutor. Sara, great to have you here. Thanks for spending your early evening with me.

Sara Beller: Thank you so much for having me.

Lee Burgess: So, to get things kicked off, can you share a bit about yourself and your journey to become an Assistant District Attorney?

Sara Beller: Sure. So, my path to law school, I always say it was a little dysfunctional. I started law school three weeks after I graduated undergrad; I didn't even have a summer break. And that's because I've known for such a long time that I wanted to be a prosecutor; there was no backup plan. So, I went straight through college, straight through law school as a spring starter, and went straight through law school and took the bar right after. I always knew this is what I wanted, and I just always decided there wasn't anything that was going to stop me or get in the way.

Lee Burgess: That's awesome. I love it when somebody really knows what they want to do. So many of us go to law school and are like, "I could do these 10 things." So I think it's so refreshing when someone has their guide posts. So, what drove you to want to be a prosecutor?

Sara Beller: I was the victim of a crime when I was younger, and the DA that prosecuted that case ended up becoming such a big part of my life. She ended up coming to my law school graduation and was at my high school graduation. Just throughout that process, realizing she gave me a voice in that courtroom and in the process kind of restored some sense of balance in my little world. Like I said, we've stayed in touch and I just realized that if I could do for even one other person what she did for me, what better way to spend a career?



Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's pretty amazing. I was actually talking to my dad, who was a career prosecutor for most of his legal career about that. Often when we talk about careers as prosecutors, we don't talk about the victims that much, that you really are advocating for individuals. I think especially at the DA level, which is slightly different than the federal level, where I feel like it isn't as much about this one person who may have been hurt. And so, I almost think that we kind of lose that so often in law school. We very seldom even talk about victims, as far as the cases we learn or the procedure that we go through. It's always defendant-focused and not really victims-focused.

Sara Beller: I completely agree. We talk about that all the time at work, that so often we can lose sight of... Not we lose sight, but the system can sometimes lose sight of the victim. So it's really important to me and was important when I was looking for what DA's office I wanted to work at, that I found one that had the same core value that I did, as far as wanting to restore that sense of justice for the victims. So in my particular office, we like to say we give the victims justice and we bring the defendants to justice, and that was always a really big part of our office and our life as prosecutors there.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, you knew you wanted to do this sort of job, you were very focused on it. What did you do in law school, outside of, I'm sure, taking things like Criminal Procedure and Evidence and all the things that you need to know to practice law in this area? But did you have any experiences that led you to this career choice and this path? Did you intern in offices? What did you do outside of your law school classes?

Sara Beller: Yeah, so even before law school, I did an internship at a DA's office, the LA County DA's office here in Southern California. And during law school, I did a civil internship at a plaintiff's litigation firm – I think that's what they call them; I'm not versed at all anymore. And I did that just to make sure that I didn't have any buyer's remorse, or wouldn't have any buyer's remorse down the road. And I thought, "You don't know something until you try it, so who knows, maybe I would enjoy civil." And I didn't. It was terrible for me, it was awful. I ended up interning at the office I work at now, and all those experiences I had kind of led to where I am, because they all showed me what I do want and what I don't want. As soon as I started interning at the office I work now, I immediately knew even as a... Gosh, I think I was going into my 2L year, I just knew I was home and that was where I was meant to be. So it's kind of cool now the interns that supervised me are my teammates and they sit down the hall, so it's cool.

Lee Burgess: That is great. It's a great sense of community.

Sara Beller: It is.



