Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. I am so excited to have one of my dear friends from law school here, Hannah Seigel Proff, who is a private solo criminal defense lawyer out in Denver, and she is going to chat with us about life as a criminal defense lawyer. 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.

Hi, this is Lee from the Law School Toolbox. I am so excited to have one of my dear friends from law school here, Hannah Seigel Proff, who is a private solo criminal defense lawyer out in Denver, and she is going to chat with us about life as a criminal defense lawyer. And Hannah, I have done 500 or plus episodes, and you're like the first law school friend who's been on it, which is really funny to me.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Wow.

Lee Burgess: I know. I had no idea.

Hannah Seigel Proff: You've got to change that. I'm honored to be the first, but you have to change that.

Lee Burgess: I basically need to go down my list and be like, "Who else wants to come join?"

Hannah Seigel Proff: Especially now, there're judges and all these partners at fancy law firms, so it's only uphill from here.

Lee Burgess: It is, really. I mean, we now seem way fancier than we were back in the day.

Hannah Seigel Proff: That's for sure.

Lee Burgess: Well, to get things kicked off for our listeners, can you share a little bit more about yourself and what you do?

Hannah Seigel Proff: Of course. So, I'm happy to be here. I own and operate a boutique solo criminal and juvenile defense practice here in Denver, Colorado, and I've been practicing law for 16 years. I spent seven years as a public defender, then I was in policy for a while. Then I went to a private law firm and now I've owned my own law firm for six years. So, I really love running and operating a solo practice.

Lee Burgess: That's so cool. I remember you talking about your dreams about practicing criminal law back in law school, which we won't admit how many years ago that was, to age ourselves. But how did you know that criminal law was going to be your passion, and was doing a practice like you've built always how you wanted to do it?

Hannah Seigel Proff: Well, I was a cradle to JD law student. I don't know that I actually recommend that. I teach now at both of the law schools here locally, and I'm always talking to similar cradle to JD folks, and I'm a little jealous of the people who had some more life experience before law school. But since I went into law school at the ripe old age of 21-22, I thought I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and what I wanted to do was fight the prison industrial complex with a law degree. So, a 22-year-old Hannah, what that meant to me at that moment was doing prisoners' rights, civil rights, that sort of work. But as soon as I was introduced to trial practice, that all changed. I fell in love with being in a courtroom, and cross-examinations, and the strategy and the theater of it all, and I was hooked. And so, I parlayed my passion for fighting the prison industrial complex into direct representation and indigent defense, specifically.

Lee Burgess: And what's been the most surprising thing about your role as a private criminal defense lawyer?

Hannah Seigel Proff: I think the most surprising thing has just been how much business is part of running a law firm, which sounds ridiculous. I didn't go into being a lawyer thinking I wanted to run my own law firm at all. I sort of went into it thinking I'd be a public defender forever. I'm a first-generation college graduate, so first-generation lawyer. My parents, my father worked for the government, so I was sort of raised on this idea like you get a government job and you stay there for 25 years, and then you retire. So, I went into the public defenders, again, at the ripe old age of 24-25, with that plan. So, when I switched courses eventually and left PD life, thanks to the support of mentors and things like that, I was surprised as I ventured down that path how much business and business development, how much time it takes. Lucky for me, I love that part of it. My husband and I own a brewery, I have a real estate business that I run. I love business, so it isn't a bummer to me that I spend probably 25% of my week

doing business development, doing those sorts of things. But I think that's been the most surprising thing about running my own law firm.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, nobody talks about that, and the logistics of managing all the information, and now you need all these operating systems to run your client files.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Yeah. And part of that can be really fun, right? Like figuring out how to incorporate AI into my practice, and having all the right softwares and streamlining my work. I really love that. But it's non-billable time for the most part that you have to spend to build those processes, so that you can do your best work when you're working.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that is one of the things that can make those government roles somewhat appealing, is there isn't as much of that. The government kind of runs everything for you.

