

Alumni Interview: Noreen Weiss

By Melody Aaron



Noreen R. Weiss is a partner at MacDonald Weiss PLLC. She is an accomplished corporate and transactions lawyer, and her clients include disrupters, SMEs, investors, and multinationals. During her time at Cleary, Noreen spent time in the New York, London, and Tokyo offices.

I wanted to open this up by asking about your time at Cleary. Do you have any particular favorite memories?

Several come to mind. My favorite memory is wandering around the misty Fulton Fish Market at about 4 a.m. with Sebastian Sperber, while we waited for Word Processing to turn some documents we were working on. One of my most unusual memories is visiting the Bishopsgate Office in London to retrieve some personal items after it was destroyed by an IRA bombing of the HSBC Bank Building (where Cleary's offices were located). I summered at Cleary between my second and third years of law school, and I also worked at Cleary part-time while I finished law school. I graduated law school in '88, and then I worked for Cleary for seven years. I spent about four of those years in London and six months in the Tokyo office, and overall I can say that the expat experience was fabulous.

That's amazing. I studied abroad in Japan when I was a 3L. Do you speak any Japanese?

I studied Japanese for a while. It was an interest of mine because I practice a Japanese martial art. I wanted to learn the language, and I'm very interested in the culture. I studied the language for a few years so that I could communicate and get around.

I have to hit pause and ask more about the Japanese marital art. Is that something you've been doing your whole life?

I started it when I was in the London office. I needed something to do, and my husband had been encouraging me to try Aikido, so I started it and loved it. My husband took it up as well when he joined me in London months later, and I would train almost every day after work and on the weekends. I did that for quite a number of years. In fact, when I was in Japan, I spent a month training in the school in the countryside where the founder of Aikido taught. I have kept it up a fair amount since then. When I moved back to New York, I found that the dojos close really early; with the last class at 6PM, it's challenging for a lawyer to make it, so it was harder. I have kept up somewhat with the bokken and jo [Aikido weapons] but gave up the hand-to-hand combat due to a bad injury. I have a first degree black belt in unarmed combat and a second degree black belt in the Aikido weapons work.

Shifting gears entirely, I would love to hear about your current position. I understand you're a partner in your own law firm. I'd be interested to learn about how you got to where you are today.

I'm going to take you through my career trajectory. Of my time spent at Cleary, roughly four [years] were overseas, which I absolutely loved. I was doing primarily capital markets and securities law with some M&A. One of my favorite projects at Cleary involved working for an issuer, and I realized that I truly enjoyed digging deeper into a business. I have an entrepreneurial spark. I found it really fulfilling to work with a company and to really understand the client's businesses. I decided I was going to try to go in-house.

I was very fortunate and got a job at HBO as Counsel for International Corporate Development. I was at HBO for eight years and worked with the executive team to launch HBO-branded channels around the world. It was very interesting because it was a bit like working for a start-up within a Fortune 100 company. There was a transactional part of setting this up and expanding overseas, and then there was the day-to-day side of the business, which included network operations work and overseeing the ventures and the commercial work associated with running the business.

After eight years at HBO, I decided to have a break because at that point I had been working for fifteen years. So I resigned to spend some time at home with my toddler and pursue some of my art interests (I am an amateur ceramic artist and maintained a studio on the Gowanus Canal during this period).

Sure, that makes perfect sense. What happened next?

The next part of my career is kind of weird, because I was home for three years and then decided I was ready to go back to work. I decided to spend the summer at home with my daughter and then start seeking an in-house position in the autumn, but that was the July that Bear Stearns went under, so there was not much of a job market in the autumn, and it only got worse with the Lehman collapse in 2008.

Oh my goodness.

Despite my pedigree—Cleary and a Fortune 100 company—it was difficult. So I eventually went out on my own. I thought, "I'm a lawyer; I'll just start practicing again." So I started practicing from a dead stop. The recession actually created an opportunity for somebody like me because there was a point where companies were looking for my level of expertise but they were becoming frugal and looking for value. They were open to hiring someone from a small firm without compromising quality because it was more economical.

