Proskauer

Alumni Reflections: Humanity, Humor and Relationship Building with Tony Oncidi and Niloofar Shepherd

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Labor and employment partner **Tony Oncidi** and **Niloofar Shepherd**, deputy general counsel – litigation and employment, office of the chief legal officer at Creative Artists Agency, joined Proskauer's Los Angeles office together more than two decades ago. Since then, they've maintained a close relationship cemented by those early years working together and a mutual interest in each other's careers. In this conversation, as part of Proskauer's Alumni Reflections series, Tony and Niloofar reflect on the pivotal moments that shaped their paths, including Niloofar's transition to in-house counsel, and the importance of mentorship, collaboration and maintaining a sense of humor.

Beginnings and First Impressions

Tony: Let's start with when we first met. I think it's been almost 20 years, believe it or not.

Niloofar: More.

Tony: What year was it? 2001?

Niloofar: Yes. We met at another firm and then both joined Proskauer in 2002. I worked at that other firm for about seven months when you decided to leave to go to Proskauer. I respected you tremendously, so even though I had not worked with you much, I knew you had a reputation, and I had a chance to see you in action. That was enough for me to know that you were the person I needed to be working with.

Tony: That's exactly how I felt. You were this prized associate we had just recruited, and I didn't want this change of firms to interfere with our ability to continue to work together.

Niloofar: It's funny to look at our relationship through a "rear-view mirror" lens. Had I made a different decision, my career would have been so different. You've been instrumental in my development as a lawyer.

Tony: So, catch us up. You were at Proskauer for about four years?

Niloofar: Yes, close to four.

Tony: Tell us about your career since then.

Niloofar: I left Proskauer, funnily enough, to go in-house, and I vividly remember breaking the news to you. I didn't have a job offer yet, but we had such a strong relationship that I felt I needed to let you in on the fact that I was thinking of leaving. I think I said to you, "It's not you. It's me." It was like a breakup speech. But I also hoped to go somewhere with your support so that we could continue to work together. I didn't want it to be the end. And you embraced it. I think you understood the gravity of the choice I was making and that I had already made up my mind.

Tony: I knew you were going to succeed regardless of where you ended up. I also had no doubt that you would've become a partner and been a monster success had you remained with us in "Big Law."

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Niloofar Shepherd, Deputy General Counsel - Litigation & Employment, Office of the Chief Legal Officer, Creative Artists Agency

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Niloofar: I appreciate that.

Tony: But there were other things in your life at that time which made going in-house the right move. It sounds like you've been happy with that decision.

Niloofar: It was a great decision. When I left Proskauer, I got a job at a post-production company that had recently been opposite Proskauer, though not in a case that had anything to do with me. It wasn't an employment dispute. When they saw my resume, they almost didn't even look at me because they were like "Proskauer! Bah!" But the general counsel ultimately decided to meet with me because of the depth of my experience and their respect for the Firm and its work. It speaks to the Firm's strength; that even as opposing counsel, they respected the work enough not to discard my candidacy. I worked there for approximately five years and then moved to a successor company for another three years. In 2013, I went to Mattel and worked there for two years. Since 2015, I've been at Creative Artists Agency.

Remembering Proskauer

Tony: What memories do you have of Proskauer that have remained with you?

Niloofar: One of the main things I look back on is just how much I learned from you about navigating big personalities and being strategic about dealings with opposing counsel. The other thing I think about is how much laughter we had. No matter how serious a case, how difficult the moment, or how late we stayed up to write a summary judgment motion, or whatever it was, we never lost our sense of humor.

Tony: I'm thinking of a trial we had together — I'm sure you'll recall — where you were our star witness and there was this late-breaking issue in the case, the pregnancy of the plaintiff's wife. And, as it turned out, you were seven months pregnant or so…

Niloofar: Heavily pregnant.

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Tony: You were our star witness — even the other side referred to you as the “pristine witness” when grappling with your testimony during closing argument. I still remember how unbelievably well the direct examination went between you and me. I think the success we had in that case was attributable to how the jury took to you. They really appreciated the humanity and the insights that you brought.

Niloofar: Thinking of the work that led up to that trial, you as outside counsel and me as in-house counsel, we worked very closely together. When I think about what I learned from you, it was the commercial reality of being an employment lawyer. We’re always dealing with human beings. You always taught me, even as my outside counsel, but certainly when I worked for you, that a good lawyer’s job is to understand the business, think about the human element and try to marry the two with the law.

Staying Connected

Tony: It’s been 20 years since you left Proskauer, but when I look at who registers for the Los Angeles alumni events, you’re often there. What drives you to stay engaged with the Firm?

Niloofar: Certainly, the ongoing relationship with the Firm as client-attorney. But that wouldn’t be enough to make me show up to an alumni event or take time away from my family. I think what it really boils down to is how much I enjoyed the people with whom I worked. The lawyers, like you and many others, who are still at the Firm. They were always nice and fun, but they were also a source of mentorship and sponsorship.

You’re one of those people, Tony, but as much as I love you and I think you’re spectacular and special, there are lots of other people at Proskauer who are the same and have done great things for my fellow associates. I just think it’s a really special bunch of lawyers who are sincere in their relationships.

Tony: It also doesn’t hurt that we’re right across the courtyard from you in Century City.

Niloofar: Geographic convenience helps.

Tony: Location, location, location.

Niloofar: In a world full of transactional people who only want to talk to you because you can do something for them, it’s special to find a place filled with people who don’t seek or want just a transactional relationship. I don’t feel like I have a transactional relationship with anybody from Proskauer.

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