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Life Stories of Recent MBAs

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I grew up in Los Angeles, California, in a small working-class neighborhood outside of Pasadena. My parents immigrated to America from South Korea in their late twenties in search of better opportunities. My father came over on a technical visa and spent his career working as a chemical engineer for the City of Los Angeles. My mother arrived several months later, speaking very little English. She spent her initial years working hard, saving money, mastering the language and eventually opened a dry cleaning business, which she still runs today. My parents have a strong work ethic and have always been very involved in the local Korean community.

From my earliest days, I have been shaped by my Korean heritage. Although I was born in the United States, my first language was Korean. My grandmother came over from Korea to help take care of my younger siblings and me when my mother returned to full-time work. My grandmother spoke only Korean, so I had to teach myself English, mostly by watching Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers on PBS television.

My father was born in North Korea, the youngest of five brothers. In the days leading up to the Korean War, communist soldiers attacked my father's house. My grandmother and her sons were told to leave by the following morning if they wanted to live. They packed up what they could carry and after a long, grueling journey that included stowing away on a train, my father's family made it to Seoul, South Korea. Shortly after, the communists invaded Seoul and my father's three oldest brothers were forced into the North Korean army, never to be heard from again. My father was only five years old at the time, but his remaining older brother worked hard to make enough money to buy food each day for my grandmother and my father. Ultimately, the communists were driven out of Seoul, but survival was not easy for the thousands of refugees that remained.

During this time, my grandmother passed away, leaving my father to be raised by his older brother. My uncle sacrificed a great deal to care for my father. He gave up his dreams of going to school and focused his energies on making sure my father was educated. My father excelled in school, which gave him the opportunity to immigrate to the U.S. Shortly after my father and mother got settled in America, they brought over my uncle and his family. My father continued to work hard and his paycheck went to supporting his extended family, which includes my uncle and my cousins. Over the years, my parents have sponsored many of our relatives from Korea, who would often spend their first months in the U.S. staying with us as they got situated. I witnessed first-hand the struggles of new immigrants striving to create a new life in a startlingly different environment.

Professor Nitin Nohria, Matthew Breitfelder (MBA 2002), and Daisy Wademan Dowling (MBA 2002) prepared this case with the assistance of Clair Linzey. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

Through these experiences, the value of helping others in need was ingrained in me, as well as keeping life in perspective

Despite the struggles of my family, we were raised with a sense of gratitude and a desire to make the most of our opportunities. I was taught that nothing in life comes easy. Rather, it's a combination of hard work, determination, and a little luck that are required to create the life you want to live. A strong sense of family bonding and loyalty also helps a lot. I know there is an expectation that it is my responsibility, along with my siblings, to carry on our family traditions and take care of our extended family.

Faith has always been a big part of my life. Especially in Los Angeles, the Korean church is a huge part of the social fabric of the Korean community. My parents frequently get up at 4:00 am to make time for church activities and related service projects. My father serves as one of 30 elected leaders, in a church comprised of more than 7,000 members. In my family, we share a conviction that God will provide, but we also value a heads-down, don't complain, and get your work done kind of attitude. As a kid, I remember feeling astonished at all my parents were able to squeeze in, constantly looking for ways to contribute, as well as tending to all of our needs.

My parents placed a huge importance on our education, viewing it as the only way for immigrants to get ahead. They simply demanded that we focus on our studies. Despite their modest incomes, my parents made the sacrifices needed to send my siblings and me to private schools.

I grew up with feet planted in two very different worlds – one foot in the Korean community and the other foot in the "American" part of my world where I wanted to be just a normal American kid. This was exacerbated when I was accepted into a prestigious, Catholic, all-girls high school, which consisted mostly of privileged children. You can imagine most of my fellow students couldn't understand or relate to the immigrant experience. I made many good friends at my high school and assimilated well into my non-Korean world, but it was very separate from my Korean world. I was able to keep up my Korean language skills and do all of those things expected of a dutiful Korean daughter, while at the same time, growing up as a typical American teenager. At times, I felt torn, wishing I didn't have to co-exist in two separate worlds, but they were just far too different to integrate together.

