

# Podcast Interview with Liz Wangu '16 FINAL

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JABRINA ROBINSON: Hello, and welcome to this episode of the Duke Law podcast. I'm Jabrina Robinson, director of LLM career development and outreach in the Office of International Studies at Duke Law. It's my pleasure to be hosting the podcast for two episodes focusing on our Duke Law alumni. They're sharing their experience and insights on pursuing successful careers in international law, one as a JD and one as a foreign LLM.

In this first episode, I got a chance to speak with 2016 alum, Liz Wangu, during her recent visit to Duke Law. Since graduation, she's worked at Clifford Chance in DC and is currently on secondment as legal counsel at the International Finance Corporation, the private sector arm of the World Bank group. Liz focuses her practice on international project finance, corporate finance, and other cross-border development finance transactions.

We had an exciting conversation about her road from Duke Law to DC, including a closer look at her current work and the strategy it took to get there. Please enjoy this episode.

Liz, thank you so much for sitting down to chat with us while you're at Duke Law today.

LIZ WANGU: Thank you so much for having me, Jabrina. It was so nice to just have the opportunity to come back to my alma mater. It really is great to be here.

JABRINA ROBINSON: Well, you just finished speaking with current students at one of our lunchtime events, sharing your experience about pursuing a career in international law. How was that for you?

LIZ WANGU: It was really exciting. It was a little bit daunting, I have to admit. But I think it went well. A personal highlight of mine was seeing my own law school professor in the audience. Professor Manuel Sager came to the lunch talk event just to support me, and I thought it was really nice of him. It was really cool to see him in the audience, especially since I came back to talk to the students about international project finance and other types of development finance. And where I first came to learn about development finance was actually from taking his course. So it was kind of like full circle.

JABRINA ROBINSON: Absolutely. Were there any surprise questions from the students or moments that stood out for you?

LIZ WANGU: I wouldn't say surprised questions, but I was actually incredibly impressed with the caliber of the questions that I got from the students. It was interesting to me how they tied their questions to current events. And I'll talk about it later on, but I really do think it's a critical and interesting time to be studying the law right now. So I was very impressed by how much they knew about what was going on and tied it to the questions that they asked me.

JABRINA ROBINSON: Well, you've been practicing law at Clifford Chance in Washington, DC, since you graduated from Duke. And you're currently on secondment from Clifford Chance as legal counsel at the International Finance Corporation, which is a private sector arm of the World Bank. Can you tell me a little bit about the work you've done at Clifford Chance and the work you're doing now at the IFC?

LIZ WANGU: My legal practice at Clifford Chance focuses on project finance and development, corporate finance, and other types of development finance transactions. Our project finance and development group advises developers and lenders on large-scale energy and infrastructure projects, mostly in emerging economies, and we advise on a whole range of projects. So they range from roads and ports to wind, solar, and geothermal projects.

But the neat part about project finance in particular-- and I told this to students-- is that the projects we advise on have a direct connection to the real economy, and they really benefit people and the development of the host countries that we work in. So oftentimes, it feels really meaningful. And you mentioned the International Finance Corporation, or IFC as we call it, which is a private sector arm of the World Bank group. So law firms typically arrange these types of secondments for associates to have the opportunity to support a strategic firm client for a period of time. And then the idea is that you report back after the secondment to the firm.

They're also a really great way for an associate to gain experience and to have the perspective from the client side. So IFC is a strategic client of Clifford Chance's. And I was telling a colleague of mine at Clifford Chance that I feel really, really lucky to have gotten this placement with IFC. Because the opportunity to work at the world's largest development institution, focused exclusively on the private sector in developing countries, has really provided global and meaningful work experience.

And as you can imagine, there's a real focus right now at the World Bank on supporting developing countries during the pandemic. And so the work at IFC I've gotten to be involved in so far has included really interesting projects. Like I've worked on a project, for example, on increasing the manufacturing capacity of COVID vaccines in a number of low and middle income countries.

I want to circle back to my work at Clifford Chance and speak about pro bono. It really is important to me to maintain an active pro bono practice, and I mentioned that to the students. So we spoke a lot about international careers and development finance work, but we can't really forget the importance of playing a meaningful role in supporting the challenges in our own communities.

You know I'm also American, and I care a lot about the issues going on at home. So one of the projects that I've really been excited to be involved in at the firm was spearheaded by one of my colleagues, Patrick Jackson, and it was being part of a core team of lawyers that drove the voter protection efforts leading up to the US presidential election last year.

So some of the most meaningful work that I've done, and I've learned the most, has been through pro bono, like that voter protection program. And so when I was speaking to the students earlier, even though many of them were interested in learning about the cross-border and international transactions, I still really encourage them to look to law firms that will truly support them in taking on domestic pro bono work.

