

Fordham Footsteps: Joy Tolliver, FCRH '04

Interview Transcript

Sara:

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from their time as a student to their current career. Some will have a direct correlation to their majors and others will describe how they took some unexpected turns.

Matt:

Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Matt Burns, associate director for young alumni and student engagement.

Sara:

And I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, senior director for strategic initiatives. With us today is Joy Tolliver, Fordham College at Rose Hill class of 2004. Welcome, Joy.

Joy:

Good afternoon. Thank you so much, Sara and Matt for having me today. I'm so excited to be here.

Sara:

We're so excited to talk to you. You have a really interesting story. So let's start at the beginning. You were a psychology major and a minor in Spanish language and literature.

Joy:

Yes.

Sara:

How did land on those two?

Joy:

Yes, absolutely. It's very interesting. When I came to Fordham, I was intending to major either in English or in communications. I took Intro to Psychology by Dr. Charlie Lewis. I'm not sure if he's still with the university, but he was my Intro to Psychology professor. I absolutely loved the course. I absolutely loved him. It was fun, it was engaging, and it really got me interested in studying and understanding the way people think. And I realized that if I was going to go to law school, which was my intention all along, that it would be very helpful for me to understand the ways in which people think. I was really just very captivated by the Intro to Psychology class and decided that that would be my major.

Sara:

And what about that minor? What an interesting companion.

Joy:

Yes. I remember when I was in high school, I studied Spanish for four years. Really just love the Spanish language. So coming into Fordham, it was my intention to continue to study the language I wanted to become as fluent as I possibly could. I remember my freshman year at Fordham, Mrs. Hoar was my Spanish language teacher. I thought that she was fantastic and that I would continue my course of study. I even considered having Spanish as a second major, but with all of my pre-law work and prepping for the LSAT, I figured I would make it a minor. And it was a fantastic four years of studying Spanish.

Matt:

What happened after you graduated? Did you head right to law school, or did you do something else in between?

Joy:

I did. I did. My junior year at Fordham is when I began prepping for law school entrance. That is when I took the law school entrance exam prep courses. I believe they were actually offered on campus. Took the LSAT junior year, got accepted February 4th. I remember the date, 2004 of my senior year, and went to law school at the end of August in 2004.

Matt:

Can you talk a bit about that decision? Because I know a lot of students struggle with it. Had it always been your intention to go straight of law school, or did anyone advise you otherwise? How did you end up making that call?

Joy:

That had always been my intention to go to law school, but I will say that for a couple of months, I considered an alternative path. I really loved studying psychology. I really loved my professors. I remember them as though it was yesterday. For several months, I highly considered earning my PsyD and doing it at Fordham. I met some of the graduate students. Some of the graduate students were teaching assistants, graduate assistants, and I highly considered getting my PsyD. I said, "I'm either going to be a lawyer, or I'm going to be a psychotherapist." Now that I'm in practice, I feel like I'm both, but it was definitely something that I considered, just because I truly loved what I studied, worked really hard, I did really well, and I said, "I want to continue this and earn my PsyD," which is another doctorate in psychology. I felt that I was very prepared with what I learned at Fordham and that I received the tools. But after a lot of contemplation and prayer, I decided that I would go to law school. And I'm glad that I did.

Matt:

Did you have any career aspirations? Did you want to be a prosecutor? Did you want to work in civil litigation? Is there something there that really drove you to that career professionally? Was law school more about that discernment in of itself?

Joy:

I always wanted to help people in any capacity that I could. Going into law school, I saw myself being a family law practitioner, doing something that would be a benefit and help to children. And law school is very interesting. I think what you picture yourself doing, going into law school, versus what you end up doing, they're not always congruent. After taking several law school courses, I sort of developed what I thought would be my path. So while in law school, I worked in the child advocacy clinic and I was an

advocate for students who were differently abled, students and their families. These were students in K-12 schools who were differently abled and really required access to special education, which K-12 public school districts are required to provide. But oftentimes when students are differently abled, when they have a number of physical and emotional and developmental challenges, it's very costly, these services are very costly. The districts often challenge paying for all of these services.