My parents fostered a high achievement orientation in us, and pushed us to fulfill our potential. While still in elementary school, I skipped two grades, while managing to stay at the top of my class. By the time I was ready to go to college, my father was hoping I'd stay close to home in Los Angeles, which would allow him to keep his protective eye on his oldest child. Fortunately, my mother's aspiration for me to go to Stanford overruled my father's wishes. Ironically, my father had been accepted to Stanford's PhD program when he initially arrived to the U.S. Due to financial constraints, he was unable to attend. My acceptance to Stanford was ultimately a huge source of pride for my father, who always regretted not being able to attend.

I loved my college experience. I really felt prepared to make my own way in the world, having a strong sense of where I came from, and values that were important to me. The only area where I did not have a clue was what opportunities I wanted to pursue after Stanford. I wanted to do well for myself and for my family, but it was most important to me to have interesting life experiences and make a difference in the world. As a human biology major, I applied to only one "business" firm, and ultimately accepted the offer to join Andersen Consulting's change management practice. It attracted me since it would allow me to get business experience, while focusing on the "people" side of business, which interested me most. I enjoyed my work, but after a few years, I left for a brief stint with a venture philanthropy fund in San Francisco, which helped me see the value of business leaders influencing and effectively addressing major challenges in society.

During this period, I met my future husband, Drew. Our relationship initially put a severe strain on my relationship with my own family. My parents always expected and assumed I would marry within the Korean community (preferably, an Ivy league, Korean-American doctor who could play the piano). Drew is Mexican-American from Utah, which, to my parents, is just about the opposite of what they intended for me. Although Drew was from a very Catholic family and had also excelled in school and his early professional career, my parents saw our relationship as the end to my Korean identity. I approached the problem as I had my entire life – I kept my two worlds very separate. I dated Drew for years without attempting to integrate him into my Korean world. But over time, I realized that this wouldn't work for me. There was a constant tension in my life since both my family and Drew meant so much to me. Drew was very patient and encouraged me to expose him to my family with the hope that over time, they would grow to accept him.

Drew also opened my eyes to the business school experience while he was a student at the Stanford GSB. Even though I had worked for Andersen Consulting, I really hadn't considered going to business school. After watching Drew enjoy his studies and understanding the flexibility of getting an MBA, I decided that business school could be the right next step, while enabling me to pursue my interests in the social sector. At HBS, I was able to fill in the gaps of my business understanding. It also led me to an atypical career choice for an HBS graduate – joining the FBI.

I graduated HBS in 2002, as the first graduating class of the post-9/11 era. Dean Kim Clark had recently launched the new social enterprise fellows program to encourage HBS students to join social and public sector organizations. I applied to the program and was selected to join the FBI, working directly with the Director of the FBI, Robert Mueller, and his Chief of Staff. My role was to help lead change management efforts after the 9/11 attacks exposed a number of organizational weaknesses. My father was overjoyed at the prospect of his daughter giving back to the country he had grown to love in a role where I could make a difference at the highest levels of government.

I'm fueled by work that has meaning and impact and by work that provides a huge learning and growth opportunity. The FBI certainly had both. I joined the FBI alongside an impressive executive who had previously helped lead Lou Gerstner's transformation of IBM. What was amazing about the first six months was that my on-boarding coincided with the FBI Director also getting to know the organization at the next level of detail. It was clear that the FBI had to transform from a reactive law enforcement agency to a proactive counter-intelligence organization that could prevent international terrorist attacks. During that period, I shadowed Director Mueller almost every day, trying to make sense of the depth of the organizational and cultural challenges facing the FBI's changing mission.

That said, the FBI is a tremendously hard place to work and get things done, especially if you are not a field agent and haven't been steeped in the culture for many years. My time at the FBI ended up being a huge life experience for me – learning how to influence without direct authority. Those who know me well would describe my leadership style as a "quiet leadership" approach. So ironically, this ended up being a good fit for the situation. I had the ear of the Director and a clear mandate to drive change, but had to be very careful about picking my spots to take on the culture. I learned that the key to success for me was finding seasoned leaders internally who had the power to make things happen, believed in the need for change, and respected my outside perspective. Over the course of two years, I built a strong network that I could rely on to make strides.

I ended up staying at the FBI for three years, which was longer than I expected. I'm proud of what I accomplished there, especially in putting in place a process for the Director to engage leaders at all levels of the organization in an honest dialogue about strategic change. This has played a huge role in training the next generation of leaders that will meet the new challenges facing the FBI. The FBI has also replicated the model of hiring experienced MBA's with 20-30 people hired each year

from top business schools across the country. These individuals now have the benefit of a built-in network with each other that helps them navigate some of the organizational challenges.