JABRINA ROBINSON: So you clearly have such an exciting and vibrant career. When you're looking back at your time at Duke Law, do you recall when and how you started pursuing your current your career track?

LIZ WANGU: Maybe I'll break it into two parts-- so the interest in kind of doing international related work, and then the interest in project finance and development finance. With respect to just the interest and really focusing on doing international work, I'll just tell you a little bit about myself. I was born in Nairobi and growing up, my family traveled a lot. We traveled to many other African countries. We went to the Middle East. We went to Asia, Europe. And then even when we ultimately immigrated here to the United States, we traveled back and forth between London and Nairobi often. So my upbringing sounds like it was really glamorous, visiting all these different places.

But actually, we really traveled around a lot and ultimately immigrated here because of access to health care. My sister was ill growing up, and we ended up here in North Carolina because she was ultimately referred to UNC Chapel Hill Hospital, just 15 minutes away from where we are. And my work experience

before law school was also mostly international. So when I was in college, I worked for a legal advocacy organization in Cape Town. And then after college, I did a fellowship through Princeton that gave me the opportunity to move to Johannesburg and work there for a few years.

So before I came to law school, I had traveled around the world through my international upbringing, and I'd also had some work experience abroad. So I didn't necessarily know what I wanted to do when I started law school here at Duke, but I knew that there would have to be some form of international nexus. And looking back, you know now as an adult and thinking about how exposed I was growing up, I realize how valuable that was because it really gave me a global outlook on the world and my role in it.

And I also learned at a really early age how to connect with different people and appreciate different perspectives, which is really important. And Jabrina, I know it's quite similar to kind of the experience you've had as well.

So now the second part of your question was why international project finance and just development finance in general. So going back to what I was explaining regarding my upbringing, I grew up seeing many different countries. And I also saw many disparities when it came to the level of development for many of these countries. And when you're young, you don't necessarily have the vocabulary or the understanding to take into account the social and the historical context of why a country has what it has, is as developed as it is, whether it's a lower middle income country or whether it's the United States.

And so you tend to look at level of development in terms of very concrete things. So I would notice this country has got really great roads. This one doesn't. This one has got a really nice airport. There are regular power cuts in this country, but not necessarily in this country. So I understood that there was an energy and infrastructure gap basically, and I also had a strong interest in social justice issues.

And I just didn't think that it was possible to do any of this at a corporate law firm, to be honest. And my first year of law school, I met with my career counselor, and I explained to her that I had a strong interest in development and that I wanted a career with impact. And that I wanted to do something about this development disparity that I saw growing up kind of traveling around the world. And she's the one who told me to look into project finance, and I'm really glad she did.

And I'm also really glad that I listened to her because addressing the disparities-- I explained, I saw a lot of growing up in developing countries-- is more or less what our work involves. As I explained earlier, when you ask me about the work that my practice group does at Clifford Chance, it involves the development of actual tangible energy and infrastructure projects in emerging markets. And in many instances, these projects we advise on are really important to a country's development.

JABRINA ROBINSON: One of the resources that you mentioned was your career counselor. I'm really curious if there were other tools or resources that you accessed while you were here at Duke Law that were really helpful in kind of building the bridge and paving the path to your current career.

LIZ WANGU: The ad hoc seminar program is one of my favorite programs, and I'm always telling people about it. And just for context, ad hoc seminars are student-developed, student-directed seminars, and they explore specialized legal topics that are generally not covered in the regular Duke Law curriculum. When I was in my third year of law school, I had this idea for this development law finance class that was really specialized, that focused on issues of access and inclusion, governance, and innovation. And I got together with a few of my friends, and we wrote out the syllabus. We had to take it to the curriculum committee to get it approved, and Professor Trina Jones served as the faculty advisor.

And so the ad hoc seminar program is a terrific leadership opportunity because, as a third year student, you essentially get to direct a course. And you work with other students, and you teach one another. And you essentially drive your own learning experience. You use the support of your faculty advisor, and in my case that was Professor Trina Jones, and then the alumni network. And it was a really, really cool opportunity. And actually towards the end of it, Duke Law alum, John Simpkins, who at the time was a general counsel of USAID-- USAID being the United States Agency for International Development-- he learned about our course, and he took an interest in the initiative that we took.

So we worked together-- Professor Jones, John Simpkins, and myself-- on developing this ad hoc seminar that we kind of had done really haphazardly and developing it so that it could actually be something that was a more substantive course and could be incorporated to the upper level curriculum. And it actually ended up being incorporated in the upper level curriculum. So it was really a cool takeaway, that you could come to Duke, see something that you're interested in, figure it out with other students, so that you can learn what you want to learn and then leave the law school having created something that lasts beyond your law school experience.