- Lee Burgess: So like I said, I grew up... My father was a prosecutor for most of his career, my mother also did a stint at the District Attorney's Office. So I had a very good understanding, possibly too much of an understanding as a small child, what the life of a DA looks like, to the point where I don't know that I've told you the story that when I was little – probably seven, about the age my son is now – I didn't know what trial was, but I just knew that it meant that my dad wouldn't play his guitar and sing songs with me at night, because he was always working.
- Sara Beller: Dad was gone.
- Lee Burgess: That was my whole association. It was like, no guitar time.
- Sara Beller: Don't worry, things haven't changed.
- Lee Burgess: Okay, good, good, I appreciate the consistency. It was a long time ago that I was seven. But I think a lot of listeners aren't necessarily familiar with what DAs do on their daily basis, because most of it is what we see that is from TV shows, and that's not particularly realistic, generally speaking. So, what is your day in the life and how has it changed in this COVID world? I wish we were in a post-COVID world, but I don't even know what we're in anymore. We're just in a pandemic world.
- Sara Beller: Right, it's still happening. So just like with your dad, there are two different days in the life. There's if you're in trial and if you're not in trial, and those are very different days. When you're in trial, like you've mentioned, you eat, sleep, and breathe that case if you're not in court. And most trial courtrooms run 8:30 to 4:30 – if you're lucky maybe 9:00 to 4:00, but for the most part 8:30 to 4:30. And if you're not there presenting your case to a jury, you're getting ready for the next day. You're up early in the morning and up late at night getting ready for the next day. If you're not in trial, days are much different. We usually go to court in the morning, handle the cases we have on calendar for that day, any hearings we might have, like preliminary hearings, argue any motions that we might have to deal with that day. Court's a lot of "hurry up and wait", so it usually takes most of the morning, whether you have one case on calendar or 10. And the afternoons we spend prepping our upcoming cases, reviewing our evidence, writing motions, preparing for trial, meeting with victims and witnesses and families. And things have changed so much since COVID. Every day it seems like something else COVID-related with the courts is coming up and changing how we do things. But one thing that stayed consistent was everyone's cool, the justice partners, which is the defense bar, the prosecution, the judges' goal to maintain justice and continue to pursue justice as efficiently and safely during the pandemic as possible. So, our courts never completely closed. We were doing video arraignments, so that defendants could assert their speedy trial rights and that wasn't being jeopardized. Things changed a lot; as far as doing Zoom court was kind of weird, and appearing remotely on the phone was



really weird. You hear people's dogs barking in the background when you're trying to make a court appearance, and kids crying in the background. But everyone was really great and we all just kind of laughed and continued to do our jobs as best we could, and just keep hoping that eventually things go back to somewhat of a normal day.

- Lee Burgess: I know. It definitely humanizes the process when you hear everybody's life happening behind them.
- Sara Beller: It does, and seeing it in the background and hearing people come home and keys rattling. It's been interesting.
- Lee Burgess: Absolutely. So, for students who are considering this career path, what skills do you think are critical to have and to bring into this prosecutorial role?
- Sara Beller: As far as skills, critical thinking is incredibly important. Reasoning, communication is a big one. I think critical thinking, because that's what we do – we're analyzing and evaluating all of the information in front of us to form a conclusion ultimately. We're always communicating, so I think communication skills are really important. And that's not to say you have to be an extrovert to be a prosecutor. I am incredibly introverted. Every time I take Myers-Briggs, it's 99% introverted. Even if I try to guess different answers, it doesn't work. Because we're always communicating, whether it's with potential jurors during voir dire, or witnesses during direct examination or trial preparation. And reasoning I think is another important skill for students to have that are pursuing this career path, because it's a truth-preserving strategy. If you apply deductive reasoning to true premises, true conclusions will follow, and that's what any prosecutor wants, is for the truth to come out and to do the right thing for the right reasons. So, I think having those skills together in one person makes a pretty unstoppable force.
- Lee Burgess: So, you mentioned you were an introvert, which I think is kind of interesting to have picked this career path that has really high contact with people.
- Sara Beller: It does.
- Lee Burgess: Did you find that your personality structure made it more difficult to feel comfortable in the courtroom, or has it always been something that you've felt good about?
- Sara Beller: I never feel good about it, I'm always just constantly stressed. When the doors open and the veneer of jurors come in and just 90 people come in that I'm going to have to parade in front of, I just panic immediately. And it never goes away, no matter how many trials I've done. But someone told me a long time ago that if you're not nervous, it means you don't care, and the day you're not nervous is



the day you should leave the job. I've always really taken that to heart and just tried to ride the nerves as best I can.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that makes sense. When I did a summer job at the U.S. Attorney's Office, they allowed us to make limited appearances. And I remember standing in my suit and fully feeling my knees hitting each other under my skirt – not just like, "I wonder if my knees are shaking"; I literally could feel my knees hitting each other, and I wasn't doing anything incredibly life-changing for anybody.

Sara Beller: Right. Just standing there and making your appearance.

Lee Burgess: I was pretty much just standing there.

Sara Beller: That still happens to me. My hands just rattle and shake and I have to wear certain dresses or shirts in court if I'm actually presenting a case of doing a trial, because I get red all the way up. It's so noticeable that I have to, you know, take precautions.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think oftentimes, people don't really talk about the fact that litigators get really nervous. One of my good friends from law school, who I know does not listen to this podcast, is a family law litigator. And when we were in law school, she used to basically throw up before our moot court arguments and stuff.