After the FBI, I returned to San Francisco to be with Drew and joined a unique strategy and leadership-oriented consulting firm called The Trium Group. Trium is a strategy execution firm that pays a great deal of attention to leadership and team dynamics. It has a breadth of capabilities that enables it to effectively work on all aspects of large-scale business transformation. I had a lot of early success at Trium following a similar model of influencing quietly – working hard and getting things done without grabbing the spotlight. The FBI experience gave me confidence and honed my sense of intuition around driving organizational transformation. These qualities helped me a lot, especially as the economy started getting tougher and I was perceived as a reliable consultant who did good work while being low maintenance from an ego perspective. Some of my colleagues have commented that I have a fairly "frictionless" way of getting things done, without making waves. This may in part be due to a philosophy to focus on those things that can get done, rather than get hung up on what's hard about a situation. Instead of getting overwhelmed, I simply to find a way to break big goals down into smaller milestones and build a process to tackle them one by one. If I need to course-correct along the way, then I update the milestones and the process as needed. My ability to maintain an integrated picture of what's happening despite complexity serves me well – in fact, my current chosen career path depends on this.

Right now we are going through one of the worst times in history for the consulting industry. Clients have less to spend and are simply trying to survive themselves. Over the past year, our business has contracted significantly. We are now a small core team that is trying to reinvent our business. At the same time, I have not only survived the cuts but have gone from being relatively junior to being the most tenured person at our firm, aside from the founder. I am now leading the largest project we have ever taken on and am traveling to Europe regularly.

In some ways I am going through a big crucible right now. It is like Marshall Goldsmith's book – What Got You Here Won't Get You There. The quiet leader who got me to this point, who has learned how to build bridges, put her head down and achieve results, now needs to step up to the plate. When I first started at Trium, I was one of the apprentices. But now the managing partner and many others on my team are looking to me to play a significant role in rebuilding the company. In order to do so, I will need to lean in hard, make my voice heard, and be a more visible figure than I have been in the past.

I find myself struggling more. Not only must I succeed in leading our most complex large-scale transformation project to date, I have to become good at motivating, inspiring, and building a high-performing team – the future of Trium depends on it. The dynamics are changing every single day, and it's hard to manage to a well-defined set of outcomes. It's disorienting. As a leader, accountability is falling on me. Plus, Drew and I are in that point in our marriage where we want to start a family, so it's as if all these major areas of responsibility are colliding for me this year.

In a strange way, though, I feel centered and calm. I think in part that's because I feel comfortable with who I am. I have this persistent belief that no matter what situation I find myself in, that I will be resourceful, find others who can help me, and ultimately figure it out and grow in the process. As I have done before with looming challenges, I will set near-term goals and face a new challenge with anticipation and a clear head. I also feel that the talents and skills I am cultivating today is training ground for my future work, and that external recognition will naturally come in due time. In the meantime, I am motivated to keep driving forward and maintain a positive attitude and spirit of adventure about what comes next.

Ann Gildroy

The most defining thing for my character has been the way I was raised by my parents. I grew up in the Acton/Littleton area of Massachusetts, not far from Boston. It's a very developed area now, but back then it was a farm town with dirt roads; in winter, it wasn't uncommon to take a ride to granpa's by a horse and sleigh. As children, having all that open land around really encouraged my brother and me to explore. I learned to take a lot of risks, and that helped make me independent.

My father started out his life as a soldier. He was a Green Beret in the Special Forces and served in Vietnam, where he worked with the Montaigne Guarde tribes in the Central Highlands. After the Army he went to Harvard Business School, and he was an entrepreneur ever since then. My father is very progressive. He really believed that women are just as talented as men, and should have the same opportunities. And he communicated that to me really early on. I remember being five years old, at our local ice skating rink, and I was supposed to go over to the figure skating side where all the other girls were – but I didn't want to go. My dad had a long discourse with the coach, tromps me over to the other side of the rink, where the boys were, and before I knew it I was suited up in skates and pads, playing hockey. I played through my first year of college.

My mother was a schoolteacher for ten years, and then got into business by developing a hotel. She always cooked us all of our meals and never put aside her love of being a mother, but I saw her do a lot of farm work with tractors, too. She used to tell me "You need to know when to put your jeans on and when to put your dress on."

