



In this tale of hope, success really has been the best revenge! A difficult journey teaches invaluable lessons along the way

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My route to the Bar was certainly not 'traditional'. I had difficult hurdles to overcome, which many others did not. I am the daughter of two working class Pakistani Muslim immigrants, who came to this country with nothing and worked tirelessly to overcome poverty, prejudice and social disadvantage to secure a better future for their children. My siblings and I were the first in our family to go to university. We had no connections in the law, and all of us struggled financially to get through our education. I have faced racial, religious, economic and social

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prejudice on my journey to the Bar and even at the Bar itself, I am sad to say. Comments like, 'the Bar is not for people like you' were unfortunately not uncommon. That is the printable version – there were far worse.

But this is a tale of hope, not of woe: I am grateful for every single one of the challenges I have faced, even when they seemed insurmountable. They made me stronger, wiser, more resilient, and more determined. Please permit me to smug for a moment; in spite of the obstacles I have faced, I succeeded anyway. My success was hard fought but all the sweeter for it. I have a successful career of almost two decades at the Bar, having recently been appointed Queen's Counsel, named 'Barrister of the Year' at the Inspirational Women in Law awards, as Head of Employment Law at my chambers, and as a Master of the Bench of the Inner Temple. Success really is the best revenge! My difficult journey taught me invaluable lessons along the way. I am passing some of those lessons on to you in the hope that others can benefit from them, as I ultimately did.

Focus on your own path: use hard work and focus to stop you being distracted by negativity. When in doubt, work harder. My response to criticism and negativity in life has always been to work harder, to be more focused, to drown out the white noise and focus entirely on what I need to do to succeed. I still do that today. I understand that it can be extremely difficult and harrowing, taking a

huge amount of resilience and emotional strength, but that in itself makes you stronger and more impervious to negativity. I worked harder and longer as a response to people telling me I would not succeed. And equally important, stop and look back at all the things you have already achieved, despite the odds against you. Tell yourself: 'Look how far you've already come. Don't stop now, you've got this.' That is my response to criticism and negativity even today. If you tell me I am going to lose my case, I will work even harder to ensure that I don't. *Let positivity be your response: have a constructive reaction to a negative comment or action.*

Use your unique life experiences to your advantage: never apologise for who you are or what you've done. Your life experiences make you a better barrister. My CV didn't look like the CVs of other pupillage applicants. I spent my holidays working different factory jobs to earn money for my studies. I worked for and alongside people from all walks of life and learned how to get along with all of them. When asked about my unglamorous employment history at pupillage interview, I was unapologetically honest. I said that supporting myself financially through university was my priority. I worked hard, juggling academic demands and work commitments simultaneously, and managing my time successfully so that I met all my deadlines. I also learned to get on with a variety of different people in different contexts through my different jobs. That's exactly what we do at the Bar, isn't it? I just learned how to do it in a different way to others. My varied experiences make me more effective at tailoring my communication styles to different people, for example, to get the best out of my witnesses in court, and bring the worst out of the other side's witnesses. I am better at reading body language and social cues of judges, opponents and witnesses, which is an indispensable skill in the courtroom. *There are lessons in every life experience and I will never apologise for mine. Be clever enough to recognise and learn the lessons from your own experiences, see them as your unique selling point and find a way to apply them to your work at the Bar. Crucially, never disparage the experiences of others.*

Take help wherever you can find it and take every opportunity to learn: there is nothing noble about struggling alone when you don't have to. You can learn so much from the experiences of others. For all the occasions where I have faced adversity and very real prejudice at the Bar, there have been many more occasions where I have received encouragement, mentoring, friendship and support. I've never been ashamed to take help when it is offered, whether it is a member of chambers willing to go

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through one of my cases with me, signposting me to a helpful book or article, or someone willing to mentor me. I love conversations with other barristers and judges, hearing their stories of both success and failure in court and on cases – there is so much to learn from them about handling difficult witnesses, dealing with difficult evidence or opponents...the list goes on! I always ask questions about how people get through such experiences, not only because it interests me, but also because I benefit from the lessons of their experiences. I can learn, adapt and apply those lessons to my own career. *Don't be afraid to ask for and accept help, to ask people 'how', and to learn from others' experiences.*

Never stop learning, especially when it comes to advocacy: if you're the barrister who is always learning, you will be the barrister who is always improving. Barristers are under a professional obligation to continue our learning, and it becomes inevitable with our job that as the law develops, so must our knowledge of it. However, there is one area where many of us neglect our continuous learning – advocacy. Advocacy is the fundamental core of what the Bar does. There are no advocacy training requirements on barristers past our first three years in practice, and the Inns don't yet have a comprehensive advocacy programme for established practitioners (although the Inner Temple is currently developing precisely such a programme, about which I am very excited!). Your advocacy learning and development should receive no less attention than your legal knowledge. Sign up for voluntary advocacy courses, watch your opponents in court and learn from their performances (the things they do well as well as the things they might do badly – there is a lesson in all of it), read recommended books about advocacy – just keep on learning. Most importantly, become an advocacy trainer. I've been an Inner Temple advocacy trainer for almost 10 years and it has undoubtedly made me a better advocate. *I have the privilege of teaching alongside the best barristers and judges of our generation from whom I have picked up invaluable tips for witness handling, submissions and written advocacy, all of which have hugely benefited my own advocacy. I can't recommend it highly enough. It is important that we give back to our profession and help the next generation of advocates.* ●



About the author
Rehana Azib QC practises in employment and personal injury at 2 Temple Gardens, where she is Head of the Employment Group. She is an Inner Temple Benchler, and 'Barrister of the Year' at the Inspirational Women in Law Awards 2021.