And so for the law students who are listening in, Duke has many resources, very many tools and resources, probably more than you'll need. But to the extent that there's anything missing, you can always take the initiative to create the spaces that may or may not exist. And for me, the ad hoc seminar program was a terrific way to do so.

JABRINA ROBINSON: So we talked about this a little bit in the event earlier, but I noted how remarkable it is that your LinkedIn profile actually invites people to reach out to you as a resource. So I'm curious a little bit about how the Duke Law alumni network has been a resource for you.

LIZ WANGU: Well, to whom much is given, much is required. I truly believe that. And Duke has given so much to me. And so many people have mentored me over the years that I'm always willing to help whenever I get the opportunity to. So really, I mean it. Reach out if I can be a resource in any way, and I will continue reaching out to the Duke Law network because I have just gained so much from this community.

So for the law students, the Duke network really is incredibly strong, and you have the benefit of going to one of the best law schools in the world. And a big part of taking advantage of this opportunity is fully leveraging the alumni network. I'm always amazed by the incredible things the Duke Law alumni are doing around the world. There are opportunities to be formally involved. You can join an alumni regional board, for example. It's a great way to meet alumni from different class years.

And then informally, which is kind of what I've done since I've graduated, is just going to a ton of the programming that is organized in different regions across the world. So interestingly enough, I moved to Frankfurt, Germany, a few years ago. I was on another secondment with Clifford Chance, and I went to go support their banking and capital markets team in Frankfurt. And when I was there, I didn't know anyone in Germany. So I actually reached out to a Duke Law alum, Wolfgang, who works in our Frankfurt office, and he invited me to a Duke Law alumni event in Frankfurt, which I was very shocked by that there's this vibrant Duke Law community.

And that's how I made my friends outside of work since I didn't really know anyone in Germany. So even beyond kind of borders, it really is a strong network. And then my most memorable alumni program in DC was this private Duke Law event and reception where we heard from the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth

Bader Ginsburg. To be in the company of someone who really used the law to change the world was dynamic.

JABRINA ROBINSON: Well Liz, before we wrap up, you had your five-year law school reunion earlier this year. Looking back and knowing what you know now, is there any advice you would offer to our current law students?

LIZ WANGU: It's crazy how time has passed. And unfortunately, our reunion had to be virtual. But class reunions, you know, they often force you to be reflective. And interestingly enough, I even took the time to read my personal statement that I wrote nine years ago. I wrote it back in 2012, and I thought I made a very compelling case as to why I wanted to be a lawyer and why Duke Law was where I needed to be. But since I have had time to reflect, I can certainly share advice.

And I've been really lucky to actually get really great advice over the years from colleagues at Clifford Chance or in the Duke Law community. So rather than giving my own advice, I'll share the advice that I've received because I really think that they've given really great advice. I'll start with advice that's not necessarily advice, but something that my colleague Tiernan Brady, who is a chief diversity officer at Clifford Chance, always says.

He always says it's important to champion your values. And I think that as a law student, what that actually means is to think really deeply about what's going on in our country and beyond-- which I noticed students are already doing from the talk-- and how it relates to what you're learning, and how you can do something to advance the causes that you feel are important.

So I mentioned earlier that I felt that it's such a critical time to be studying the law. And you know when I was a law student, I thought at the time that it was just such a critical time, but now I feel like it's even more so. And I really got involved with a lot that was going on. So my first year of law school, for example, was the Trayvon Martin trial that was going on. And I remember me and my roommate writing down just a ton of questions following the case and taking them to our criminal law professor-- I had Professor Jim Coleman-- and just trying to understand what was going on with that case in the context of what we were learning in our criminal law class.

And then my second year, we celebrated 50 years of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. And I was one of the students who was involved, along with my amazing classmates, Anna, Seth, and Christine Kim, who's with the law school's Center on Law, Race and Politics. And we hosted a conference called The Present and the Future of the Civil Rights Movement. What we were really trying to assess there was a progress that's been made in the law and just in daily life since the passage of the 1964 Act.

And then the summer after my second year of law school, we were doing our law firm internships. And then I remember us celebrating and dancing to the landmark Supreme Court case ruling that held that the Constitution requires states to recognize same sex marriage. And then our third year, unfortunately, there was just a lot going on around the country that we felt was unjust, particularly related to police brutality. And so we organized die-in to peacefully protest everything that was going on. And there were about 60 students who were involved in this die-in, and we just thought that it was unjust and that was kind of our way to respond.