Hannah Seigel Proff: A hundred percent. And I meet with public defenders all the time who say, "I'm tired of the grind, the caseload. I want to make more money", whatever it is. And I remind them, I'm like, "First of all, add 20-30k to your salary, because of all of your benefits, your paid vacation, all of that." I love running my own firm, so I'm not trying to talk them out of it. But don't forget about that. And also, don't just do the, "If I billed X number per hour, eight hours a day, I would make X", because if I'm billing eight hours a day, I'm working 12. And you know that from private law practice as well. So, it takes a lot of time to bill time, and then add on top of that all the business stuff you get to do as a business owner.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. It's interesting, my parents both were government lawyers, and then my dad was a prosecutor for the government for most of his career, and then switched to a private criminal defense practice. And I think that was just an interesting point to even do that later in your career, because then, yeah, all of a sudden you're really used to paid time off and all of those benefits. And it was a little bit different, because he'd had so many years with the government, I think the government still supported some of the benefits and things like that. But still, there're a lot of logistics. And one of the things that he always commented was that it's a different way of being on call when you have these individual clients. You don't just get to go home at 6:00. Which he didn't always do if he was in trial, but generally speaking, you didn't have somebody calling you with an emergency. And so, he used to keep a suit in the back of his car because he just never knew when he would be somewhere and would get a phone call and need to go to the jail or need to go have a meeting with someone, because it was just a much different dynamic.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Absolutely. My husband and I take a two-week to 20-day international trip every year, so I close my law firm. And it's so funny because every year, I go to the jail and I remind my clients for weeks, months leading up, like, "I'm going to be completely unavailable for 20 days." By the time that last visit comes, they're like, "Just leave! We know! We'll be fine!" Literally their lives are on the line, that it's really hard to leave, and I have to set up with my paralegal. The people who call my office to hire me, you don't call a criminal defense attorney because you need help three months from now, right? So, I have to set it up that that business goes elsewhere. And again, I try to not use a scarcity mindset with my firm. And understand that when I make time for myself, when I take the cases I want and say "no" to cases that don't suit me, the work I want to do is going to come back for me. Or if I say "no" to five cases while I'm in Mexico for 20 days, when I get back I'm going to be refreshed to do better work for the clients that I can take. So, I think it's hard when you run your own firm, because it feels like every call is money that you could make, but not running a firm from a scarcity mindset is something I really have worked hard at.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think anytime you run your own business, to be able to just say "I'm out of office" is really hard. And the longer you run your own business, I think it gets harder, because it becomes so much more a part of you, and you just don't clock in and clock out the same way. I love running my own business because I think there are the tradeoffs to that is, you do have all this autonomy. You can decide what you want to do, you can build the life that you want, and you're very responsible for it. So, one of the things you mentioned when you were talking about your practice is you do juvenile defense. And so, what are the unique challenges juvenile defendants face? And I feel like you don't necessarily hear a lot of law firms that focus on that, or promote that they work with juveniles.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Yeah, it's so interesting. One of my mentors when I was starting my firm, I went to her with my logo and my website before it was all launched, and she gave me the advice to back off on the juvenile stuff. She's like, "Look, I think it makes you seem like you're less of a litigator." There has been unfortunately this sort of stereotype that people who practice juvenile law are less kind of fierce litigators, because it's more of a soft system. I don't agree with any of that. But her advice – and I trust her and she's still a dear friend and a mentor – was sort of, "Back up off the juvenile stuff. That work will come to you because of your reputation doing that work." And I really stuck with my guns. And the reason I stuck with launching a law firm that says it's a juvenile-focused law firm is, it's the work that I love to do, it's the clients that I love to assist, and really, it's a practice area and a specialty that's really come to fruition, at least in Colorado, in the 16 years I've been practicing. When I started as a public defender, there

were very few lawyers who were focused on representing children in a holistic manner, specifically children charged as adults. Those cases were just assigned to public defenders who represented adults, because the child was in adult court. And it's really in those years that I was a public defender that the norm started to shift. And we started to say, "We really need specialists to do this work, who really understand the adolescent brain and development and the law specifically with children." So, it's been a joy of mine that that's a focus of mine. And I still get plenty of criminal defense work in the door, but I get a lot of juvenile defense work. I'm everywhere from Aspen to Colorado Springs, which is hundreds of miles away for those people who aren't Colorado people, doing juvenile defense, which is what I love to do. So I think when I took maybe the risk of putting out that specialty and really putting out into the world what I want to do, that work came to me and people think of me for that work. So, I really love it.

