



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have Hillary Vaillancourt here with us to talk about a variety of topics, including her work on [Piece of Cake Allergy Consulting](#), and the work of building a small firm. 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. And with that, let's get started.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have Hillary Vaillancourt here with us to talk about a variety of topics, including her work on Piece of Cake Allergy Consulting and the work of building a small firm practice. Welcome, Hillary.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Alison Monahan: Oh, it's definitely my pleasure. Well, to get started, can you just give our listeners a basic sense of your background, so they understand a little bit about where you're coming from?

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah, absolutely. So I graduated law school from New England Law in Boston in 2010. I can't believe it's been that many years ago now. I've practiced in small general practice firms since then. I did take a break in practicing law for a few years in between. During that time, I worked as a fundraiser for higher education. And now I have my own law practice – the focus is mostly on estate planning, especially for families with minor children.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. It sounds like you've been pretty busy since you graduated from law school.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes, you could say that. I do like to be busy.

Alison Monahan: Yes. And how did you become interested in this food allergy law? And how did you start this consulting business, which sounds really interesting?

Hillary Vaillancourt: Thank you, yeah. So I am actually really excited, I will officially be launching Piece of Cake Allergy Consulting next week. And it really started about eight years ago, when I was diagnosed with my own food allergies. It turns out that I am allergic to six different foods, but only two of them are considered part of the top eight allergens which are required to be on labels. So I went through a very long period of time where I had to do a lot of research on my own to figure



out what was safe, what I could eat. And it was especially challenging because at the time I was working as a fundraiser, which required a lot of business travel. So I experienced a lot of difficulties and anxieties around things like eating in restaurants, being on airplanes. But there weren't a lot of resources to help me understand what accommodations I could ask for, what my rights were. I had no idea that food allergies are actually considered a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Alison Monahan: I was going to ask you about that.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, because as you were talking, I was like, "Huh, I wonder if this is considered a recognized disability." Obviously this is not legal advice, but just generally speaking, what kind of things can people ask for?

Hillary Vaillancourt: That's a great question. So, at the K through 12 level, number one schools, children can request accommodations in the classroom. They can request specifically a 504 plan. At the higher education level, there's a whole litany of things that college students really, and graduate students, should be thinking about. Number one, housing – if there's a serious allergy, getting a dorm, sharing a dorm with people who understand and are willing to abide by certain restrictions, such as maybe not having peanuts in the dorm room, or milk or something else that could be really serious for someone with a severe allergy. Dining hall issues – making sure that there's safe food in the dining hall, or having accommodations where a student might not be required to pay for the dining hall meal plan if there're not enough safe options for the student there. So, at the educational level, there's a whole lot of things that people with food allergies can request under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Alison Monahan: And would this apply in the workplace as well? I'm just envisioning an office kitchen and that thing.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah, absolutely. So for example, when I was fundraising, all of the fundraisers at the university were required to have a territory that was both local and drivable, as well as a territory that was farther away and required flying. In retrospect, I probably could have requested certain accommodations that maybe my flights to territories wouldn't be so long, because I did need to have special accommodations in terms of, I wouldn't eat before I got on an airplane, just to make sure I didn't have a reaction before flying some place. I wouldn't eat on an airplane, for sure, just in case I had a reaction mid-air. And that was really, really stressful. So absolutely, people can request accommodations in the workplace as well.



Alison Monahan: This is so interesting. Luckily, I'm not a person who's had food allergies, but I do definitely have friends and things like that who have kids or themselves and, yeah, it just seems to be something that just adds such a layer of stress throughout your life.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes. And like I said, when I first was diagnosed, there really weren't a lot of resources. There were a lot of people who did great work in doing their own research and shared that online, and I would have been absolutely lost without a lot of that information that I Googled. But there really weren't a whole lot of other resources in terms of accommodations, understanding what my rights are, understanding how to request changes in my meal if I ordered at a restaurant, and the different nuances around all of those things. And so, I was really inspired to start Piece of Cake Allergy Consulting, especially when my son – he was about a year and a half at the time, and also was showing signs of having a food allergy. At his daycare, he accidentally ingested one of the things that we thought he might be allergic to.

