

Meet the Bar: Nithya Nagarajan, Partner, Husch Blackwell, LLP

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In this second edition of CITBA's "Meet the Bar," we spoke to Nithya Nagarajan, a partner at Husch Blackwell LLP and seasoned international trade attorney.

Nithya's interest in the law became evident at an early age. "I wanted to be lawyer since late high school, when I was 15 or 16 years old." Nithya's legal journey was unconventional and did not begin in law school, but in the bustling offices of the Department of Commerce. Inspired by a George Washington University professor's positive experience at Commerce, she eventually took a job as an import compliance specialist. "I was slotted into the AD/CVD section of import administration," she recalls, "it was a great opportunity and I moved up through the ranks fairly quickly because of the increase in cases back then." Indeed, she gained a senior title within three years and had the opportunity to travel to Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, and Ukraine as part of new steel cases and verifications.

It was at Commerce where Nithya met two great mentors: "I credit Marguerite Trossevin," the deputy chief counsel at the time, "with [helping me develop] my analytical thinking skills," she says. Nithya recalls that Trossevin "would sit and talk with me and ask 'why are you saying this? Explain this further.'" Nithya also credits Duane Layton with helping her hone her editing skills. "They knew I wanted to go to law school," she says, "and they helped me to think like a lawyer early in my career."

Her mentors at Commerce encouraged her to apply despite the financial burdens that had already forced her to delay the process of going to law school. "This is my dream," she says emphatically, "I then decided that I was going to go somehow and someday." She made it work by enrolling as an evening student at American University Washington College of Law, while maintaining her role as a senior import compliance specialist at Commerce.

After graduating law school, she explored antitrust litigation during a stint as a DOJ Honors attorney. She soon realized that she liked the macroeconomic aspect of trade more than the microeconomic aspect of antitrust. After clerking at the Court of International Trade, she returned to Commerce. With her previous background as an analyst, she was well-suited to assess the work she was now tasked with reviewing. According to Nithya, she "knew what the analysts were trying to say in their memos" and coming back to Commerce as a lawyer made her able to understand their perspective.

Nithya's proudest career accomplishment was her next move. Only eight years after graduating from law school, she started a solo private practice from scratch focusing on trade remedies. "When you come out of the government, you don't have any business whatsoever," she explained, "you have no book of business." Despite the stresses of having to run her own shop (she claims that she would not advise any young lawyer to do the same), Nithya learned valuable lessons that served her well. "This helped me manage on my own and taught me skills that then helped me acclimatize to the large law firm environment better."

Nithya identifies certain sets of skills that junior attorneys should be constantly refining and sharpening. "You have to be able to deal with the client," she said, "build a rapport, understand their business, and know their operations." Law school, she explains, doesn't teach you how to think like a businessperson. But for the client, as was the case in her solo practice, "their business is their bread and butter." Nithya also wisely notes that clients don't like to engage in a lawyerly conversation. "[A great lawyer] can give a great legal analysis, but most of the time the business folks don't read it because they don't understand it." To bridge the gap, Nithya suggests keeping up to date on the client's business. "You have to constantly be reading." She tells me that an innocuous Law 360 article or a recent Federal Register notice might have a larger impact than expected. "Doing all of that groundwork," she adds, "will help you develop a sixth sense" when dealing with a client and get a deeper appreciation for their point of view.

When a potential client asked what her succession plan was for the pendency of a large, new, years-long case, Nithya came to the realization that she needed to rethink her solo career. "I didn't have a proper plan and even if I wanted to do something as simple as go on a vacation, the case was so large that I wouldn't have been able to," she notes. "That wasn't really a good position to be in." Soon after, she got word that Husch Blackwell was growing its trade practice—an opportunity she could not pass up. Husch Blackwell's trade practice has grown significantly since she joined as a result with the hard work of all the partners in the group.

At Husch Blackwell, she has continued to take an active role in a variety of associations: the Association of Women in International Trade; the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association; TerraLex; CITBA; and the Historical Society of the U.S. Court of International Trade, to name a few. She encourages all lawyers to volunteer their time. "Get yourself involved, because you'll never know where the next opportunity is going to come from."

Beyond her work with these associations, she enjoys cooking with vegetables from her home garden. "That's my therapy," she says. In addition to growing peppers, tomatoes,

and eggplants, she grows squash native to India, like the ridge and snake gourd. Nithya also has a passion for history, which will take her to Greece this year, a place that has been on her “bucket list” since she was a child. This summer, she will finally cross that off her list as she visits Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) and other ancient cities on a family trip to the Mediterranean. While exploring, she will invariably find a bookshop, a cherished ritual that she seeks out during her travels.

From her distinguished career as a government attorney, to an entrepreneurial solo practitioner, to successful partner at a large firm, Nithya’s story highlights the value of varied experiences and inspiring colleagues who challenge you to think critically. Her journey is a refreshing reminder that the most fulfilling legal careers are often the most unexpected.