Lee Burgess: I would assume too that the challenge of juvenile work is that oftentimes you are really holding a community or a family around that juvenile who has made possibly poor choices in extreme situations. When my father changed careers, and people would say lots of things about prosecutors who switch, because I think a lot of prosecutors are true believers. And my dad always would say things like, "I have a role to play. In my role, people make mistakes on my side. People make mistakes. We all do our best to keep the system as honest as we can." So when you switch sides, people would say all sorts of stuff, right? "How can you do this? How can you defend?" And he's like, "You know, most of my clients are people who made poor choices in extreme situations." And you're often holding the families who are supporting a person who made poor choices in extreme situations. And so, I would assume in the juvenile court process it's the same, because you've got to have parents and family and community that are also really hurting and scared. And that's something they don't train you to do in law school, is manage families.

Hannah Seigel Proff: I don't even know that they train you in law school to manage clients.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true. Fair point. I was thinking that as I just said that. I was like, "What class did we take that taught us to do that?"

Hannah Seigel Proff: I think there's more of that now, at least at the law schools in Colorado. I'm seeing more of interviewing with empathy and people at least talking about those concepts. That is one of the hardest things about juvenile defense, and it's why for a lot of people, it's not the right fit, because you have a client, you owe your duty of loyalty to that client, you have your attorney/client privilege with that client, but then you have parents, often, who are paying you, or even if

they're not paying you, they want to be apprised. Of course, the child is the holder of the privilege, so they can say, "Tell my mom nothing", "Tell my mom everything." Both of those conversations are hard for the lawyer, right? So, managing the family is very hard. I'll also say I represent a lot of lawyers' children. I personally don't have children, but people who have children, it is like their brain does not work. People call me, "Well, I'm a lawyer. I sort of understand my kid's in big trouble." And I think to myself, "You actually probably know less than the average Joe who calls me and their kid's in trouble, because you know too much." So, that part is hard, but I love that part and I love looking at the whole. I practice holistic juvenile defense, and that's sort of best practices in Colorado these days. And so, looking at really the whole child, the whole family, if it's available to me, to address the needs. Of course, I represent innocent children. There may be no needs, they're just wrongfully accused. But a lot of times I represent a child who in a split second, because their prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed, made a terrible decision, to your point. And the entire rest of their life could be changed in such detrimental ways. I'm representing children charged with homicide, sex assault, weapons charges. They're in really big trouble. And that's the hardest part about the work. It never gets easy to watch anyone go to prison. The heartbreak of watching a child go to prison... And sometimes prison is the best option. If you can get a child a 20-year sentence to prison on a murder case, unfortunately that might be considered a good sentence in some cases. And that's still longer than that child's lived, longer than the parents have had with the child in the home. None of those conversations are easy, but I really love it. I love it. And just try to keep empathy at the front of all of the conversations.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I recently went and saw Malcolm Gladwell speak, he has a new version of his book out. And one of the things he talked about in this lecture was the power of listening. The interviewer was talking to him about why he's good at what he does. And he says that he thinks his greatest skill is being a very acute listener, and that it's a very underrated skill, is being able to hold that. And I feel like that must be something that you really have had to hone when you're dealing with all of these folks who are in a crisis moment, as you said.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Absolutely. One of my tricks that I tell young public defenders, all lawyers, anyone who wants to be mentored by me who is looking for a trick or tip – every time I meet with a client for the first time, I make sure I don't have an appointment afterwards. So, if I go to a jail at 1:00 PM, I probably want to be home for dinner by 7:00. And I have never had to stay that long, but I don't come in and say, "I'm going to be out of here by 3:00", because that starts off the conversation with "I don't have enough time for whatever you want to tell me." I'm like, "This is our first conversation, so I'm here as long as you need

me." Most of the time a meeting lasts for an hour. Everyone's exhausted after an hour. I'm going to get out of there. But I'm holding space to have that conversation go as long as I need. Moving forward, once I've built trust, I can say to someone, "Look, I have a doctor's appointment at 3:00, so I've only got an hour today. I hope that's okay." They know I'm going to listen, and I have listened in the past, and so that's something that really works well for me. Same with my office meetings. I will assume there will be an hour that first one, but if there are two, I have the time on my calendar.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, because when you're trying to get somebody to confide in you, even if they've hired you – especially, let's say, in the juvenile context maybe it's the parents that have hired you – and this young person or this teenager does not know you. And so, there's got to be time to convince them. I mean, teens aren't the best at speaking to you about things. Even my 10-year-old, sometimes it takes me a while to say, "Alright, we're just going to kind of noodle on this until you start giving me actual information about what I need."