Alison Monahan: Oh no.

Hillary Vaillancourt: And his daycare provider simply told me, "Don't worry, one bite won't hurt him."

Alison Monahan: Oh my gosh. And you're like, "Actually..."

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah. It can be a really scary thing for someone who has a very severe allergy, and we really didn't know the scope of those allergies for my son. Fortunately, he was fine, but that is not always the case for every child or person with a food allergy who accidentally ingests their allergens. And I really learned not only is there a lack of information about food allergies out there and a lack of training, but there's also a lack of training for people with food allergies on how to be able to advocate for themselves and for their loved ones. And so, I really wanted to start something that would help train people with food allergies and educate the food allergy community on how to be better advocates for themselves.

Alison Monahan: And is that kind of your goal with Piece of Cake? What type of stuff do you want to do with that?

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah. So we'll have, to start with, three different ways in which people with food allergies can take advantage of our programs. The first is individual education, where I will work one-on-one with either the person who has food allergies or with their family, especially if it's a minor child who has food allergies, and really specifically address their exact needs. If they're having issues getting accommodations at school, walking them through the process they've been through so far, what types of things they can request and how to go about doing that in a way that should hopefully set them up for success. And then a second



option is group training, where up to five families can get together and participate in the training together, but also build a support network among each other. When I was first diagnosed, I didn't know anybody else who had a food allergy. And as supportive as my husband was, going to grocery stores with me for hours at a time, reading labels, it would have been really wonderful to be able to talk with other families who were going through a similar situation. And every family has had different experiences and can really relate different tips and tricks that they've learned that work for them, which really makes the whole food allergy community that much better. So, I'm really particularly excited about the group training program. And there's the...

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that sounds...

Hillary Vaillancourt: Oh, go ahead.

Alison Monahan: I was just going to say, that sounds like a really great idea.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Thank you.

Alison Monahan: I can see the social support component being really important in a situation like this, particularly if you've got young kids and you're frightened and you don't really know and like, "Oh my gosh, what if something happened?"

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: It seems very stressful, the whole thing.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes. I do plan on also having other professionals who are in the food allergy space but deal with different aspects of it. So, there are nutritionists who specifically work with people with food allergies to make sure that they're still getting all the nutrients they need despite having dietary restrictions. There are also mental health professionals who work specifically with families with food allergies, because it can be very stressful. But also if a parent or a sibling has witnessed a family member with a very severe reaction, it can be extremely traumatic.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I'd imagine.

Hillary Vaillancourt: The program is really meant to be a holistic, all-encompassing, one-stop-shop to really understand not only your rights, but also how to cope with life with food allergies. And then there's a third option, which is self-directed study online, where people with food allergies can purchase programs from our website and work at their own pace through the program.



- Alison Monahan: Nice. I'd have to imagine this is probably also a sort of developing area of the law.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes.
- Alison Monahan: I know it just seems to be getting so much more attention, like the peanut things and all that, as compared to when I was a child, for example.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Absolutely, and for me, that's one of the most exciting parts, because there isn't a lot of precedent right now. Just because there's a cause of action available, it doesn't always mean that it's convenient or really feasible for somebody to bring a lawsuit. It can be expensive, time-consuming, and really difficult on a family. There is a case out of Colonial Williamsburg recently where... And I absolutely adore Colonial Williamsburg – it is one of my favorite places on the planet, but they were sued because the boy who was on a field trip with his class needed to have gluten-free food, and he tried to bring it into one of the restaurants on Colonial Williamsburg grounds. And they denied his request to bring the food into the restaurant. And this little boy sat outside in the rain, apparently, according to the facts of the case, alone, eating his gluten-free food.
- Alison Monahan: That's horrible.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes.
- Alison Monahan: Not exactly a sympathetic set of facts there.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah, no. I guess if I'm trying to look in the best light of the defendant, I could see an argument being made for liability, that if everyone is bringing food in, you can't control health and hygiene and things like that.
- Alison Monahan: We're lawyers, we can make an argument. But it's not a great look, a small child sitting alone in the rain.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Exactly, yeah. So the family sued and now there is some precedent about accommodations in restaurants, but there's so much that still needs to really be brought to the forefront of legal proceedings in order to really establish a lot more precedents in so many different areas. I can think of places like amusement parks and theme parks, sporting events that don't allow outside food, and how that could impact someone with food allergies. And it would be really interesting to see how different cases brought in these situations would turn out. So, I'm particularly excited about the developing case law around all of this.



