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## Life begins at forty or sixty

...OR WHENEVER YOU WANT

Sometimes we do not know what we want to be when we grow up, or just grow, and that is okay. We work hard, we desire to be our best, whatever it may be, and that may change with time. Our path may be different than others, and we may have already lived a lot of life. There is no one mold that you need to fit to be an attorney, or a trial lawyer. It is okay to always be growing.

### Corporate world

My own pursuit of justice came later in life; it was a long road to the Bar. Having been in management in the corporate world for over 25 years, I observed workers injured on the job and not provided first aid. I observed workers wrongfully terminated because of who they knew or did not know; not promoted based on their sex; and terminated because they rebuffed a superior's sexual advances. In an industry where the service technicians were required to drive the company vehicles home and dispatched directly to the work site (portal to portal), I saw investigators, hired by insurance companies, attempt to prove that the technician deviated from the most direct path home just to avoid coverage when they had been injured in motor-vehicle collisions that occurred on their way home.

### Turning point

At 48 years old, after turning my boss in for embezzlement, my career reached a breaking point. I left that world, after over 25 years, disheartened, disappointed, but more than anything, I was determined. I obtained my paralegal certificate and began my career in the legal profession, wanting to play a part in helping injured and abused individuals obtain justice. There were a few hiccups. Needing a job, my first long-term temporary assignment was for a defense firm and then I landed a position in a family law firm. When that position ended, late that same night, I got a call from an employment agency begging me to show up the following morning at a personal-injury firm, and the journey truly began. As with every job, I was enthusiastic and hard working. I learned, grew, and expanded

my wings. I joined Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles as a paralegal to take advantage of the resources they provided and the camaraderie.

### It is never too late

One day my attorney made a passing comment of, "Why aren't you an attorney, you do everything an attorney does." While that may not have been completely true, without taking time to pause, I latched onto that thought, that dream, that moment of recognition and encouragement. I began the process of pursuing a law degree. For me, my only option was a four-year program, evenings, and weekends, at a non-ABA program, while I continued to work full time. I started law school three months before my 55th birthday, graduated, took the Bar, and got the results that I had passed the Bar, shortly after my 59th birthday.

Then began the arduous task, or so I thought, of getting a job as an attorney. Because of the community I joined, and on the advice of others, I attended CAALA mixers and before I knew it, I had a blossoming career as a personal-injury attorney, inspired by those that came before me.

### *The long and winding road*

My curiosity throughout the years, and the desire to succeed always led me down the path of continued learning, growing, and understanding. My corporate career involved management, human resources, and accounting. While working for a commercial heating and air conditioning company, I learned about compressors, freon, and condensation coils to explain to customers why the work performed was not under warranty. Little did I know that, years later, when a wet ceiling tile fell on my client's head and I was deposing the head of maintenance regarding the air conditioning/heating unit, that he would tell me they were hiring and ask if I wanted a job.

One of my more unusual endeavors was a wholesale-flower business where I drove a 20-foot refrigerated truck, picking up flowers directly from the growers and delivering them to flower shops. Besides being quite hilarious watching 4'11"

me climb into the cab of, or the back of, the truck, when you have driven through the truck scales and had CHP jump in their cars with lights and sirens come after you for driving too fast through the scales, you learn everything there is to learn about driving a truck and the rules associated with it.

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration rules became something I was soon familiar with, including pre-trip truck inspections, required logs, and working-hour limitations. When a rod goes through the gas tank of a semi-truck spilling more than 100 gallons of fuel on the freeway resulting in multiple collisions and you somehow avoid all of the vehicles, having the front tire of the truck stop suddenly when it hits the dry road, spinning the 20-foot truck 180 degrees, laying the truck over on the passenger side of the truck, and hanging by the driver's seatbelt facing oncoming traffic, only to have the insurance company say you were 25% at fault because you were able to avoid all of the other collisions, you learn a lot about how slippery fuel is, motor-vehicle collisions, and dealing with the insurance companies.

My last job in the corporate world was in a marine-oil terminal in the Port of Los Angeles. My position included handling contract negotiations, not only for the terminal and its vendors, but union contract negotiations, pre-employment, random, and post-accident drug testing, as well as, all employment issues related to the terminal, and all accounting functions. It was my responsibility to make sure certificates of insurance were on file, current, and named the terminal as an additional insured for all vendors, drivers, and companies coming into the terminal. I learned about hazardous and non-hazardous materials, reporting requirements, and safety issues related to those chemicals and materials. Responsibility for maintaining weighmaster certificates and ensuring all trucks were weighed light and heavy, within weight limits, and compliance with those requirements also fell on me. Because of my ongoing desire to learn more I became a certified hazardous materials technician

to train the men, only to be told they would never allow a woman to train the men.