Hannah Seigel Proff: Absolutely. When I have adults in my office, they all laugh because my whole conference table is like covered in fidgets, which adults always laugh at them, but then they immediately start fidgeting. We almost all love fidgets, right? But I also do a lot of walking meetings. Denver has a couple of great walking trails that are really private, or bike paths. If I'm talking to young people about the first time they had sex, or really scary situations, they may not want to make eye contact with a 42- year-old woman, or with anyone for that matter, while they talk about it. So, I really try to think outside the box about how to build rapport and how to have those tough conversations, because you have to have that relationship in order to do my job well.

Lee Burgess: If you're listening to this and you're in law school, and I think you want to do any sort of deep client-facing work, because I think that criminal defense is its own category, but I would even assume that even family law lawyers would be in the same camp, right? You have people coming to you often in crisis, unless you're just doing prenup work, but there's usually a crisis. They're not at their best, they're in pain. How should folks go about honing those skills? I mean, maybe law schools are talking to them about this more than when we were in law school, but still, law school is not as focused on being the whole person as maybe they should be. So, where do those skills come from? I mean, you have always been a good listener. We've known each other for a long time, I think that's part of who you are. But these are skills that can be developed.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Absolutely. I don't even know if this is a piece of advice. I don't think I've ever been asked this question before, but I think one of the things I did to become a

good listener is just to be curious in life. Don't stop reading novels and reading magazines and doing things that interest you when you're a law student. Don't just become like a law-processing machine. That's not this job. For the most part, people hire me because of my empathetic listening, because of my vibe, the thing I say when they walk in or when we're texting before the meeting or something. People don't come in for the most part and start quizzing me about the law. I'm very good at the law, I know the law. People don't hire me having seen me ever cross-examine someone, right? They can read the reviews online, all of those things. They hire you because of your personality, and your life experiences, and your ability to make eye contact and to have those conversations. I also say that as I'm neurodiverse, I'm dyslexic, so I'm thinking about this from a neurodiversity perspective. I know some of us aren't as good at making eye contact or things, but think about the ways that you can connect to people, like what's best for you and is authentic to your personality. There is nothing about being a trial attorney that works if it's not your style. I've learned this the hard way by seeing people in the courtroom and trying to emulate something and then being like, "I feel like an absolute idiot right now. This is not me, this isn't something Hannah does." So, it feels like I'm putting on an act, and I think a jury can tell that as well. And that's how it is with clients, whether it's a divorce or a civil rights case, someone's family member, a personal injury case, people are injured, they've lost a family member, they've lost their ability to use their body, feel well. You have to have so much empathy for that. And honestly, I think thinking more broadly than yourself generally is going to help unlock that. I also think getting into those situations and watching other lawyers address it when you have internships, asking – it might not be billable or whatever – but "Can I come to those meetings where you decide whether you take a client?", because a lot of the empathy starts, a lot of that rapport building starts in those initial meetings: "I am so, so sorry this happened to you." One of the things I always say, which is 100% true, when people call my office, I will say, "How are you? Thanks for your call. How are you?" And then I immediately say, "Although I know most people don't call my office on a great day, I'm glad to be talking to you." Because it's true, people don't call a criminal defense attorney because it's like, "Yay, a summons just pulled up in the mail" or, "There's a cop outside my door." Very rarely. So yeah, I think think globally, read books, keep your personality outside being a lawyer, because I swear, I don't get any of my business because of my lawyer skills, upfront at least, from a business perspective.

Lee Burgess: And I think look at other people even outside of the profession. I have a dear friend here in the Bay Area who is a chaplain. She was trained in Zen Buddhism and decided she really felt called to become a chaplain, so she did all this programming, she went to school for it. And she is the most intensive listener I have ever experienced. And this has been since I met her like a decade ago. But

when Amanda sits with you, we could be talking about poop and our kids, but she is just there with you. She has this amazing presence and you can see why she sits with people often in their darkest moments. She works with parents who their children are in a pediatric care and are in crisis. But you can see that she just has this ability to show up and hold space in a way that I've never seen before. And having her in my life has made me a better business owner. I mean, I talk to people who are in a different type of crisis, right? Not so extreme, but they might feel like they can't move forward in their profession, they are struggling. And I am able to hold those conversations better, because I've had a friend in a totally different realm who's modeled for me what it feels like when somebody is really present. She just has this deep presence. And so, I think so often we forget to look outside the legal profession – like you were saying, read books and do that. But what does it feel like to be around somebody who's such a good, compassionate listener? And then you'd want to take that and say, "How do I do that, even in my personal life when my friends are in crisis? How do I show up in that way?"