Joy:

So I represented the students and their families to make sure that they had access to special services. And I'm very proud of the work that I did in that clinic. When I graduated, I became a law clerk, which is a position for one year, where you work exclusively, normally for one judge. I worked for a family law judge, which is exactly what I wanted to do. Then midway during my clerkship, my judge is transferred to the criminal division. I had no interest whatsoever in doing anything related to criminal law, but this is my judge, I don't have a choice, I have to go where he goes. I went with him to the criminal division. That led to my becoming a prosecutor after that. I got really great trial experience, really great litigation experience.

Joy:

As a prosecutor, I worked in the domestic violence division, which was really emotionally, very tough work, very intense. I realized I'm learning a lot and I'm helping a lot of people, but this is not the capacity in which I think my legal career will be best utilized. After that, I went into private practice. I went to a mid-size law firm in New Jersey, where I was assigned to the education law department and the labor & employment law department. It was one division, and essentially I represented municipalities as their labor and employment counsel, and I also represented K-12 school districts and private schools as their education council, normally as their board council and as their labor and employment counsel. That was very similar to the work that I was doing when I was in law school as a child advocacy student attorney, but now I was representing the institution.

Joy:

It was a little different in that respect, but I was very well-versed in education law in my state and all the nuances involved. That was really just a phenomenal experience for me, that then led to my becoming the general counsel of a college. So all of my training in education law and then labor and employment law really all came together very nicely as a general counsel for a college, and now I am the vice president of government relations and general counsel at a bigger school in New York. It's work that I absolutely love, it's work that I'm incredibly excited about. As I look back on my path, I see how all of my prior experiences led to where I am today.

Sara:

Would you advise students to play the field a bit and explore different disciplines and then figure out what they like and what they gravitate towards?

Joy:

Absolutely, and I especially advise students to try to get internships, to get experience. There's truly no experience that's a bad experience, because we either learn what it is that we like, or we learn what it is that we don't like, and both are equally important. Actually, when I was at Fordham, I interned at UBS, United Bank of Switzerland in their law department. I interned over the summers, and it was just a

phenomenal experience. I got to work with some really great attorneys. It gave me really great insight into the securities world, as it relates to the law.

Joy:

That experience actually led me to an internship that I got at the New York Stock Exchange when I was in law school. And they were really impressed by the work that I had done at UBS when I was at Fordham. There's no experience that won't be beneficial to you. Again, it will either show you what you want to do or what it is that you don't want to do, but it's experience, nonetheless, it's experience you can put on your resume, and it can show that you're committed to working in this industry. I highly suggest internships, even if they are unpaid, and I know that that's not very popular with students, because you have to make money, and I get that. But when I had opportunities that weren't paid well, I just got another job. I just worked two jobs so that I can get experience, but I could also get the compensation that I needed just to live.

Matt:

I want to ask you about some of those decisions you made, were there any mentors who helped you figure out that career path? I know you mentioned that psychology professor who helped you figure out what you wanted to do along the way.

Joy:

Absolutely. One piece of advice I really love to give to students is to seek out mentors. A lot of times we're expecting people to take us under their wings and teach us everything that they know. And it's incumbent upon us to seek out mentors. Dr. Charlie Lewis, who was my intro to psych professor, this was a huge class. I'm sure it was well over 50 students. It was so many students in the class. There's no way that we can reasonably expect a professor to reach out to everyone. But I reached out to him. I went to see him during his office hours. I wanted to know what are the other courses that I can take? What other experiences can I get in psychology?

Joy:

I was really just so hungry to learn more about my course of study, and I encourage students to do the same as it relates to whatever it is that they want to do. Whatever industry it is, whether it's medicine, whether it's teaching, whether it's fashion, whether it's engineering, you have to own your career. You're the only one that is going to be able to establish what your career path is going to be.