Sara Beller: Your friend and I have that in common. I would just hide as best I could in class and just pray I wouldn't get called on.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I know. And now she appears in court all the time, she's a very successful litigator, so you just never know.

Sara Beller: It works out somehow.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Okay, so you mentioned that you did intern at the DA's office, and in fact at the Riverside County DA's office.

Sara Beller: Yes.

Lee Burgess: I did an internship at the U.S. Attorney's Office, which was an amazing experience as well. So, I think this is a really exciting experience and one that a lot of people don't really consider. Now, the bummer is, you don't get paid usually, which is kind of a bummer.

Sara Beller: It is a big bummer.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but sometimes you get school credit, which is kind of awesome.



Sara Beller: That's what I did.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And you mentioned, I think when we were talking about this a while back, that you did an independent study, and that was one of the ways you got school credit.

Sara Beller: Yeah, I was able to find a professor to sponsor me, so to speak, and kind of mentor me or supervise my study. And we built a little curriculum and I was able to get course credit for my internship, so it was really great.

Lee Burgess: That is great. Did you do yours during the summer or during the year?

Sara Beller: Both. Being a spring start in law school, my academic year ran with the calendar year, so I was a January to December academic year. I was there, I did a summer internship, and then as well as my entire 3L year, which was January to December.

Lee Burgess: Amazing. So, like I said, sometimes you're allowed to appear in court. Were you also certified to appear in court?

Sara Beller: I was. Under California, I think it's the ABA. They've changed it, I don't know, but then it was certain classes you had to take allowed you to be certified with the bar and appear in court under the supervision of a licensed attorney, and there were requirements for them as well. Our office was really great with giving interns actual court experience; I was able to do a jury trial as an intern.

Lee Burgess: That's amazing.

Sara Beller: It was a great experience. And I think I did close to 40 or 45 preliminary hearings and argued countless motions, and I got to start building those relationships with the judges and the defense bar that I still have today. So it's a really great experience.

Lee Burgess: And talk about being sure about what you wanted to do by the time you graduated, because that's clocking a lot of hours.

Sara Beller: Right. If I wasn't sure before, I was afterwards, or should have been at least by all the experience.

Lee Burgess: Right. If it was going to go south, it was probably going to go south before that. So, these are such great experiences, and I think a lot of times students aren't sure where they find out how to get these jobs, whether they be during the school year or during the summer. So, how did you land your internships and what advice would you have for others who are looking to gain this experience?



Sara Beller: Yeah, so I had a... It wasn't OCI necessarily, but we had recruiters from the office DAs that were kind of out looking for interns, come to my law school and do interviews just kind of independently. I signed up for a time slot, and that's how I was able to get the internship my 3L year. But I think a great resource that students don't always think to take advantage of is the professors on their campus, from law professors, from pro-professor evidence, any adjunct professors that teach those elective courses that are geared towards criminal law. They're almost always going to have a connection or know someone who knows someone and be able to help you out that way. I think another great way is just go on your county's website or wherever you're going to be for the summer. If you're out of state or out of town for school and you're staying there for the summer, just hop on that county's website and just check it out, see if they have volunteer opportunities, employment opportunities. That's where you're going to find information for internships or externships.

Lee Burgess: I also think it's important if you do have flexibility about your location for the summer to apply to some of these offices that aren't so saturated. I think that if you're going to law school in a bigger metropolitan area – let's say you're in San Francisco, the amount of law students floating around the Bay Area is going to kind of inundate the few county offices that you have in the Bay Area. But if you're willing to go into the Central Valley, or you're willing to go to even some of these areas that just don't have as many law students trying to get those jobs, sometimes you can also find different opportunities, or even in an office that doesn't have as many interns, and then you may get a lot more exposure. I think there's always this idea that you want these kind of big name offices, but I know when I was interviewing for jobs, they really wanted to know what you did while you were there. And you really want those letters of recommendation and those references from your supervisors. It can also be like, you need to shop around a little bit to see where you might be able to gain that experience, or like you said, do some of it during the school year, maybe some of it during the summer. You've got to try and get in the door a few different ways.

Sara Beller: Right, I completely agree. Interning at different offices is a great way to, like I mentioned earlier, to find what's important for you, where is a good fit, a good sense of community, because at the end of the day, we spend more time with our coworkers than we do with our families at home.

