

Fox Rothschild Podcast

Legally EmpowHERed Podcast

Episode 17

Featuring Sahara Pynes with Erika Levin

Pynes: Welcome back to "Legally EmpowHERed." I'm your host, Sahara Pynes, and I'm really excited to bring this podcast to you. As an attorney and former business owner myself, I'm passionate about drawing on my own experience and insights to set my female clients up for success.

In celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, I'm honored today to be joined by Erika Levin, a litigation partner in Fox Rothschild's New York office. Welcome back, Erika. Thanks for being here.

Levin: Thank you so much, Sahara. It's a pleasure to be here.

Pynes: I am monopolizing all your time and I always love speaking with you. And I of course know a little bit about your background and your life story, but some of our listeners for the podcast might be a bit perplexed as to why someone with the last name Levin is joining me to talk about Hispanic Heritage Month. So, can we just start off with where you grew up and some of the languages you speak and your connection to the Latin community?

Levin: Sure, sure. So, Levin is my married name. I was born in Brazil and that is my primary connection to the Latin community. My father and all of his family is from Brazil, so that is my primary connection. I grew up there. I moved to the states when I was quite young, around six. Then I was back and forth throughout my whole life.

My family and my friends in Brazil have been a huge part of my life. It's something that's very important to me, and somehow I was really lucky to also make it part of my career. It was really important to me to keep that connection. And so I knew, by watching what my father had done over his career, that you can marry the two. Right? And so that's part of why I wanted to do international business law was so that it would give me a chance to be working with people from a lot of different communities and cultures. But primarily Brazil was where I was focused.

Pynes: How did you wind up attending law school in the U.S.?

Levin: I moved to the states when I was young, and I did all of my schooling here in the U.S., and so it just was natural for me to go to law school here. So, that explains the U.S. education. I've done a tremendous amount of work with these various regions, Brazil, Latin America, generally speaking everywhere.

I have to say there was a point in time in my career where I lost my father, and at that point it made me really focus on Brazil even more because it was such a strong connection. And I felt like it was something

I wanted to do to honor him and also to be closer to my family. And that was when I made a concerted effort really to focus on Brazil and to be there.

You know, at one point in time I was there probably once a month. I was traveling back and forth. I was doing work in the region, and what I realized in the U.S., particularly in New York, while there was a lot of people who spoke Spanish, there weren't that many that spoke Portuguese. And having that connection was really helpful and it allowed the clients and our colleagues to feel more comfortable. I speak Spanish and Portuguese and English. I understand the Latin languages pretty well. Once you know one, you understand most of them.

Pynes: For you, not for me.

Levin: I would take them in university, as fun classes to take. I love languages and I frankly, I love, just love culture and love people from different places. And so it's really just a fun thing for me. But it's also really useful and what I realized is, once you're from another culture and you're trying to adapt, you understand how hard it is for others. It's not always so easy. So, I think coming to the U.S. when I was young and having to kind of fit in, so to speak, it wasn't that easy at first.

I came to the U.S. just so you know, I didn't speak very much English. I spoke Portuguese. I went to, actually, this is funny, I went to a Yeshiva and so I was speaking Portuguese and Hebrew.

Pynes: Wow.

Levin: But not that much English and so that was a little funny and tricky. But after a while, obviously the English worked out.

Pynes: You were the unicorn of the Hebrew school.

Levin: Yeah, probably.

Pynes: Let's talk a little bit about what we lawyers call a niche practice. You've established this sort of niche international work, and specifically in international arbitration, focusing of course on your Latin American groups.

Tell me more about the journey in choosing that as your niche. You mentioned honoring your father, but how did you establish your international arbitration practice and then build it while developing your network of contacts and of course, your amazing reputation in this area.

Levin: Aw, you're too kind. I think it took a long time and a lot of effort.

But really, I knew all along that I wanted to do international work, and I wasn't sure exactly how. And international arbitration was presented to me in law school. I had two wonderful professors that were focused in the area. I participated in a moot court competition called the Vis Moot Court Competition, and that just opened up my eyes to international arbitration.