Hannah Seigel Proff: I love that. It's such a good example. And I am lucky enough at this point in my career that I have sort of a board of directors of mentors. And I laugh, because some of them – I don't necessarily tell them this – but I have the one that I'm like, "I want her marriage when I'm her age." She's a lawyer, and she's an amazing lawyer and she helps me. But one of the core things I appreciate about her is how well she's kept her life outside of being a lawyer at her center. Then I have the litigation, I have, like you, the empathetic, the lawyer that when I talk to her about a case or whatever, tears come to her eyes, like she feels me with me. It's such an important lesson, but I'm maybe not going to come to that person for the business development help, because she's the one who's like, "I work for a law firm because I'm a mess and I can't have my own business." So, I think you can't lean on one kind of example or mentor for everything. So, you might have someone at your first job – for the listeners – that you're like, "Wow, they run a client meeting so well." But then you see them litigating and you're like, "That would never be me in the courtroom. It's way too flashy. It's way too whatever." That's fine. That person can be your client visit mentor in your head, and then you can borrow from someone who fits more your style for the courtroom presentation part of things. So, I love that. And that friend of yours sounds amazing.

Lee Burgess: Which she really is. But you definitely have to have this board of directors. I love that. And I think as my life gets bigger and more complicated, I definitely have so many people I go to, to hold space for me in all sorts of different spaces. And it's such a treat when you get to be with those people, who you look at for that individual advice, because you can say, "I'm here because I just want to

consume your advice on this topic, because you're my person in this way." It makes those get-togethers really powerful, especially when nobody has a lot of free time. And so, time becomes such a precious commodity.

Hannah Seigel Proff: I teach at both of the law schools here, as I said. We have this thing at University of Denver Law School, it's called Breaking Bread with the Professors. So the professors take the students out to lunch or coffee, I took my students out to pastries and coffee on a Saturday morning. And students sign up and then you buy them coffee. And during that presentation, one of the things that the students were like, "Oh, this was so helpful to hear" was, I said, as people's mentor, and as a member of the legal community that people come to for advice, I am so appreciative when a mentee of mine comes to me and says, "I want to talk. I would love to schedule a 15-minute phone call to talk about negotiating this contract that I just got this job offer", or "15 minutes to talk about my theme and theory in this DUI trial I have next week." I'm so much more excited to take that meeting than like a nebulous, "Can we schedule a call?" Because when I go to plug "Can we schedule a call?" into my Eisenhower decision-making matrix of like, "How urgent is this?", I have no idea. Is it life or death, or this can wait a month? And I just did it yesterday. I'm thinking of doing something sort of unorthodox in a case that I start in eight days. And I texted two mentors, "Have you ever done X? Even, yes or no, I would still like to schedule a call after the Thanksgiving holiday to talk to you about this trial of mine that starts on the 9th. Do you have any time between the 2nd and the 9th?" They wrote back right away, thrilled to schedule the call because I was specific with my needs. So yeah, having those people you go to and being explicit with, "Right now I want to talk about this really hard case" or, "I want to talk about my stress about retirement savings", or whatever it is – I'm so happy to have that agenda. And of course we're going to stray and talk about other things, but we're going to start with whatever the most pressing topic is for you, and that's how it should be.

Lee Burgess: Right. And I think that it really helps people understand how they can show up for you. I think that so often, we have people in our lives and we know that we are their mentors or their friends, but it is nice to say, "I need this. Can you show up for me in this way?" And then it's the person who's showing up – you're like, "Yeah, I can. I'm happy to show up for you in that way." It's such a benefit. Like you said, you can stray and have other conversations, but it feels good as the person who's giving that support to say, "You have this need and I can help you meet this need right now." It makes you feel good and helpful, and then it also gets the receiver of the advice what they need. They don't have to feel awkward. And you can even pre-think about it. I think that's great too. If you are prepping for a case and want specific advice, maybe you don't want the off-the-

cuff advice. Maybe you want the advice that they thought about on their commute into work, knowing they're going to have a meeting with you later. You couldn't do that if you didn't prep them for it.