Lee Burgess: It's true.

Sara Beller: So, you don't want to be miserable going to work every day. You want to enjoy the community that's there and enjoy the relationships that you're going to have, especially if this is what you want to do for your career.



- Lee Burgess: Yeah, and if you're looking for an office that you really want to stay and build those relationships, then you want to make sure that it's a good fit, it's in a place you probably want to be.
- Sara Beller: Exactly.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, what do you think, when people are applying for these jobs, what they should think about when they do their application, if it's written or if they're writing a cover letter? What do you think is important to highlight about their interest in these kinds of roles?
- Sara Beller: I think something that's really important to highlight that sometimes students will overlook is anything that you've done that shows you have an interest in criminal law or being a prosecutor or a litigator – highlight that on your resume, move that to the top or somehow emphasize that you have those interests – if you've done the Criminal Justice Club, or you've taken trial advocacy or litigation classes in school. If you have a connection to the geographical area where you're applying, highlight that in your cover letter. Explain why that office in particular is important to you or you have a connection to that area – that I think is really going to make students' applications stand out.
- Lee Burgess: That's a good point. I also think, going back to talking to professors, which I thought was such a good point, to try and build this network and this relationship. Looking at your school for those criminal law practical, either clinics or programs that your professor might run, just to really show your commitment and collect as much exposure to this as you can in a practical way. I know one of my favorite Crim professors ran a death penalty defense clinic, and that was kind of his passion. He placed students there over the summer and students who were really passionate about criminal work oftentimes found that they got involved in some of that. I think that it's just exposure and investment in this area of the law; it can come from a lot of different ways. And I think you don't always have to say if you want to be a prosecutor that you would never work at a death penalty defense clinic. I don't know.
- Sara Beller: No, of course not. Yeah, I worked at the Innocence Project when I was an undergrad, and I was in the most conservative county in the great state of Texas. I was at the Innocence Project and it was a great experience. It's all good experience, because at the end of the day, there's no such thing as bad experience, it's something to add to your resume to show that you have that interest in that area of the law, and it all counts.
- Lee Burgess: Well, and this is about understanding all the pieces, right?
- Sara Beller: Absolutely.



- Lee Burgess: I think that if you understand how each side functions, and their role as you were talking about – your role to try and find truth – I think that just makes you a better advocate for whatever side you're working towards, because in the end, we're all advocates. We're trained advocates, right?
- Sara Beller: Right, I completely agree.
- Lee Burgess: And it's all about feeling confident in your role, feeling confident that you can also anticipate what the other advocates are going to do.
- Sara Beller: Right, you have to anticipate the other side for sure. And being familiar with that side obviously helps you do that and helps you be more prepared for your client, so you advocate for your client, whether it's the people of the state, the people of the United States, or an individual. And like I said, in our office, our county, I guess we call everyone the "justice partners", because it's true – everyone works together and everyone has the same ultimate goal of justice, no matter who they represent or what side of the bench they sit on. And knowing how all those parts fit together and taking advantage of opportunities to see how they all fit together is, I think, really important, and a good opportunity for students.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, one thing that a lot of times people don't think about is that you have to do a lot of paperwork when you get these jobs. And I'll be honest, as the daughter of a federal prosecutor, I knew of the security clearance, because it was ominous in my house. Every time my dad's clearance came up for some sort of renewal, you could just hear the moaning of the record keeping.
- Sara Beller: And hear the 70 pages printing out.
- Lee Burgess: Exactly. And then it was so funny because when I had to do my preliminary security clearance... Your internship security clearance, your background check or whatever they require is not particularly in-depth. But you have to list all these places you've lived for the last 10 years or something like that. And I remember being on the phone with my mom and being like, "Man, mom, all these places?" And she's like, "Hold on one second." I hear her in the background; she comes back, she's like, "After suffering through your father's career of security clearance, I have a file folder with every place you've lived, ever."
- Sara Beller: Your mom is so sport.
- Lee Burgess: I know. She's like, "Because I thought maybe someday you would have some job." At this point, they didn't even know I was going to go to law school. My parents are both lawyers, but she's like, "I just thought some day you might



need this information, and I didn't want to repeat what we had to do, which was comb through old stuff."

Sara Beller: Yes, I love that. She must have been so happy that all of her hard work wasn't in vain.

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Sara Beller: That something good came out of it.