- Alison Monahan: Yeah, well, it sounds like there's definitely a lot to unpack and a lot of different angles on that type of work, but you also run your own practice devoted to other things. Tell me a little bit about that.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Yeah, so, my law practice is focusing mostly on estate planning – so, drafting wills, trusts, and other documents related to those things. It really kind of started, I don't want to say as an accident, but it was never my goal when I was in law school to have a law practice of my own. In fact, I couldn't understand the students who went to the different clinics and things to learn how to run their own practice; I could never imagine why someone would want to do that.
- Alison Monahan: I know. If you told me I'd be running a business in law school, I would be like, "That's ridiculous. I have no aptitude for that, I have no interest in that, I don't know anything about that. I couldn't possibly do that." And well, here we are.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Exactly. It's one of the biggest things I've learned in my life in general, not just since graduating law school, but it's just really to be open to opportunities and take everything for a learning experience. The experiences that I've had in starting my own practice and all of the mistakes I've made from the business side of things, over the first year especially, have made me so much better and more efficient at starting my business Piece of Cake Allergy Consulting.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, true, I'm sure. The second time is definitely, I'm sure way easier.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes. Well, when I first started my law practice, it was kind of out of necessity. I was working at another job previously, but it really was a very bad fit for all of us, and sometimes that's just the case. But I was about four and a half months pregnant at the time, and especially for financial reasons, it just wasn't a good fit. I wasn't making enough money to make ends meet and it was very stressful. The health insurance plan that was provided was way too much – it was like a \$16,000 deductible.
- Alison Monahan: Oh my gosh.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes. For a family with a small child and one on the way, it just wasn't going to work.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah.
- Hillary Vaillancourt: And I kind of realized that I was bringing in business to the firm but I wasn't making 100% of the fee from the business that I brought in. And I could keep my overhead relatively low if I started on my own, especially with a virtual practice, and so the money that I was bringing in would be enough to support my family if I could bring that in on my own. So, my plan was to actually work advocating for children in the court system. I was all signed up for the training and ready to go,



and then COVID canceled all of the events. It cancelled all of my marketing events, shutdown court, all my classes were cancelled. And so, I had to figure out a way very quickly to pivot. My son was suddenly home from daycare, so I didn't have the childcare for my son. My husband's income as a sports broadcaster dwindled, because so many of his games were cancelled. And so, we really didn't have much opportunity to build up the practice and establish a good foundation; it was really just based on necessity. But it was also an enormous blessing. I learned so much through that crazy first year, but also I'm so grateful for the experience. It's been wonderful to have the flexibility of having my own practice, especially with a young family. But there're certainly pros and cons, just like with anything.

Alison Monahan: Sounds like you really got the pandemic perfect storm there – all sorts of stuff coming at you from all angles. You got the small child, you got lots of...

Hillary Vaillancourt: We were in a little bit of a home renovation and move.

Alison Monahan: Oh my gosh.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Certainly, I wouldn't recommend anyone start a business under those circumstances.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. What was that like, trying to build a practice, particularly in a new area during the pandemic? How did you do that? You're like, "I don't know."