Hannah Seigel Proff: A hundred percent. And that's the thing, when I get those, "Can I pick your brain later this afternoon?", sometimes I need to pull a statute book out. It's like, if I had known ahead of time that you wanted to talk about 19-2-1001, I would have looked at it before our call. So, I think people think they're saving people time being vague, but actually I think it's the opposite.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I know. Let's just be as direct as possible. Life's too short and complicated. So, you mentioned... I know you and your husband are both entrepreneurs, you mentioned about your vacation that you take internationally every year. I think it's so important to decide what balance means to everyone, because we cannot have everything at all times. It just doesn't work that way. So, how have you set up your life so you feel that you have what you want professionally and what you want outside of your life?

Hannah Seigel Proff: Yeah, it's such a good question, and I will admit, I think like many people probably from our generation of lawyers, this wasn't a focus when I first got out of law school. We did not talk about work-life balance. Now I speak on panels, the first question I get asked a lot of times from modern day law students is, "What about work-life balance?" I didn't think about that for the first seven years of my practice, and it was to my detriment, because I was burnt out. I wasn't doing anything well. I always tell this anecdote, because I think it's so telling – one of the reasons I decided to leave the public defender is my husband, Brandon, said to me – my six, six and a half years as a public defender – he says, "Do you know you haven't texted me about something that wasn't work-related in six months?" And I was like, "Oh my gosh, please." In my head, I'm of course getting defensive, because this sounds so bad. And so then I get on the bus – and I'll never forget – I get in the bus and I'm scrolling and he's like, "I love you." And I'm like, "Did you pick up my dry cleaning, because I start trial on Monday?" He's like, "Any plans this weekend?" I'm like, "Closing murder on Monday", because my last six months as a public defender, I tried two murder trials and four sex assault trials. I was just litigating all of the time. So, that was a real wakeup call for me and I'm so glad he said something, because at the end of this career, I plan to retire right at 60, so I will have been a lawyer for 35 years at that point. I'm going to have, hopefully, God willing, years and years of life ahead of me, and I want to have a partner, and a life, and friends, and not just have my whole life around my law firm and my cases. Of course my legal community, I love my legal community, but Lee, we went to school in California, so I moved here to Colorado to be a lawyer. So, a lot of my friends when I first

started were public defenders, were lawyers. It's been really important to me to diversify my friend groups, diversify what I'm spending time doing, and making my family a priority. I'm also religious about the gym. I have to get to the gym five days a week. I just have seen firsthand how much better my brain works and lowers my stress. I try to keep what I call a Secular Sabbath, which is based in the Jewish traditions that I grew up with, but really more just, I don't work from sundown on Friday to Sunday morning, even when I'm really prepping a trial, because you're never at your best when you've worked seven days a week. So, it reminds me of taking the bar. Everybody said with the bar exam, "Take those couple of days before the bar off, don't study." And I remember that seemed so hard. And then when I was almost done with the bar, it's like, "Wow, if I had been going nonstop, I would have burnt out." There's only so much gas in the tank.

Lee Burgess: It's so true.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Well, I think that's really impressive because you're teaching, you've got your solo practice, you have your other businesses. And then you also started a non-profit?

Hannah Seigel Proff: I did, although I'm transitioning. It has a new home starting January 1st.

Lee Burgess: Oh, awesome! That's amazing.

Hannah Seigel Proff: After 15 years, that's sort of going off my plate a little bit. I'll still be involved, but yes, I founded, co-founded, and have been the acting executive director for LYRIC, which is Learn Your Rights in the Community. We started 15 years ago, myself and Michael Juba – he's another attorney here in town. And it's a Know Your Rights curriculum for young people. So, it's meant to empower young people to be knowledgeable citizens about how the Constitution applies to them in police interactions. And that's for anyone who gets a speeding ticket – which, who hasn't been there?, to of course folks who are investigated or a part of larger allegations of criminal wrongdoing, to know what does a lawyer say you should do in those situations, which is, remain silent, don't consent to them searching you or your stuff, and really putting yourself at the center of that and making sure you understand how your rights apply. And also talking about safety and acknowledging generally the white supremacy in the history of policing in this country, and that there are just going to be certain folks, certain young folks that we're teaching it's not safe for them to have police interactions.

And so, understanding how to safely exercise their rights is an imperative. So, I love the work that we do. I will tell you though, I got burnt out of having an unpaid extra job. And it started to feel like it wasn't going to be able to be sustained, and the message is so important that we decided it would go under the Transformative Justice Project, which is an amazing non-profit in town. And I cannot wait to just go in and teach the curriculum instead of doing all of the back-end things that I'm not as good at, like fundraising and all of those things. Although I'm sure I will still help with all of those things.