Joy:

And so, yes, I did have some mentors. Some were great, some were not so great. But from them, I learned what it is I want to do, what type of law practitioner I want to be, and what type of law practitioner I don't want to be. There were some lawyers who I worked for who were just horrible, just not professional at all. And I said, "This is not who I want to be." But the experience was valuable, because it showed me who I didn't want to be. So I would say, yes, I've had mentors, some great and some not, but all of them have contributed really to the tapestry that has been my legal career thus far.

Sara:

It's such a great thing that you can combine passions, too. I feel like with your law degree, you can go and work in an entertainment industry, or you can work in sport, you can work in music, or you can

work in a lot of different places, so you can take those hobbies or those other interests and package them with a law degree and really have a fulfilling experience.

Joy:

Absolutely. The great thing about going to law school is that you don't have to have any particular major. I remember my freshman year, my sophomore years at Fordham, and so many of my friends who wanted to go to law school felt that they had to be a poly sci major, they had to be a history major. I wasn't interested in those topics. I wanted to study something that I enjoy, something that I thought was enlightening and fun, something that I was going to want to work hard at so I could do really well at, because law schools are interested in how you perform. They want to know, how well do you work? Do you have a strong work ethic? They want to see what your GPA is in addition to your LSAT score. They want to know that you are committed to doing other things besides being a student. They want to know that you're a well-rounded person.

Joy:

I was very active on campus at Fordham, and all of these things contributed to my law school application. So I would say, yes, study what you love, do well in it. And when you go to law school, explore. There's so many different courses you can take. There are so many internships that are available, but you have to go after it. You can't just expect anything to come to you. I think just even my own experience shows that you can start on one path, but you don't have to stay on it.

Joy:

I started as a law clerk, I ended up being a prosecutor. Fourteen years ago when I started, I never would have thought that I would be a vice president at a college. I never thought I would be the general counsel of a college. But that's how my career path went, and I wasn't sitting by, passively waiting for things to happen. I was actively involved in the trajectory of my career. I encourage students to do that. Not be afraid to do something that's unfamiliar or something that might be a little intimidating. And if it doesn't work out, you can always see something else.

Matt:

You mentioned your involvement outside of the classroom. Can you talk a bit about what you did with your extracurriculars either at Fordham or at law school and how you did use that to inform your career?

Joy:

At Fordham, I was a freshmen academic student advisor. I think it was appreciated as FASA at the time. I'm not sure if that still exists. I was also very involved with CSTEP, and working with the CSTEP students. I was also a member of United Student Government. I believe that I was vice president for my class, and I was involved in the United Student Government all four years. I also worked for the dean at the time, which was Fr. von Arx. I worked for him for three years, my sophomore, junior, and senior years. I was a member of the Fordham Club, which was really a wonderful experience for me. I also did community service events around the Bronx, some of which I did through Fordham Club, some of which I did through USG. And I was really just happy just to help out wherever I could. So if there was anything that came through the dean's office, they needed a student to be part of an event or to be a part of the community service event, I just availed myself to anything and everything that I could.

Matt:

Yeah. That must've been such good practice for not only law school, but the real world, having to balance so many different extracurriculars on top of your academic studies there.

Joy:

Absolutely. In addition to all of those things, I had a job. I worked at the GAP starting in high school, in New Jersey, and I continued working at the GAP in New Jersey. So what I would do is after the class, I remember I scheduled my classes to end at e:20. I would then get on the D train and the PATH train, and I would go to Jersey City where I continued working at the GAP. Then I would come back at the end of the night and on the train I would study, I would do my work to the extent that they could. When I had breaks at the GAP, I would go back in the break room and do my homework and then get back on the D train and come back at the end of the night and do it all over again the next day.

Joy:

I think that you definitely have to be just committed to doing all the things that you need to do, not just to be a great applicant for law school, but just to be just a well-rounded student and to be able to juggle multiple things at once. Because if you plan to be a lawyer, you will need to be able to juggle multiple things at once.

Sara:

You've also been an adjunct professor. How does it feel to be on the other side of the desk, teaching students?