My brother, Colin, had severe learning disabilities and an anxiety disorder. So my parents had one child who worked hard and did well, and another who worked just as hard but would fail, and became the kid everyone else picked on at the playground. Colin's situation had several effects on me. First, it forced humility, because none of my achievements were ever brought out at home. When I skipped a grade, Colin stayed back, so my parents weren't going to praise me for my achievement at the dinner table. Second, it made me a kinder person. Initially, it was embarrassing to have my brother be the outcast in the schoolyard, but I learned to stick up for him, and it created a desire to be a champion for the less fortunate. And third, it made me persistent. I saw how two different people could put the same effort into something – like studying for a science test – and only one would succeed. Later in life, there were times I wanted to give up completely but didn't because of the example Colin had set for me of how to put forth effort even in the face of failure.

By third grade, I had gotten bored in the local public school so my parents pulled me out and sent me to a private one. Then in eighth grade, I went off to boarding school at Groton, a small and very academically rigorous Episcopal school that stresses the importance of service and selflessness. That was the first time I was exposed to any kind of race, or ethnicity; I had grown up in an all-white community and never gone to school with African-Americans or Asians. And I was exposed to different religions, too. For a school field day, my dorm designed a T-shirt with a pig on it. There was a Muslim girl in the house, and she was unhappy with that. At the time, I argued vehemently that we should go with the design the group wanted, but looking back, I think that incident taught me that it's really important whenever possible to accommodate other people's beliefs, and their need to preserve their own dignity.

As an Episcopal school, Groton required we go to chapel every morning. I had been raised not to believe in God. My parents aren't religious and are actually opposed to organized religion. It was a fundamental thing; my parents gave me: a belief that every decision is my own; that there's no hand watching over me preventing me from making bad moves; no pre-determined fate; and no forgiveness. You've got one life, and that's it. There have been many times that I've felt scared or lonely, and badly wanted to believe in God, but I don't. Going to chapel at Groton forced me to

consider those beliefs my parents had passed on to me, and maybe more importantly it got me in the habit of taking time out of my daily routine to think and reflect.

Senior year at Groton I decided I wanted to go to Georgetown. I was a good student, but never as bright as the other kids at that school, and I had gotten flatly rejected by all the Ivy Leagues. But I met the Dean of Admissions and I convinced him that I would benefit the school somehow, someday. He agreed to admit me if I could raise my grade point average a bit. I had no idea how I could possibly do that, but I just dug in – and it worked. That was a big success for me. I studied international diplomacy and security at the Foreign Service School, and loved it.

While at Georgetown, I interned on Capitol Hill. I had a vision of wise old people selflessly serving the country. I'm deeply patriotic, and I pictured Congress and the rest of government as these grand institutions. I was really disappointed. I saw a lot of self-interested people and came to the realization that the government, as an organization, is really hard to move through. So I started thinking what to do after school and in the fall of my senior year went down to the Marine Corps recruiting station and filled out all the paperwork. I thought my parents would be thrilled, but I would describe their reaction as violent. Neither of them grew up with any means, and they felt that in sending me to Groton they had put me on a different, better track. Military service wasn't part of that plan. My father kept saying, "Don't squelch your potential!" I ended up interviewing for investment banking positions on campus. Banking seemed like such a challenge, with all those hours, but I was hardworking and disciplined and knew I could hack it. Plus I was pretty excited about the possibility of actually working on Wall Street. Prudential Securities made me an offer and I started working in their analyst program right after school.

My time in banking was miserable. I was only 21, and had lost all my animation. At first, it felt pretty cool to be working so hard, and taken home in a Lincoln Town Car every night. But I was surrounded by people whose prime focus was making money – their personalities were just completely different than the ones I had grown up with. I had no sense of purpose; I didn't feel like we were at all objective in figuring out how to benefit companies. I thought things might be different at another firm and switched over to Warburg Dillon Read, which ended up being a very similar experience, and then leaving and working at an Internet startup with some people I knew in Washington D.C.