So, I had done an internship with the U.S. Embassy. I thought I might go international public law. And when I discovered that there was something called international arbitration, that there was an international private law, it made so much sense to me. I love business, all things business, and I saw that arbitration was really helpful in promoting international business, keeping things going, trying to make things efficient. So, if there was a bit of a hiccup or a dispute, we could get things back. And knowing that you had a mechanism to enforce your contracts, it promotes business. It makes the investors feel more comfortable, right?

And so, I really just seized upon this area. I got to meet practitioners and academics and so many wonderful, generous people. And when I got into the area, it was really new. So I was lucky. I got taken under various peoples' wings that were the gurus in the area. So I learned from the best.

To this day I just find it's an amazing practice. The thing that binds it is international, but the subject areas can vary tremendously. I've had really great experiences over the years, and so I'm very fortunate. In terms of the different areas, I focused more on the regions where I spoke the languages. I will say, I'm very fortunate. There are times where you look back and you realize: I was just lucky that I was born in Brazil and lucky that I had the exposure to another culture and to another language because I think it really gave me a competitive edge in the international arbitration sphere. To do this work, you really need to at least have one language, if not more. There are many who speak more.

Pynes: Yeah, that makes sense.

Levin: And it's important to be able to relate to other cultures and to understand what people are thinking, how they're interacting. And we need to realize that everyone comes to different situations with different experiences, and we're not all the same. I think growing up in a different jurisdiction, traveling around a lot in my life, has at least allowed me to understand: Wait, take a pause. Where is this person coming from? What is their perspective? Why are they here? What are they thinking? How are they feeling? And I think having that ability to connect and to understand, engenders trust. And it really has been very helpful in my career, not only for my clients, for my colleagues and the adversaries and the counterparties.

Pynes: Yeah, you touched on culture and I wanted to circle back to celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month by re quoting you a quote from a Q&A that you participated in that I saw. It said, and I'm quoting you now, "I derive great joy from being able to connect with my clients and colleagues in relation to amazing food, art, music, etc."

So, who doesn't love amazing food, art, music. Tell us a little bit more about that and how your childhood and your lifetime of connections to the Latin culture enhances all those connections that you are making in your professional life.

Levin: Sure. So, I mean, I just love, love everything, I have to say, Latin, especially Brazilian. There's not a trip that goes by -- or even when we have visitors that come to the U.S. -- you want bond over things. And we bond over the food, the drinks, especially caipirinhas. The food-- pão de queijo, feijoada, feijão, bacalhau -- all these things that are just so delicious. One thing that we sort of missed during Covid that

is back and hopefully continues to be back, is bonding over food, bonding over experiences, bonding over culture, music.

As soon as you hear the music, you know, "The Girl from Ipanema" for instance, or some sort of somba, you are automatically smiling, right? It's very hard not to. And this idea that we're connected through different things. It's not just about the work. That's what really leads to these long-term relationships. It's fun.

And I always joke, I work really hard and I play harder. But, when your work is fun, it's just a pleasure. And I've been really, really fortunate with the people that I've worked with and the clients that I've worked with, and the colleagues. I have to say, I just came back from a trip in Copenhagen where I was with international lawyers, women lawyers from all over the world. There's a special bond with everyone, so to speak, but especially with the Latin lawyers. As soon as you start speaking in Spanish or in Portuguese and you connect, you just feel at home and you feel comfortable. And that, to me, because I'm here, is so important. I strive for it, I yearn for it, and I just, I love any opportunity that I have in terms of spending time and celebrating the culture. So, it's really a privilege and an honor to have that. And I like to share it. I share it with my family, I share it with my kids, with our extended family, with our neighbors. It's very much a part of who I am. And I think we owe it to everyone to share that it's a rich heritage and it's so special.

Pynes: Yeah, that's really a special connection. And I have never been to Brazil, Erika, so I think you might need to have me tag along on your next business trip.

Levin: For sure. For sure. Anytime.

Pynes: Thank you so much for coming back. I just always love talking to you and I feel like I really got to know you better. So, thanks for being here and you are always an inspiring guest.

Levin: Aw, likewise. Thank you so much for inviting me, and I really am so in awe of everything that you're doing.

This podcast series has been tremendous, and I wish you the best of luck with everything, and I hope I get to see you soon.

Pynes: Me too. Thanks, Erika.

Levin: Take care. Bye.