I say this because looking back, I clearly remember all of the key legal issues and the conversations we had, just trying to make sense of what was going on at the time, just to round these issues and how it affected our legal education.

And as I mentioned, I really do think that it's a critical time to be studying the law. There's so many interesting things to champion. It could be equitable vaccine access, given that we're in the midst of a global health crisis. It could be voting rights. If any of you all are following what's going on in Washington right now, there's a lot of back and forth that we're seeing regarding the passing of the voting rights bill. It could be climate change. It could be racial justice. There are so many tech and privacy issues that we're constantly reading about in the news. And all of these issues have really, really interesting legal and regulatory concerns.

And so the point is, as a student, to the extent you can think about what's going on in the world right now, what issues you care about deeply enough to appropriately champion, I encourage you to do so because it really will inform your legal education in a special way. So that's a long-winded way of saying what Tiernan always says to champion your values.

And then the second piece of advice I would give, I actually got from a friend and a classmate, Celeste Jackson. She graduated a year ahead of me at Duke Law, and she's always telling me to think beyond the technical day to day and appreciate the big picture of your why. And so if you're like me and doing mission-driven work and something that just really makes an impact-- is really important for you-- you will probably find yourself often questioning the purpose and the meaning of what you do daily. But it's really important to think beyond the technical day to day and appreciate the big picture.

So I mentioned earlier that the meaningful part of our project finance-- when I was explaining our practice group at Clifford Chance-- is that the projects we advise on have a direct connection to the real economy, and they benefit people in the development of host countries. However, the day to day, honestly, often involves reading various documents, marking them up, sitting in on many long calls, and it can sometimes feel really tedious.

And so how does this apply to you as a law student? Especially in that first year, where you spend most of your time briefing cases and reading really long and sometimes dry case law, it really will feel tedious. And you'll probably find yourself questioning the purpose of it all. And I would say when you find yourself questioning that purpose, just take the advice that Celeste gave me, which is don't overthink the technical day to day. Trust the process, and think big picture about what your why is.

And then the last piece of advice that I'm going to share is from Ed Cooke. And just some background on who he is-- you all probably know the name Wilhelmina Cooke, and for those who may not, just a few weeks ago Duke University dedicated a building to her. She was one of the first five African-American students who enrolled at Duke in 1963, and she helped to racially integrate the University. But while she was a student here, she was such a big change-maker that her legacy essentially just lives on. And so many people remember what her role was when she was a student, essentially just integrating our University.

And so her husband is Ed Cooke, and he too is truly a change-maker. He's had a long and impressive legal career, just like Wilhelmina did, and has been a mentor to many people at Duke Law, including myself particularly from my class year. And so I'll share with you the advice that Ed Cooke told me as a law student. He told me again when I first started practicing law, and then he told me the same thing again just last week when we had dinner in Washington, DC, which is to essentially give yourself permission to work on things that are harder than you think are reasonable.

And I'll say it again because I really hope this resonates. Give yourself permission to work on things that are harder than you think is possible. And Jabrina, I have to be honest, and I told you this earlier, when

you invited me to speak, I had a little bit of imposter syndrome. And that's because when I was a law student, all the speakers who came back were so experienced, and they were so brilliant. And as you mentioned, I just celebrated my five-year reunion, so I'm definitely much younger of an alum. So I had a little bit of imposter syndrome, and I had to think back to Mr. Cooke's advice and kind of like shake it off and still do difficult things.

And so to the law students who are listening, how this applies to you is that law school is going to feel very daunting. It is, and there're classes and certain electives that you're not going to be so comfortable signing up for. It may be a law firm that you want to apply for that you feel is a little bit of a reach.

Clerkships always feel super intimidating. It could be Law Review or any other journal, whatever it is. But when you feel like what you're trying to go for feels like a little bit of a reach or you feel uncomfortable at those moments, just take Mr. Cooke's advice and just give it a go anyway.

So in summary, the advice that I'll share that I've received is just find a way to champion your values and think about what's going on in the world and what your role is. It's really important to do so because it really will inform your legal experience. And then think beyond the technical day to day and appreciate the big picture of your why. And then last, but not least, and this is my favorite piece of advice from Mr. Cooke, is to give yourself permission to work on things that are harder than you think is reasonable.

JABRINA ROBINSON: Liz, it has been such a pleasure speaking with you, and thank you so much for joining us.

LIZ WANGU: Thank you so much for having me. I'm always happy to come back. Thank you so much, Jabrina.

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JABRINA ROBINSON: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the Duke Law podcast. I hope you enjoyed my interview with Duke Law alum, Liz Wangu. You can check out other episodes of the Duke Law podcast on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. And be sure to follow the podcast to be notified when new episodes are available. Thank you for listening.