Joy:

That has been and continues to be one of the most rewarding experiences I think I've had in my career. I started teaching 11 years ago on the community college level, and since then, I now teach graduate level and the undergraduate level. I actually am currently teaching a course every day from 9:00 AM to 12:30, and it's very intense, but I really enjoy it. I love working with students. And just understanding, especially in a climate, in which we're currently living, the political climate that we're living in, the social environment that we're living in, it's really given me a greater appreciation for what students are experiencing.

Joy:

In this last year with COVID, I know students have had to deal with things that we didn't have to. Now, when I was at Fordham, we also dealt with 9/11, that happened in my sophomore year, and that was very difficult, I think, for everyone. But I'm also now just very sensitive to the needs of my students, all that they might be experiencing, the challenges they might be experiencing, just in the climate in which we're living. I just feel like I can influence and impact their lives the way Dr. Charlie Lewis did for me and so many others at Fordham. I consider that an honor and a privilege.

Sara:

Wonderful. Just circling back to your current position, can you talk a little bit about government relations? I know Fordham has a government relations office, but it's very behind the scenes. People may not know what they do. Can you talk a little bit about your day-to-day?

Joy:

Sure, sure. A big part of my job is making sure that the college has very strong relationships and healthy relationships with outside entities. This includes our high schools. There are so many high schools in New York, in the Bronx and Manhattan, New Rochelle. And it's a part of my job to make sure that we have good relationships with them, such that if their students ever want to come to our school, that we have an established relationship, we have dual enrollment initiatives for high schoolers to take college courses while they are in high school. We actually have several students who are graduating from high school and an associate's degree, which is a two-year degree, simultaneously. So I'm really excited about that. I also work with congressional leaders. A big part of my job is going to Washington, D.C. And to lobby for the rights of the students, to make sure that they have access to funding that they need to make sure that there are programs that are appropriate and accessible to students.

Joy:

It's also making sure that just within our state leaders, that we have very good relationships with them running a school, quite frankly, is a business. And we have to have healthy and strong relationships with all of our stakeholders to make sure that we can continue to provide the best educational experiences for students, but also to make sure that we are providing them and ensuring that they have the best outcomes, because there's no point of us being in the higher education business if our students aren't doing after graduation, if they're not getting good jobs, if they're not getting internships. So a big part of my job is making sure that we have the relationships needed to ensure the best outcomes for our students.

Matt:

I feel like we could have an entire episode just talking about your work day-to-day there and the important issues that you grapple with. But tying it back real quick, is there anything in particular from your Fordham experience that stays with you in your day-to-day in this role?

Joy:

There are so many things that I can say about my experience at Fordham. My experience at Fordham, honestly, is just phenomenal. I'm not saying this for the podcast. I'm such a proud alum, because there were so many people I feel who poured so positively into my life and made my experience such a rich experience. One that I think always stands out is my experience with Dr. Luz Lenis. I remember I got to know her my freshman year and she was the sophomore dean, but I always liked being ahead. I always wanted to know what was to come next. So even though she was a sophomore dean, as a freshman, I went to visit her all the time. I always had so many questions. I wanted to know everything I needed to know to make sure that my sophomore year was a successful one.

Joy:

She embraced the hunger that I had, and she embraced the fact that I was so just excited about school, and she was the reason why I ended up working for Fr. von Arx. She said, "Joy, you're here, you're in this office all the time. You might as well work for us." She said, "I know that you're still working at the GAP, and you're going back and forth." And so, she'd offered me a position and I accepted it, but I really appreciate how students-focused our deans were and how student-focused our professors were.

Joy:

That's not to say that everyone was like that, but I had such rich experiences, because our administration and our faculty were so student-centered, and that has greatly influenced the way that I serve as an administrator. I believe that we have to be missional. I believe that we have to put students first, because that's why we're here. Without them, none of us have a purpose, none of us had a position. So, making sure that students are first was greatly instilled in me by Dr. Lenis and others at Fordham, and it's really one of the reasons why I work the way I work today.

