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WEBBER WENTZEL

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A word of advice to my younger self, Neerasha Singh

To Neerasha,

A lot has already happened to you at such a young age. Mum left you too soon, and as you look to the future, you must be wondering what it may hold.

While you are still young and that loss is fresh, that larger-than-life personality that filled your life, and that of your four siblings, with love will remain with you as you become older. The happy childhood you experienced before will continue in its simplicity and joy. You will have everything you need, and while you will forever miss her, that self-confidence and strong personality that defined her has been passed onto you, and it will shape your future. Also, your Dad will step up in the most amazing ways and perform the role of two parents in one, with the community around you there to support you as you grow.

It is that community that will help you discover your passion for public speaking, debating and writing, leading to you submitting work for the Alan Paton Prize. You become a person who has a strong sense of self, and I'm happy to share with you that you will have options at the end of high school; quite a few, in fact. What will grab your eye is law, since it appeals to your strengths, with a helping hand from TV shows such as LA Law, which will open your eyes to topics that are not discussed openly around you.

You will go to university, and throw yourself into your work. A place that will leave an indelible impression on your view of the world, and your place in it, will be the campus law clinic, where you will spend a lot of time as a member of the juvenile justice unit. Your work as part of the unit will take you into places such as prisons, where you will speak to prisoners whose destiny was shaped as much by circumstance and survival as anything else. A lesson you will take away from this period in your life, and which will stay with you, is gratitude. You will become very aware that you are fortunate to have what you have, including that love and support you received earlier in your life. Many people are not so fortunate. You will not forget.

It's at the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) where you will first cut your teeth in the legal environment. You will apply to do your articles at their Johannesburg office, and will get in. The next couple of years will be fascinating for you and, at times, difficult. Your rotations will expose you to subjects at the heart of socio-economic rights, including housing, children and women, and environmental justice, leaving a mark on your soul that you will never quite shake.

Even today, when I think back to that time, I struggle to put into words the emotions that the people you will meet at the LRC leave on your emotional doorstep. However, what it will do is broaden your horizons as you land a coveted role at the Constitutional Court.

There, you will rub shoulders with literal giants of South African law, working on precedent setting cases in corporate law, and some that trace their origins to the worst of apartheid. It will be the most amazing place to learn, and really hone your ability to pivot and adapt under pressure.

It's after the Constitutional Court that you will find your true professional home, joining Webber Wentzel in Johannesburg. At the time of joining, the firm filled one building in Illovo, but as I write to you today, we now occupy one of the most prestigious offices in Sandton, having grown at a marked rate as our reputation for outstanding work grew within South Africa's legal circles.

There, you will work on a wide range of subjects, including mergers and acquisitions, commercial aviation, aviation finance, and insolvency. One transaction that you will be especially proud of is helping South Africans return home from Indonesia and Brazil during a global pandemic, with your work leading to a change in legislation. But that's a story for another day.

Also, you will never be bored. You will work hard, but in every office and hallway, you will work with and encounter interesting, motivated, and smart people who love to debate and share their point of view. That self-confidence that you carry with you will serve you well because you will not be afraid to ask questions, nor admit that you do not know the answer to a question, nor shirk from expressing your opinion.

It will shape the way you interact with your peers and those that eventually work for you, helping you to make decisions quickly and effectively in the best interests of your clients, and the firm at large. You will enjoy what you do. You will be inspired and challenged to give your best every day.

Your life journey will teach you to lead with passion and compassion, and lots of love and laughter.

When I began writing this letter, I had the intention of sharing different pieces of advice. While some may sound trite, such as perseverance and hard work, the journey you are embarking on will be shaped and driven by you, and you alone.

All I can urge you to do is continue believing in yourself, your talents, your will to succeed, the tireless curiosity that keeps your mind spinning at all times, and the opportunities hard work creates.

Don't sweat the small stuff. Keep your heart strong. Allow your spirit to soar. Be kind to yourself. You have enough love to carry you through all that will be. You will be OK.

Neerasha Singh