By serendipity, I was introduced to the person who became the co-founding person of this firm that I have now. Together, we combined my corporate, securities law, M&A, and international

business experience with his expertise as a tax and finance lawyer. We had the core requirements to put together a law firm focused on cross-border business expansion, finance, and transactional work and general commercial operations work. We both really like working for companies that produce a service or a product, across a range of industries and sectors.

What is your practice like?

My practice now is very broad, broader than it would be if I were still at a big law firm. I use all of my different skills to work with companies raising money, venture capital funds investing in companies, and private cross-border M&A, among other areas. I spend 50% of my time working on cross-border business expansion, primarily into the United States, by growth companies and small- and medium-sized enterprises. My role is that of a general counsel and a strategic advisor.

Although I haven't been in-house in eight years, I still think about problem-solving and practicing law the way an in-house lawyer would. I was a client, and I know what it is like to be a client. I know what it's like to use an outside law firm. This helps me be much more naturally inclined to business-oriented decisions. I know how to cut to the chase, and I help my clients analyze risk in a realistic manner. The relationships I have with my clients are very close, and I do an array of work for them. I really have an outside general counsel role. What I like most about my current position is being an insider for a company and being a strategic advisor on all aspects of the business.

That's fascinating. It sounds like you wear a lot of hats and have to be able to wrap your head around a lot of different types of projects.

Yes, because I had put in my "10,000 hours" in a lot of different things. I legitimately have expertise in these broad areas, from my capital markets experience at Cleary to my deal and commercial expertise at HBO, and so forth. My securities experience at Cleary has taken me into cutting-edge technology businesses and to clients that touch upon securities law, crypto-currency, and smart contracts. My clients are diverse and fun, and my practice is new-economy focused from consumer products, like cosmetics and food and wine, to fintech, e-commerce, blockchain/crypto, and cannabis.

We've touched on this a bit, but I would love to hear any advice you have for young associates, either generally speaking or for someone who wanted to go in-house or open their own practice.

I think the most fundamental thing is that you need to ask questions. It's very intimidating as a lawyer because you think that you're supposed to know the answer. You feel like you cannot let on when you don't know the answer. As a young associate, you need to focus on the details behind what you're doing and build a deeper knowledge framework. That was

something I wish I had done more of. Within professional development in law firms, there needs to be a lot of space for lawyers to be encouraged to ask those questions.

That's great advice.

If you're going to start your own firm, in addition to asking questions, you really need to build your network. That's something that I wish I had been more deliberate about. Your peers are important, as are people that you meet outside the firm. Those are people at all different phases of their career. They will grow up to be the big decision-makers, just as you will, so you want to foster those relationships and keep them throughout your career. For people who are shy, and are reluctant to engage in networking when they're in a big room with a lot of people they don't know, I think you need to train yourself a bit. First of all, you need to have something to say. If you're going to network, you have to talk!

That's fair!

You need to come up with just three to five things that you want to say about yourself or questions to ask the other person. Try to train yourself and set a goal: "I'm going to have a conversation with at least five people" and then you'll know it was a successful event. Set some standards for yourself, and be genuine, be human, be yourself. After a while, it will just flow.

That's great advice. Do you think of yourself as a shy person?

Yeah but not anymore though!

Success!

What can be mistaken for shyness is the self-confidence issues that so many women need to overcome. I had to train myself. You can develop the skills, and I guarantee that it will make you grow as a person. It's a really important skill for any lawyer to have and essential to be a rainmaker. Starting your own firm is an entrepreneurial process, and you have to go out and attract clients. There are a lot of different elements to running your own law firm, such as administration, technology, and marketing, and you have to be prepared for all of those new tasks.

What did you appreciate most about your time at Cleary?

I really have to say the people, the collegiality of the place, as well as the training and the expat experience. It was a great experience. For me, the people are razor-sharp smart, and also they're interesting and quirky. Some of my colleagues from Cleary have become life-long friends, and attending the alumni reunions abroad—seeing a group of people who travel to be together merely based on their ties to Cleary—is a testament to the human bonds that are made here.