Lee Burgess: It's like, "I'll read you the file folder."

Sara Beller: That is great. I wish I would have thought of that, because having to look back on every place you've lived in, every person you've lived with – I mean, your college, your freshman dorm roommates – I don't know where they are, maybe they've gotten married by now, who knows. It's been such a long time, it's unreal.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, there were definitely a few funny things. And thank you Amazon.com for always having my history of everywhere I live. That was the other place I checked.

Sara Beller: There's always that.

Lee Burgess: Amazon knows everything, basically. We should just give them our Amazon user names.

Sara Beller: We should be able just to have them compile the file folder.

Lee Burgess: Totally, press "Print". You can also see what type of toilet paper I order, it'll be great.

Sara Beller: Exactly.

Lee Burgess: But I do think that sometimes people forget that there are some practical pieces to these – the background checks, the security clearance. And the paperwork can be obnoxious, but you also have to do so much the same paperwork to get licensed for the bar, that I think a lot of people think, "Oh, I don't want to go through all that hassle." But you're going to have to go through basically the hassle no matter what.

Sara Beller: Exactly; no matter where you work, because before you can start working, you're going to have to do the paperwork for the bar.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.



- Sara Beller: Just save the information somewhere.
- Lee Burgess: Exactly. So right now, start your file folder right now, or your notes on your phone. Take a clue from my mom from 20-30 years ago, or however long.
- Sara Beller: Yeah, make that file folder.
- Lee Burgess: I know, she started that file folder. I guess it's only 20 some years ago, but still. So, how many years have you been a DA now?
- Sara Beller: I am coming up on my fifth year.
- Lee Burgess: Alright. So you've got kindergarten profession at this point?
- Sara Beller: Yes.
- Lee Burgess: Your profession is a kindergartener. So what's been the most surprising thing about your work as a DA?
- Sara Beller: I think what's really surprised me the most is how much every case I've tried, it's become a little part of who I am. It's not like when a case is over... Because you spend so much time working on it and preparing and meeting all the players involved – it's not like when that's over, you just never think about it ever again. I think most career prosecutors have a really special place for their cases, and they're really protective of that space. So I was really surprised by that – not that it stays with you in a bad way, just that it kind of becomes a little part of who you are. And you don't forget any of your cases, you don't forget any of your victims or witnesses. They'll kind of always be in that space. I was also really surprised by how well everyone works together, like we were talking about with the justice partners, and how everyone's really dedicated to ensuring that justice is achieved. And it's not the fighting like cats and dogs or the antics we unfortunately see on television, because those shows make our jobs as real lawyers much more difficult. But yeah, I think those couple of things have kind of been surprising in a really good way.
- Lee Burgess: I like the fact that you mentioned about the cases staying with you, because you're working so intensely for this period of time...
- Sara Beller: Yeah.
- Lee Burgess: ...that both the ones that had the outcome that you were hoping for and those that didn't, I'm sure do stay with you in different ways.



- Sara Beller: In very different ways. Using the not favorable outcomes to really self-reflect and realize, "What can I do differently? Was there something that... " A point that you can pinpoint to and say, "Is that where it started to go wrong?", and what happened so that you fix it going forward. Like I said, those things, they really stay with you.
- Lee Burgess: One other thing I wanted to mention – if someone is interested in doing this sort of work and isn't that comfortable at this point in public speaking, did you do anything to kind of get comfortable being in front of a room, or practice public speaking, or did it just kind of come with practice?
- Sara Beller: I hate it so much I couldn't even practice, because I just can't even talk to myself without being stressed out. No, but I took advantage of the classes in law school, like the Trial Advocacy class we were talking about. And I took a Negotiations class and a Pre-trial Litigation class. Things that forced me to do that and try to get as comfortable as possible. I don't know how much it helped because I'm still incredibly stressed out all these years later. But trying as best you can to take advantage of those opportunities, internships that give you that real experience where you can go into court or mediation. Anything that kind of forces you to get out of your comfort zone, if you're introverted like me, I think kind of helps.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. I've also known students and lawyers who have even tried things... I mean, this is not really COVID timing, but even Toastmasters, where they just have to get up and talk about something. Or you can take a public speaking class at a community college over the summer.
- Sara Beller: Right. That's a good idea.
- Lee Burgess: Even take an acting class. I think that sometimes getting out of your intellectual space and just working on these skills, I think can help. I know that back in a former life, I did a lot of performing, and every time, even when I was a civil litigator, would be dressed up to do something important. Not that I did that many important things, but it seems like I was important. You're still almost playing a role. It's not really you; it's the lawyer version of yourself. And I even felt that way when I would teach at a law school. It was like my professor version of myself was different than my other version of myself. And so you can, I think, practice to kind of develop those frameworks, so it can feel a little less vulnerable if you're showing up, because you're getting dressed up, it's almost like a costume.
- Sara Beller: Absolutely.
- Lee Burgess: I'm sure it would have to be a little strange working from home because that's really the meld of all your worlds, right? You're trying to be this version of