Lee Burgess: Sure. But it's different to own it than it is to help with it. It's a very different mental kind of capacity. I think it's such a great message, because as the daughter of two lawyers, of course they had that talk with me. Especially when I was a teenager, when I started going in my friends' cars, when I had friends in my car. I vividly remember sitting down and my parents being like, "If you get pulled over, this is exactly what you do. Just remember, you do not know what's in anyone's backpack. You do not know what's in the trunk of the car. If the police officer comes to your front door, this is what you say and do." And my dad was a prosecutor at that time, and he's still like, "These are the things that you can do." And so, even now, as my friends have teens, one of my friends, their teen was staying home alone for the first weekend by himself. And I sat him down and was like, "If you need to call the police for something, here's what's going to happen. Or if you get pulled over", whatever. And I think it's so important, because who else is having these conversations with young people? Young people of color, of course, there's such a greater impact on some of them because of the history of racism around some of these interactions. The stakes are so high for everyone, but even more so for those populations. I think that being able to bring this discussion and empower with information is so important. I really respect the fact that you've brought it into... And so, are you doing it in schools? Are you teaching it in schools?

Hannah Seigel Proff: We do. We teach it in 50 Colorado schools, high schools, yes. So, the ideal situation is going into a Civics class after they've learned about the Constitution, but we teach in French classes and Home Ec. Anybody who will have us, we will be there to teach the lesson. So, teachers really love it, students really love it. We, of course, have anecdotal evidence I hear from lawyers, like, "Oh my gosh, my client remained silent because he pulled one of the business cards out." So, it's really rewarding and important work, but I'm excited to go on to the next kind of volunteer thing, because at this point, LYRIC has been about a 10-hour a week job for me on top of my job for probably 10 years. For the first five years we were pretty grassroots, it wasn't very organized. But now we have a staff and it's a lot.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Well, we could talk all day. But we both have things we have to do today. Before we go, though, I want to reminisce a little bit about our time in law school. So, you talk about 22-year-old Hannah who's at law school and wanted to take on the prison establishment, changed course a little bit. So if you could go back and talk to early twenties Hannah, what would you say to her, and give her advice about what to do or how to think about the future?

Hannah Seigel Proff: I think I would talk to baby Hannah about networking, and trying to network in an authentic way. I felt like such an imposter going into law school, and I surely felt like such an imposter any time I talked to lawyers. And I will say – I don't know that you and I have talked about this – but the wildest thing about aging to me is how you don't change.

Lee Burgess: It's true.

Hannah Seigel Proff: I thought 42-year-old Hannah would be so different from 22-year-old Hannah. And other than the life experience, I'm exactly the same. I'm going to crack up at the same weird thing, I'm going to feel awkward when I first walk into a room sometimes. And so, you're talking to lawyers that also have their own insecurities and were in your shoes at some point. That's the cool thing about being a lawyer – we all went through some version of what you're going through. So I just wish I would have relaxed to feel myself and build community more with my mentors. I had a few. Richard Sakai, who was at our law school, who's one of my dear friends and mentors, and I credit with a lot of my success in law school. There were those people that I was able to put my guard down and be myself around, and I think I was good at that around my colleagues and our cohort. But when I went to a networking event, I was like 22-year-old Hannah pretending to be 42-year-old Hannah, even though she had it totally wrong. So, I think just relax, be yourself, ask those questions. I think the thing I got right about law school is I knew what I wanted to do. I don't really understand contracts, and I'm going to study as hard as I can, I'm not going to break myself over it. And I got a C in Contracts. And has there ever been a negative consequence in my life? Other than the fact that when I sign contracts, I always think to myself, "Ooh, maybe I shouldn't have gotten a C in Contracts." I don't do that work. So, that focus worked out well for me because I love what I do. But I wish I would have just been myself and admitted the things I didn't know, because I didn't know. I knew next to nothing. And I think the good news

is, after about five years as a public defender, I matured a little and I also kind of put my head up out from under the water and I was like, "Okay, I can do this." I no longer have the imposter syndrome that I started out with, but now I need to figure out how to do it better and learn from the people around me. So, that's how I'd coach myself. But otherwise, I will say I did a lot of things right. We had fun. We didn't just study all the time, which I'm very thankful for. I meet some of these law students now that I'm working with and I'm like, "What are you doing this weekend?" They're like, "Studying." And it's like the first weekend of law school. You need to go meet your friends, meet your cohorts, go to that barbecue. These are going to be your colleagues and your friends for life. And don't throw that away.