Hillary Vaillancourt: Initially, I want to say with a lot of luck, but truthfully, it was a lot of hard work, some luck. I had worked at a practice when I first started law school, where the practice was part of a legal insurance plan. And that was one of the first things I did, was get involved with the insurance plan again. And that has been a wonderful experience. There are several of them out there, and I've worked with a few of them now. It's a positive situation, because I don't have to do as much marketing. The clients really kind of look me up and come to me, and as I've progressed and gotten that much better, our rating has really improved through the program, and so we're really getting a lot of clients through the legal insurance plan. And there're pros and cons there too. The fee isn't nearly as much as if I had that same client but in a private context, without the insurance premium. So, we have to do more of a volume business, take on more clients to make the money that we really need to make. But I've learned so much in terms of establishing processes and how to be...

Alison Monahan: Oh yes. I'm all about the processes.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Yes. It's so critically important, time blocking and all those little things. I think so often when we think about creating a business, there's a huge difference between creating a business and a law firm. There's certainly a business aspect



to having a law firm, but there're also a lot of other logistics that go into it – obviously knowing the law and keeping up with the changes in your area of law, but also keeping up with the legal practice in general, and making sure you're getting all your CLEs and you're getting them in on time, and you're paying your registration fees on time, you're abiding by all the legal ethics. In comparison with Piece of Cake Allergy Consulting, there are dozens more players with complex situations in running a law firm than there is in running a business. So, it just adds a whole new level to things.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's interesting. Eventually I went inactive, mostly because I didn't want to do the CLE, but Lee's still doing hers, so once every three years, I get to hear a lot of complaining about the CLE because the process in California is, you only do it every three years. But yeah, you're right, there's just so much you have to do to make sure that you're in good standing and you have your license and all that. And it's so important because obviously that's a very valuable asset. I know you wrote a post on the Girls Guide to law school, which we can link to, about running a specifically virtual law practice. How's that going for you and what have you learned along the way in that sense?

Hillary Vaillancourt: That's a great question. I would say most people are really receptive to a virtual practice these days. When I graduated from law school, my best friend from law school, she actually was interested in potentially starting her own practice at the time, and interviewed several other attorneys in the Boston area about starting their own practice, and all of them said, "It'll take you several years before you even turn a profit. You better have someone else who can help support you during that time."

Alison Monahan: How convenient.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Right. Which of course, I didn't really have that. She didn't have it then either. But when I looked at the logistics and overhead for a virtual practice, it's really very minimal. It's malpractice insurance, I pay for a program where I get unlimited CLEs, I pay for obviously my computer, I have a special business phone number. And eventually, I did add a case management system for my clients, but I try to keep overhead as low as possible. It was really only \$300, \$400 a month for my total overhead. And it's crept up a little bit as we've added different areas, different states to our jurisdiction. So malpractice insurance has gone up. Prices never go down; they always go up for things.

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Hillary Vaillancourt: But in terms of overhead, it's way less than I anticipated. And so, that's been a huge blessing and surprise in starting with my own virtual practice. One thing that has surprised me as well is how much clients expect me to be available 24/7.



Alison Monahan: Interesting.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Kind of going back to Piece of Cake Allergy Consulting and learning to be a better advocate, I had to be a better advocate for myself in my own law practice and learn to set better and clearer boundaries about when I could and couldn't meet with people. I've had clients ask if I could meet at 9:00 o'clock at night, I had clients ask if I can meet on Sunday morning, I had a client ask... I rushed to draft documents for her, dropped them off on a Friday evening, basically making a house call, and then she asked if I could meet her again on Sunday afternoon to pick them back up.

Alison Monahan: Oh wow.

Hillary Vaillancourt: And it happened to be my wedding anniversary, so as much as I was tempted, because I do want to give quality service to my clients, I've had to learn to get a lot more comfortable at saying "No."