yourself, where there's a dog or a spouse or a child behind you. I know I struggled with that during some COVID times, where I'd be like, "Sorry, I'm on a sales call." And I've got a two-year-old pulling at my shirt or whatever.

Sara Beller: On the hip, bouncing?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. Yep.

Sara Beller: Yeah, I love that you mentioned the character of yourself. I've had supervisors tell me even around the office that obviously still work and professional, they're like, "Seeing you in the office chit-chatting, bantering down the hallway with someone is so much different than the person that is in court that I've seen in front of juries and in front of judges." And it's true. Just kind of accepting that, I think, has helped me not be so concerned about public speaking, or try to push down whatever nerves I can, just accepting it's a role. You, unfortunately, have got to squeeze into those tights, those pantyhose, and zip the skirt up, put the heels on, and go be that person for the day. Something else that might help is improv classes at community colleges.

Lee Burgess: Oh, yeah.

Sara Beller: I know that can kind of force you to break the mold if you're someone who's really serious and kind of has a hard time letting those walls down. That might be something that would help students too.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and get comfortable that you're probably going to screw up.

Sara Beller: Always.

Lee Burgess: Also, I think I've told this story on the podcast before, but I did screw something up in federal court that summer that I worked there pretty badly, and the judge reamed me in open court, mostly to ream my supervisor who didn't proof all my work. But I was like a deer in the headlights. I walked out the building, I called my dad, I was like, "Maybe I should just go home." And he was like, "Well, now at least you've been yelled at by a judge. Welcome to the club! Who hasn't been yelled at by a judge?" And I was like, "That's not what that felt like."

Sara Beller: You've got to get that first time over with early.

Lee Burgess: Right, exactly. It's like when you get called on in class and you don't know the answer. It's like, you might as well just get it over with, it happens to everybody.

Sara Beller: It will inevitably happen at least once, so just try to get it over with.



- Lee Burgess: Yeah. But I think the nice thing about improv classes or speech class or doing something where the cost of any sort of failure is so low that it's just nice to practice being uncomfortable in those situations when it's a huge safety net.
- Sara Beller: I completely agree.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, because the stakes feel... Luckily in that situation, I basically had no power. I just finished my first year of law school. I mean really, what did I know? Luckily, I had no power, so there were really no big consequences to my mistakes. But I definitely would say I didn't make that same mistake again, ever.
- Sara Beller: And you probably never would going forward, because all it takes is that one time, just like when you get called on in class and you're unprepared – yes, you won't make that mistake again.
- Lee Burgess: Yep, exactly, the painful ways to learn. It's funny, I vividly remember that conversation on the sidewalk in Oakland, just being like, "I should just go home. This is a terrible idea." Oh my goodness. Okay, well, you also tutor for us here at the Law School Toolbox. And so, I always have to ask my tutors when they are talking about something on the podcast, what three pieces of advice would you give to every law student?
- Sara Beller: The first one I would have to say is, learn how to write in IRAC format. Make it a habit early, stop fighting it, just accept that IRAC format into your heart, the better off you'll be, I promise, because it is the only way to pass your law school exams and ultimately the bar exam. So, just practice now, ask your professors for feedback on your writing, and just ask for help when you need it, if you don't understand what someone says when they mean you have to write in IRAC or, "This is conclusory in your A portion" when you're doing practice essays. Reach out and ask for help, because the faster and sooner you make it a habit, the better off you'll be.
- Lee Burgess: Well, I agree with that answer, which is why I hired you to work for me, because I love that answer.
- Sara Beller: It was a very rehearsed answer.
- Lee Burgess: It's okay, I love it. I love it. You're just playing to your audience.
- Sara Beller: Always. I think another thing I would say is, set a minimum two-week study schedule with specific tasks to accomplish, not just a block of time that says, "Study Contracts." Specifically in that block of time that you've blocked off, what are you going to do for Contracts? Do that for two weeks at a time and stick to that schedule, most importantly. Accountability is everything, and a lot of times we're the only ones to hold ourselves accountable as law students, even



lawyers. I still do that – I have my daily to-do list of things in the office I need to get done. So, having those specific tasks that are tangible that you can point to, versus just study, I think is helpful for students and something important to kind of start making a habit early on. And lastly... It was three things, pieces of advice?

