Proskauer

Alumni Reflections: The Power of Mentorship & Camaraderie with Mike Callahan, Julie Kim and Marjan Elbaum

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It All Started on the 26th Floor…

Proskauer partner Mike Callahan sat down with alums Julie Kim, vice president and senior counsel at Warner Bros. Discovery, and Marjan Elbaum, general counsel at Banyan Software. Julie and Marjan developed an early bond at Proskauer, sharing a corridor on the 26th floor of our New York office. Together, Mike, Julie and Marjan reflect on the challenges of transitioning in-house and across industries, the weight that early bonds with colleagues and mentors have carried throughout their careers and their advice for young lawyers looking to make the most of their time at Proskauer.

Making the Leap: Going In-House

Mike: Julie, what have you been up to since leaving Proskauer in 2015?

Julie: I left Proskauer in 2015, and with the help of people from Proskauer, yourself included, I went to HBO to join their distribution business and legal affairs group. I've been at the company, now Warner Bros. Discovery, for almost nine years now.

Mike: If I recall correctly, at the time it seemed like a leap from what you were doing, which was M&A, to working on distribution agreements in television. How did Proskauer prepare you for that and how did your skills translate to that job?

Julie: You're right, I think at the time it felt like it was a bit of a leap. I had a lot to learn about distribution agreements, how to read new kinds of contracts and how to address the issues that HBO cares about as a company. But there are some soft skills which Proskauer really instilled in me. And I'll give a shout-out to Winnie Lee Fraser, who was a mentor to me. She said, "Your job is to make the lives of people who are more senior to you easier." That's reflected in the way you show up to meetings, the way you respond to emails and the way you interact with colleagues.

Mike: Marjan, you left in 2017. What was the impetus for you to leave and where did you go?

Marjan: Well Julie left, so how could I possibly stay? I didn't know how to survive without her. Joking aside, I think I was similar to Julie. I really liked the clients I worked with at Proskauer, specifically clients that had no in-house counsel, where I felt like I was not just the counsel advising on M&A and corporate work, but someone who was more involved in the day-to-day. And so, when I was thinking about my next steps, I knew I wanted a role where I could see, understand and be involved in business decisions. I was very particular about what I would leave for because I really enjoyed working at Proskauer and was continually learning and growing.

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Marjan Elbaum, General Counsel, Banyan Software

It just so happened that, through some networking, I got connected to an opportunity to go in-house at an apparel company called Centric Brands. I was able to work with their chief strategy officer on a mix of M&A, doing the day-to-day commercial contracts and seeing and executing the strategy of the business.

I was there for about five years, and now I am at a company called Banyan Software. My life has come full circle because I am now a client of Proskauer.

Mike: How did Proskauer prepare you for that jump? And where did you find opportunities for growth?

Marjan: I think one of the things I learned early on at Proskauer was that it's okay to not know things and to have to figure them out. You come in as a first year and someone says to you, "Mark up this assignment agreement." And you say to yourself, "I've literally never seen an assignment agreement before. I don't even know what that is." It took a moment to get used to the idea that it was okay not to know, so long as I could find the right resources to figure it out. And so, when I was going into a new environment, I was already comfortable with that feeling of not knowing everything, but I had the tools and the resources to be able to figure it out.

Julie: I remember when I was a young associate there was always a lot on my plate and so learning how to prioritize became very important. This is an important skill in the transition to in-house work because there is always more work to do than hours in the day.

Mike: And Marjan, what do you love about your current role at Banyan?

Marjan: I like being able to come up with a strategy and then execute it. I especially like the idea of building something. Banyan is still a relatively new company and it is rewarding to be part of a growing business.

Mike: It also seems like you have a wider range of issues to work on than you might have at a law firm.

Marjan: 100%. Going into Centric was one thing. It was still a little bit in my wheelhouse of M&A. Coming into Banyan, I'm now dealing with a wide range of matters including employment issues, credit processes and foreign tax issues. I'm sitting in meetings and we're talking HR and we're talking finance and we're talking business development. So, part of it is really leaning on the resources that you have at your disposal. If I'm working on a UK matter, I'll be reaching out to Mike and saying, "Hey, Mike, I have no idea what this is. Do you have anyone at Proskauer that is able to give me background on this?" Because no matter how much research I do, I'm not going to know UK tax law, for example. I need to figure out how I can efficiently and effectively work with what I have.

Mentorship Matters

Mike: Who were some of your mentors at Proskauer?

Julie: Chip Parsons was a mentor for me. Early on I was going back and forth on which group to join at Proskauer - M&A or PIF - and Chip helped me make that decision (I ended up joining the M&A group). Mike Ellis was also a mentor to me. I worked with him on a number of deals, and he was always incredibly selfless, taking the time (often late at night) to walk through agreements with me. Mike is an expert at what he does, and he was always willing to share his knowledge. And then you, Mike. I think we started working together a little bit later in my time at Proskauer, but we similarly developed a relationship where I felt comfortable having conversations with you both about work at Proskauer and my career goals outside of Proskauer.

Marjan: For me, I learned a lot from M&A partners like you, Arnie Jacobs, Jeff Horwitz and Lauren Boglivi. This was a group of partners I felt quite comfortable with asking questions. These were also the partners that I worked with the most and so would allow me to sit in on phone calls, negotiation sessions and do live drafting. I learned a lot by just doing these simple things. We also had a really strong group of senior associates above us, including Mike Ellis (now a partner), Winnie Lee Fraser and Mina Farbood, who also moved in-house. They were always taking the time to walk through questions and share knowledge not only a substantive perspective but also from the perspective of an senior associate who had been in my shoes. It was a great group that we were able to use as mentors and lean on as a support system.

My perspective on Proskauer is that it's the people that really sets it apart. The unique culture creates a very human[e] law firm experience.

Julie Kim, Vice President and Senior Counsel, Warner Brothers

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Senior Experience & Fresh Minds

Mike: Are there any memories or stories from your time at Proskauer you'd like to share that could help younger associates today?

Marjan: If I were to look back and give my first-year self some advice, I would say to try to learn from people as much as possible, both within your group and outside of the group. Proskauer is such a diverse law firm, not only with respect to the people it employes but also the type of legal work that is done. Try to get as much experience and exposure as you can, even if the experience and exposure is from 10,000 feet. And make as many relationships as possible as these are the relationship you will rely on as you move forward in your career.

Mike: Julie, anything you want to share with the alumni community?

Julie: My perspective on Proskauer is that it's the people that really sets it apart. There are so many people I keep in touch with, Marjan included. The unique culture creates a very human[e] law firm experience. I really felt that people were always willing to help out and work together as a team.

Marjan: I would also like to do a little plug for the Proskauer alumni group because when I first started as General Counsel at Banyan, Paul very kindly put me in touch with Proskauer alumni who are also GCs at other companies. I think I spoke to maybe two or three. I didn't really know what I wanted to ask, but just having the opportunity to learn from their experience and reach out to them after the fact with questions was a huge asset.

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