Alison Monahan: I think that's so important. It sounds like you're already kind of going above and beyond in a lot of cases.

Hillary Vaillancourt: We certainly do try. It is a different way of doing business, and I also had to learn to get comfortable with that myself. I spent a lot of time comparing what I was used to a practice looking like, versus what this actually looks like. So many of the signings, of course, in a business office setting are very formal. They're at a big conference table, there might be like a Persian rug on the floor and fancy lamps in the corner, and a secretary or an administrative assistant up front. And my signings, usually I'm barefoot and my children are running around, and the client's children are running around, and someone's derailing a toy train or running with the bicycle or something like that through the living room. But we laugh a lot, and I feel like the clients are a lot more at ease. We're talking about things like estate planning it can be really difficult, especially if the client has gone through a very bad experience managing the estate of a loved one who died without any documents in place. And I typically work a lot with families who do have small children. And so, having the flexibility of meeting on a Saturday morning or while their children are at school, or taking their children with them to a location where they know it's going to be comfortable and there's very little formality, I find that my clients in particular, the ones that we attract to our practice, tend to appreciate that a lot more. But it did take me some time to kind of let go of what I was used to a law office looking like, and embrace what my law office actually looks like.

Alison Monahan: I mean, it sounds kind of fantastic, also very different than the BigLaw firms I've been at. You mentioned a couple of times that you've got some small kids. How do you think that's interacted with your legal career? I think sometimes people



think, "Oh, your career's over as soon as you have kids", but it doesn't really sound like that's the case here.

Hillary Vaillancourt: No, I think I've been very fortunate in that when I did start my practice, there was definitely a period of adjustment. I had about three weeks in my practice before daycare was shut down, and then my son was home. It's taken my husband and I a little bit of time to kind of find our balance. And then especially with a new baby in the mix that whole first year, there's just really very little stability and consistency, so that was a huge challenge. But also, there are so many things that make our lives easier by having a home practice with small children. I'm not rushing in the morning having to wake up a sleepy, grumpy child to get them ready to go out the door to go to a babysitter. I don't have to prepare meals and things well in advance to make sure I pack enough food and snacks. If a meeting goes late, I'm not rushing to go pick a child up well after hours and being dinged with the late fee or a comment or something like that. My husband, being a sports broadcaster, his schedule is a bit unpredictable. And so, between the two of us, one of us is always with our kids. My son is four and my daughter is 18 months. And so one of us is always with the children, and one of us is working. And it's just been such a huge blessing to be able to have that kind of flexibility. As my kids' schedules have gotten a little bit more stable, now that my daughter's a bit older, time blocking has been a huge advantage. I know that I can get some work done in the morning and some work done in the late afternoon, but the middle of the day when the kids are hungry or they're ready for a nap, is always very unpredictable. So I make sure to never schedule as much as possible anything in the middle of the day. And also truthfully if I'm tired, I take a break, I take a nap where I rest with my kids. And you can't do that when you work for someone else or have a different kind of 9:00 to 5:00 situation. So, it's been a huge blessing for me to be able to have this practice with young children. The flipside I will say is, it's also challenging and the income level is also unpredictable and inconsistent. That certainly presents its own challenges, but you take the good with the bad in every situation.

Alison Monahan: Exactly, and it sounds like if nothing else, you guys have managed to carve out a mostly workable situation in the midst of this ongoing pandemic craziness, so I definitely salute you for that.

Hillary Vaillancourt: Thank you.

Alison Monahan: I know being a parent with small children right now is not the easiest thing that's ever been done.