Lee Burgess: It was three, yeah. You can make more if you want, you can make your own list. It's totally up to you.

Sara Beller: So, one other one I would say is, protect your reputation. Your reputation is your most valuable asset as a lawyer, and you start building that reputation on your very first day of law school. Respect your classmates, the professors, the faculty, don't gossip, dress appropriately. People won't remember where you ranked in school or who got the fancy internships and who clerked for what judge. They will always remember how you conducted yourself, how you treated other people, and that's what your reputation is at the end of the day, so really protect it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's a good point. When I was a 1L, we did moot court in the spring, and our argument was this fact pattern – I still remember it – it was a long time ago now, but it was about whether or not biting off someone's ear when you're HIV positive was assault with a deadly weapon. That was the fact pattern, anyway.

Sara Beller: No wonder why you remembered it. It's such a traumatizing fact pattern.

Lee Burgess: I know, it was a little traumatizing. But they always had alumni come and sit as the judges. And when I applied to firm jobs, I was at a lunch with someone on my callback interview, that turns out was one of the people that was on my panel. And it took us a while to figure out how we knew each other, but she remembered my argument, and I think that was one of the reasons that she advocated so hard for me to get that job. And I think sometimes in law school, especially... That's a pass/fail class, so a lot of people don't really... It's like if you show up and you have a good faith effort, they're not going to fail you at a moot court.

Sara Beller: Right. Not going to try as hard.

Lee Burgess: Right. But I do think it was such a great lesson of "you don't know who's in the room", because if I bombed it, I may not have gotten that job, which turned out to be the job that I ended up taking. And she is still a friend; she and I are actually going hiking on Thursday. She's still a friend and mentor.

Sara Beller: That's amazing!



- Lee Burgess: I know. But it is just really interesting, I think, how you often don't know where these important people will show up in your life.
- Sara Beller: It's so true. We had in one of those, I think it was my Pre-trial Litigation class in law school. I was a 2L second semester, I think, and the professor was an adjunct professor, and she tried to teach us the hard way the "you don't know who's in the room" lesson. So it's the very first day of class, she sent out the syllabus the night before. I don't mean late at night; late for me is like 8:00-8:30. I have a very strict 9:00 o'clock bed time. So, you send me a syllabus at 8:00 o'clock the night before class, and there were, I think, 70 pages of required reading and so many written questions we had to have physically ready to turn in for a grade. Anyways, fast forward to the next day, everyone's kind of upset sitting in class because class was supposed to start at 6:00, now it's 6:30, she's nowhere to be found.
- Lee Burgess: Wow.
- Sara Beller: Nope, no professor, we're all sitting around and we're maybe talking a little smack because everyone's really frustrated, we're complaining about the syllabus situation or not getting any sleep, so we're cranky. And now it's 30 minutes late and you're going to make me late for bedtime again, so now we're all really upset. It was a pretty small class, there were about 18 to 20 of us. And sure enough, she walked in and she was reading from her phone or tablet some of the things that we were saying, pointed out of who was wearing what, and the particularly not nice things that we were saying about how upset we were and frustrated with her and irritated with her. And the girl in the black jacket said this, and the guy in the plaid shirt said that. She had her assistant, her paralegal in the classroom...
- Lee Burgess: Oh my!
- Sara Beller: ...that was listening to what we were saying and was sending her messages to teach us a very hard lesson of, you don't know who is in the room. So always, always conduct yourself professionally and appropriately, and when it's the most important is when it feels like it's the most difficult to act appropriately and professionally. But lesson learned the hard way – you never know who's in the room.
- Lee Burgess: That's true. That's a great story, I'm glad you shared that. Well, this has been so fun. Unfortunately, we're out of time, but thanks for taking time out of your busy week to chat with me.
- Sara Beller: Of course, thanks for having me.



Lee Burgess:

Yeah, absolutely. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app. We'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to reach out to myself or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always reach out to us, including Sara, on our website [contact form](#) at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

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