Knowledge of FMCSA requirements, chemicals, and trucks, has been invaluable in the PI world. Non-compliance is as critical to your case as the actions taken. One of my most rewarding cases, which I am honored to have been a part of, involved an individual with a brain injury who lacked impulse control, drinking caustic grade drain cleaner, burning his esophagus and stomach. If you told me years before that becoming a certified hazardous material technician and acquiring that knowledge, when I was feeling dejected because I was not permitted to share that knowledge, would be instrumental in knowing about safety data sheets, including how the chemicals should be stored, would bring justice to a severely injured individual, I would have laughed.

### Life lessons

I have a million stories, have lived a long life, have been involved in many diverse types of businesses, and have a lot of life experiences. I laugh when people say, "What haven't you done?" because I am not sure what that answer is. Numerous times I have told myself I will quit apologizing for the crazy things I know but must admit the joy I feel when I can share that knowledge with others.

When I first became an attorney, other attorneys reassured me that while older, we bring life lessons with us that would prove invaluable. I have since learned that regardless of age, we all have life lessons, and those lessons are invaluable. People hear my story and tell me I am an inspiration. While I am quick to discount the compliment, my response is, "I did not do anything that everyone else cannot do."

Yes, what I did is amazing, and makes me smile. I put in the work, and I worked hard. However, I do believe anyone who puts their mind to and puts in the work can and will do it. Some people say you should work smarter, not harder. Of course, you need to work smarter but no longer apologize for working hard. Working hard is not a dirty word. That is what gives us our passion, our desire to represent individuals who cannot speak for themselves, and that is what makes us the consumer attorneys we are.

Why do I tell you all this? It is simple, so that everyone knows they can do what they want, when they want, and in their own way, and their path does not

need to replicate anyone else's. My hard work has led me to where I am, a partner in a respected law firm.

More importantly, what I am most proud of is that as many mentored me when I started, I have continued to mentor. From the start, many, some of whom had been practicing longer than I, reached out, and asked me questions and my thoughts on handling cases and facts.

When CAALA first started their mentorship program years ago, I immediately signed up. At first, I was not sure I had anything to offer, and given my path, at times felt awkward giving advice. Then, as previously discussed, I realized we all have something to offer and I may know or have experienced something that others have not. To this day, others may provide me with a perspective I have not thought of, or which I have not experienced.

### Leaders come in all shapes, styles, and ages

Last year, CAALA held the first ever Leadership Academy. I applied and must admit I was a bit surprised when I was accepted. After all, the youth is our future, or so I thought, but we are all the future. Walking into class the first day was a bit overwhelming given the obvious age difference. The concept of the program was amazing, the instructor phenomenal, and more importantly, it continued my philosophy of always learning and growing. We learned what characteristics good leaders possess or should possess, how good leaders encourage, how they allow their team members to grow, and we created our individual leadership statements.

I am not going to lie; I may have scored low on some of the tests. I am trying to learn to take care of and allow time for myself. Something else that CAALA has implemented with their CAALA Wellness webinars and events, and something I need to work on. Reminder, I am always wanting to learn and grow but just like how you get here, when you get there, and your path, be true to yourself, be a good person, and do no harm to others. If you can say that, then your leadership skills might be different than others, and that is okay.

The time spent during the breaks and lunches of the Leadership Academy, in addition to the time spent interacting and sharing ideas in classes, the lectures, speakers, and lessons, taught me how much more I must learn.

While I was humbled having fellow lawyers ask me questions and advice, I

am now in my 27th year in plaintiff's personal injury and loving it as much, if not more, than the first day. I learned so much more from my fellow lawyers/human beings in the program, and throughout this journey, than I could have ever fathomed.

They are all inspirational. The drive, the passion, the caring that this community shows is unmatched. Fellow members of this community are fueled by the desire to represent, stand up for, and help people.

It gave me pause for thought that I wished I had begun this journey sooner, but then I remind myself of the very lesson here – we all must make and take our own path, our own journey, and break the mold, if need be, to get to where we are meant to be. As I am inspired by those who have come before me, I am equally if not more so, inspired by those who have come after me, and yes, I must admit I am extremely proud to have helped others get the care, treatment, and justice they deserved. 

*Mary Caruso is a partner at the Wilshire Law Firm with more than 25 years of experience in the field of civil litigation, focusing her practice on cases involving catastrophic injuries, wrongful death, motor-vehicle collisions, automobile v. pedestrian accidents, premises liability, elder abuse, school bullying, and sexual-abuse cases. Mary is a board member of the Los Angeles Trial Lawyers Charities and CAOC's boards of directors. Ms. Caruso was named the "2021 Rising Star of the Year" by the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles, and is a graduate of CAALA's Trial Academy and Leadership Academy.*