Hillary Vaillancourt: No, and we did try for a little while to have a nanny come to the house just for a few days a week. But that was really difficult too, and then she unfortunately had been exposed or she was actually really sick, and then she couldn't make it and I had to move appointments around. I can absolutely sympathize and



empathize with working parents out there. My son's first year in daycare, I was working in fund raising and he was sick, and I'm not talking about sniffles or just a little bit under the weather. He had a major illness like pneumonia, hand-foot-and-mouth, a stomach bug at least once a month for eight straight months. And it's just such a terrible existence, it's really not sustainable, and I had an incredibly supportive and understanding boss at the time, but not every employer is like that. And now that I have my own practice, the clients that I have are also incredibly understanding, and they go through situations like that too. I had a client who had a newborn, and so I would make sure to schedule a half an hour before our scheduled appointment and a half an hour after, so that just in case things didn't work out with the timing with the newborn, we could still make our appointment, we just had to adjust a little bit. So, flexibility is definitely key when it comes to trying to balance all that. But that's a huge luxury that most of us don't really have, and one that I'm incredibly grateful for.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I'm in awe really, because it's a lot. Well, before we're out of time, it sounds like your career has definitely taken some twists and turns along the way to finding something that is basically working for you. What advice do you have for law students in terms of figuring out their career path, especially maybe if they're thrown some unexpected curve balls?

Hillary Vaillancourt: It's honestly such an interesting question for me, because I feel like I've been thrown curve balls my entire career. And really, I think just embracing the learning opportunities and taking those with you wherever you happen to go. When I was in law school, I learned that I really didn't want to do property law, I especially didn't want to do any kind of criminal law, and I really thought I would work for a non-profit or advocating for a cause that I was really passionate about. I didn't really see myself working for a small practice. But I graduated of course in 2010, which was not a great time for the economy, and so I really didn't have many options when it came to career choices that I was interested in. I was very fortunate to meet an attorney in my hometown, and I kind of just convinced him that he needed to hire an associate to handle his workload, and it worked out. But the ironic part was, I went to work at a small firm handling criminal and property matters, which was everything I said I didn't want to do.

Alison Monahan: Of course.

Hillary Vaillancourt: So it was definitely... It was a very funny situation, but I've learned so much through that. It was extremely hands-on, my boss really gave me casework and kind of just let me figure things out on my own. And through that I learned lots of different ways of managing a practice, and I didn't even know that I was learning those skills at the time. Certainly never anticipated, even then, having my own practice. But I think for anyone who's thinking about their career, just be willing to be a sponge and soak everything up. Keep good notes, because you never know when something might come in handy later, but just be a sponge



and soak it all up, and be willing to take new opportunities. I tend to consider myself to be fairly risk-averse, despite all the risk of my career, so it's hard for me to say, "Take risks." It feels a little bit cliché, but starting my own practice was a humongous risk that certainly could have broken me that first year, and I think probably almost did. I sound very positive about it now, but last year was a very challenging year. But if I didn't take that risk, I wouldn't be here now. And also, be patient. I think when I graduated law school, I expected to start at the bottom rung of that ladder and just work my way right up on a straight and narrow path, and that's just not the case. It takes a lot of twists and turns sometimes. I shouldn't say it's not the case, for some people it is. Sometimes I'm jealous of those people. But it's okay if you have a very windy path and you take deviations and you try something new for a while, because all of those skills that you learn really just make you that much better later on at whatever it is that you end up doing. But just allow yourself the time and space to make those choices, take those risks, and not set expectations about where you want to be at a certain stage in life, if all that makes sense.

Alison Monahan: No, I think that's great advice. Well, we're over time now, but before we wrap up, if people want to get in touch with you or find out more, how can they do that?

Hillary Vaillancourt: That's a great question. So, they can go to my new business website pieceofcakeallergyconsulting.com. And all of my contact information is there.

Alison Monahan: Nice. Alright, any final thoughts before we wrap up?

Hillary Vaillancourt: No, just thank you so much for the opportunity. And for anyone out there who's struggling with their career, just know that it does get better. Like I said, just be willing to really assess where you are and think about where you want to go.

Alison Monahan: Well, thank you so much for joining us. This has been really interesting. And with that, we are out of time. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app. We would 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 or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website [contact form](http://contactform) at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

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