Lee Burgess: It's so true.

Hannah Seigel Proff: And they're going to be the people who help you. Those friends are going to be the people who you call when you're like, "I cannot understand mens rea" or whatever. "Explain it to me." Or 20 years from now when you're like, "This happened. I need your advice." So, you really do need those people, both for your mental health and for your legal career.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, because life is happening while you're there. I think we can get into these pockets of time in life. And I feel like the one benefit you get from aging is you see time differently, right? That's one of the reasons why they say you get generally happier when you age, because you have a different perspective on time. But I, of course, think of that pocket of time, and I think of the fun we had, and the people that we met. And yes, we did work hard, of course, but that's also life. Life was happening during that time, right? These are three years of your life, if you're in it full-time. And what do you want that to be? Yes, success. We both worked hard, we reached our goals, but it's still life. Life's happening right now, and you want to not miss out on it fully. You can be responsible and not miss out on it.

Hannah Seigel Proff: A hundred percent. A hundred percent.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Well, I like to end with one more question, because I think it's one that we don't ask a lot of lawyers. It's like, are you happy with this path? Are you happy with your profession and what you do?

Hannah Seigel Proff: I'm so happy. I have the best life. I just have really carved out a practice area that suits me. I do things how I want to do them. For example, I have a solo practice. I really didn't want to have business partners and deal with business

partners. And I love working with younger law students, I have externs, but I didn't want to have associates and spend a lot of my time training folks. It's just not what I want to spend my time doing. And I've really stuck to that, and it makes me really happy because I get to spend a lot of time doing the things I love, which is networking, business development, process development, and practicing law, meeting with clients, writing motions, preparing for trial. And I love that. And I have just a wonderful personal life, and Denver suits me, and I've really carved out a practice and a life that brings me a lot of joy. And I love being a lawyer. I tell my students, every time I teach, I say to them, "You're taking a class from someone who loves being a lawyer." Not everyone loves being a lawyer, but I really do.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. That's such a great conversation, because we can get down on the legal profession, that's a whole another podcast. And there are ways to build the life that you want. And I really respect that you have built a life around your passions and with some balance and leaning into the joy that you can find even when you're doing hard things, because the work that you do is not easy, but there can be joy in it too.

Hannah Seigel Proff: Yes. I really recommend young law students, or not even just young – people new in their legal careers – think about sufficiency and what is enough. I really think we get sort of blindness when it comes to salaries. Again, people asking me to look at contracts – maybe not the best idea based on my Contracts grade. But people I've mentored, who are getting these offers at BigLaw, making money that I didn't make until I was 10-12 years into my legal career. And I think it does us all good to remember that there is enough money. And I say this knowing a lot of folks need to pay off loans and that life is expensive, but I think as a profession people get golden handcuffs. And I will say that we have colleagues from law school that got golden handcuffs, and it's hard to get the key and take that key back and take control of your life. If you say, "Oh, I'm going to do this for five years and then I'm going to do..." It's not easy to go and get a district attorney job after five years in BigLaw. I see people try to do it all the time, because there's a whole bunch of people who have done their whole career doing that. So, just think about, what is enough for you? And I think a happy life is definitely something that's attainable for attorneys, and for litigators, which I think can be even more elusive.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Well, I so appreciate your time today. This was so much fun. We'll have to do it again. And we're taping this right before the Thanksgiving holiday. So, have a wonderful holiday weekend with your family. And I hope to have you back soon!

Hannah Seigel Proff: Thanks, Lee. It was really a treat. Nice to talk to you.

Lee Burgess: 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'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 myself or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website contact form at LawSchoolToolBox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

RESOURCES:

LinkedIn: Hannah Seigel Proff
Proff Law (Juvenile & Criminal Defense)
LYRIC: Learn Your Rights in the Community
Transformative Justice Project
Podcast Episode 81: Building Emotional Intelligence
Podcast Episode 219: Mastering People Skills for Success as an Attorney (w/Stephanie Hanna)
Podcast Episode 389: Running a Criminal Defense Law Firm (w/Givelle Lamano)
How to Fight Law School Imposter Syndrome
Level Up Your Networking Game: Be a Helper
Are You Considering a Career in Criminal Defense?