Sara:

Well, and you're a lifelong learner. You're back in school, getting your Ed.D. In higher education administration.

Joy:

I am, and I'll be honest, after law school, I promised myself that I would never put myself through such a grueling educational experience as law school was, but I really, really love what I do. She further my commitment and my knowledge to what I'm doing. That is why I now currently a doctoral candidate in higher education.

Sara:

And how's it going?

Joy:

It's going well. I've done very, very well in all of my coursework, but I will say that managing all of these things, it's not easy. I won't say that this is coming easy at all, but I've committed to it. And when I commit, I like to see things through, so.

Sara:

We'll get there.

Joy:

We'll get there.

Matt:

Well, any advice you might offer to students who want to follow in any of your footsteps, whether they're heading to law school or heading into a similar line of work?

Joy:

I would say, stay the course. I know that in the last year, just with some of my own students, they've had to change courses because of COVID. Some people have lost jobs, lost income, some people have lost housing, some people have lost loved ones. It's been a very difficult time to be a student. There's also been the loss of expectations, and what you anticipated your year would be like. I've truly felt for students, college students in particular at this time. But I would say no matter what, just stay the course. Even if you have to take a break, even if you have to have a delayed or longer stay in school, I would say, stay the course because you never want to look back and wonder, "Well, what if I had gone through? What have I completed?"

Joy:

Sometimes stopping out is something that is beyond a student's control. Sometimes taking time off is beyond your control because of circumstances. But I would say to number one, really surround yourself with people who are going to encourage you, with people who believe in you, and people who are going to do what they can to help you stay the course. That's number one. And that goes back to the seeking out mentors that we talked about beginning.

Joy:

Number two, I would say work as though everything depends on it. That was really something that my parents taught me when I was very little, to work as though everything depended on it. I'm just going to tell the truth, I guess. I've always been a geek at Fordham my freshman year. When other people were out, I was often found in the library for hours after school, just getting my work done. I was often found there on Friday nights, just getting my papers done, because I didn't want to be stressed over the weekend.

Joy:

Sometimes you have to take time apart from the social scene or from your friends to accomplish what it is that you want to accomplish. Anything that you are working for, it's not going to be given to you. If you really want to be successful, I believe that you have to put in the time, you have to put in the work, and that's been my experience.

Joy:

Third, I would say don't be afraid to change courses. One of my best friends to this day, we both were going to go to law school. I remember on the day of the LSAT, he did not show up and she decided to change courses. And he's now a senior wealth management advisor. His name is Mark Smith. Mark has had just a tremendous career, but he changed courses literally on the day that we were supposed to take the LSAT he didn't show up.

Joy:

But I think it's modest to say that not showing up for the LSAT worked out well for him in his career. So don't be afraid to change courses and don't be afraid to do what you know you are meant to do. Sometimes that looks differently to us than it does to other people. Our parents may have expectations for us. There might be some legacy expectations, parents they have been doctors, or parents may have been teachers, and now it's expected to you. If that's not the path that you know you are intended to fulfill, I would say go what you know you are supposed to do and give it all that you have.

Matt:

Well, soon, it's going to be Dr. Joy Tolliver. What's next after that, do you see yourself staying at your same institution? Do you see yourself trying to branch out and do something different?

Joy:

Well, I first want to say thank you for your tremendous faith in my abilities and my completion of this program. To be very honest, I do aspire towards the highest level of leadership in higher education. For all that it takes to do the work that I do and to do a doctoral program, I'm definitely going to give it a

shot. I love what I'm doing, I love my current institution, but we also have to be open to other opportunities that may come our way. So I'm content, but also excited for what is in store.

Matt:

Well, Joy, I think that is all we have for you. Thank you again for being here. Certainly, if we ever get Mark Smith on the podcast, we're going to ask him why he didn't show up to the LSAT that day.

Joy:

Thank you for having me. It's truly, always an honor and a pleasure.

Matt:

So great to have you. Well, that's another addition to Fordham Footsteps. Fordham Footsteps is brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

Sara:

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