

An unplanned change of heart pays lasting dividends for Michigan lawyer

By Brian Cox

Rachelle Miller was just two classes away from a chemistry degree when she finally admitted the truth to herself: she hated the subject and was miserable studying chemistry.

In a dramatic life pivot, she dropped out of her analytical chemistry class mid-semester and turned her back on a planned career in medicine.



Rachelle and her husband, Eric, live in Warren with a cat named Taco and an adopted disabled dog named Chicago.



“The professor announced it was ‘drop day,’ and I just stood up and walked out,” says Miller, who had already registered to take the MCAT. “I couldn’t do it anymore. It wasn’t that I wasn’t good at science – I just never liked it. I stayed on that path because I was good at it, not because I ever enjoyed it.”

She called her future husband, Eric, to tell him that she’d dropped the class and needed “to retool” her education plans. He was surprised, but supportive. He then asked, “What are you going to tell your mom?”

That, Miller says with a laugh, was a good question. She had no idea.

The following week she met with an adviser who told her there was a path to graduating the following semester with a political science degree. It sounded like a plan to Miller.

After figuring out a way forward, Miller told her mom about her change of plans. Her mother wondered what Miller would do with a degree in political science.

“I told her I could always go to law school,” recalls Miller, “and that was the start of it. It was literally spur of the moment. I needed an answer.”

But the more she thought about it, the more the idea of going to law school took root. She transferred money she’d paid for an MCAT course to an LSAT course. She talked with law professors at Wayne State University about the profession and her interest in becoming a lawyer continued to grow. Law was fast-paced, adversarial, and intellectual – everything she didn’t know she was looking for.

“Going to court and advocating in an adversarial position seemed to fit my personality,” she says. “I always want to be under the gun.”

Born and raised in southeast Michigan, Miller grew up in a family passionate about anything with a motor. She revealed her penchant for thrill-seeking at an early age, riding her first dirt bike when she was just 3 years old.

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Rachelle and Eric enjoy boating during the summer, riding their mopeds around town along the water, and attending music festivals such as Lollapalooza.

"I drove straight into a bush and hit the house," she says with a wry smile. "My dad had to repair the bike."

She eventually graduated to "quads," or four-wheelers, and go-carts. In addition to a certain "need for speed," Miller also inherited her family's love for classic automobiles, as she and her husband, Eric, now own a 1996 yellow Corvette.

Miller's family didn't restrict their love for motors to land vehicles, however. She spent summers boating on Houghton Lake where the family had cabins; Miller also carries on that tradition and now owns a 225 Sundowner that she keeps docked on Lake St. Clair, a body of water that borders both the U.S. and Canada.

Miller and her husband live in Warren with a cat named Taco and an adopted disabled dog named Chicago. They enjoy boating during the summer, riding their mopeds around town along the water, and attending music festivals. She has traveled extensively domestically and internationally, including Ireland, Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain, and England.

After graduating from Wayne State with her political science degree, Miller enrolled at the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) School of Law. She chose UDM in part because it kept her close to home and offered a generous scholarship – and in part because she sensed it was the kind of intimate, high-touch environment where she could thrive. She forged life-long friendships and values the strong bonds created with those in her class. In short order, she realized that she would excel under the demands and deadlines of litigation.

There were a few challenges litigation presented that Miller hadn't had to face much while studying science and math.

The first was speaking in public. Naturally shy, Miller knew she would have to work on becoming more comfortable arguing before an audience. She joined moot court in part to gain more experience speaking in front of a judge and jury.

"Once you put the fear behind you, it's just a lot of thinking on your feet, which I like," she says.

Legal writing posed a different kind of challenge. Coming from a STEM background, Miller hadn't done much narrative or persuasive writing and felt creatively under-equipped. But one of her professors saw her potential and helped her unlock it. With a few structured lessons and a lot of effort, Miller went from struggling with her first assignments to earning top marks in the course.

She credits the work ethic she learned from her parents for the focus and dedication that is necessary to confront and overcome challenges.

"I understood from my parents that things are not always going to come easy," she says. "Coasting is not an option. You always need to improve, and I think that is core element of my personality."

In the summer following her 2L, Miller clerked for Judge Sean Cox of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. For someone who growing up had had little exposure to lawyering beyond "Law & Order," the prestigious post opened Miller's eyes to how legal proceedings ran. For the first time, she witnessed how lawyering was really done.

Miller joined Cardelli Lanfear Law in Troy after earning her J.D. She appreciates the mid-size firm for its collegiality and intimacy.

"I got to know the partners and their differences in their litigation styles," she says. "They've trained me every step of the way."

Her practice ranges from product liability to first- and third-party no-fault cases, to premises liability and commercial litigation. As she has developed her practice, she has found Primerus to be a valuable resource. She recently attended the Young Lawyers Conference, which proved helpful with networking, and she is excited to attend Primerus' upcoming Trial Skills Academy.



Rachelle has traveled extensively, including to Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain, and England. She and Eric recently visited the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland.

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Looking back on her path to a career in law, Miller says the years she spent working managing fast food restaurants while an undergrad and in law school helped her develop interpersonal skills and a work ethic that have proved valuable as a lawyer.

“You run into every type of person in the world in the restaurant business,” she says. “And the grinding hours of working in fast food management prepared me for some of the long hours practicing law can require.”

When Miller followed her gut and walked out of that chemistry class years ago, it was a turning point that marked the beginning of a career built not on what she was supposed to do, but on what fit. What began as a spur-of-the-moment decision has become a purposeful career, shaped by resilience, curiosity, and a deep commitment to doing the work.



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