When the market crashed our company's VC funding dried up and I was out of a job. I'd always wanted to join the Marines, but hadn't because my parents wanted me to go down this totally different track, which I'd hated. So this time I didn't tell my parents and contracted with the Marine Corps in August of 2001. A month later, I was traveling in Belize and one night I had a dream that my father had fallen off a bridge and I couldn't save him. That morning I called home and my mother, panicked, told me we were being attacked. While we were on the phone, a plane hit the Pentagon. To get back to the U.S. quickly, I ended up flying to Tijuana and actually walking across border. Then I called my parents from a payphone and told them I was due to start OCS on October 7th. My father told me he was disappointed in me, and my mother started crying and told me I was throwing my future away.

Until I joined the Marine Corps my whole life had been about developing individuality and independence. On that first day of training, when I was already in uniform, they took away my watch along with all my other personal belongings. They said I wasn't on my own time anymore. Everything I'd learned about being my own person was stripped away and there was no way out. For the rest of the six-month-long course, I was told what to do every single second of the day – and for the very first time everything depended on the success or failure of my group as a whole. The Marine Corps teaches you to be completely unselfish, to stop thinking about your own well-being, to think about the person next to you and how to overcome other people's weaknesses.

I ended up graduating near the top of my 250-person company, which meant that I was supposed to get more choice in terms of jobs. On selection day, I was handed a tiny little piece of paper with the roles I was allowed to have by law, all back-of-the-line, non-combat stuff, while male Marines who had performed less well got a pages-and-pages long list. It was depressing to be told that I wasn't capable of doing certain kinds of work for the country I had decided to fight for, but I justified it by saying, "It will be more successful to try to change an organization from the inside. I can try to impact the men I'm around, and show them that they'd rather have me on their right flank than the guy who graduated 250th." I initially chose aviation maintenance, which is boring, but because of the war a ton of new jobs suddenly opened up working with the Iraqi forces. I immediately volunteered and flew to Iraq in the summer of 2004. My title was Iraqi Security Force Liaison Officer. Nobody knew what the title meant or what the responsibilities were, and that worked well for me. The Iraqis forces weren't getting much attention from Americans, and I was so excited to have the job that it came through to the Iraqi Commander, so we got along very well.

Early on in that job, I wrote directly to General Petraeus about the abysmal conditions being faced by Iraqi forces on the ground. Although I had run roughshod over military protocol in presenting to him, he appreciated my honesty and bluntness. That's where our relationship started, and it took off from there. He got me a special deal to go work with the Special Forces to recruit and build out the Iraqi Army, and I got permission to travel with Iraqis, which not a lot of Americans have. I ended up staying in Iraq and working for the General for another tour.

While in Iraq I began thinking about what I wanted to do longer term. Having studied abroad twice while I was at Georgetown, and then lived in Iraq, I had seen a lot of corruption and bad business practice. I felt that if you had a bunch of ethical, moral business leaders who were not just in it for themselves but trying to enrich the community, it could be pretty powerful and change a lot of lives, quickly. I applied to HBS from Iraq – I had to upload a photo of one of my recommendations, because it was in Arabic, and the translations were spotty at best – got in, and flew back three weeks before school started. I had a really tough time adjusting. You cannot come out of that kind of life-and-death situation and onto this gorgeous campus without feeling really guilty. I ended up removing myself socially; I was a total recluse. Up in Vermont I found a little rental cabin, and I spent a lot of time there by myself. During recruiting week our first year, I didn't even have the energy to interview. I didn't drop any resumes, and instead decided to go home to see my parents.

Out of the blue that week I got a call from Goldman Sachs. They convinced me that Goldman would be different than my past banking experiences – that the culture would be more leadership focused. The opportunity fell on my plate, and I took it. And while I had a miserable time that summer, I accepted the full-time job offer anyway, because I was too tired to think of anything else. But in January of my second year of school, General Petraeus, who by that point had taken on the whole war effort, asked our team to come back to Iraq. We struck a deal that I would go be a part of his team again on the condition that I had both direct access to him and complete freedom of movement. I left before HBS graduation.

Our team only had a quick, vague conversation with the General – he doesn't give much specific direction – before we showed up in the south, where the militia controlled probably 85% of the urban areas. Along with the local Iraqi general, we developed a plan to take back the city we were in, block by block, and make it safe for the local residents, who were being terrorized. We picked out a building in the middle of the city and moved in. We had no bathrooms, no running water, it was as hot as hell and we got attacked every single day. We had a ragtag force of Polish soldiers, some Iraqi Army, and a few police. At first we just went to work on securing that one block. Then we slowly secured every house in the neighborhood, and then began taking over more terrain. By the time we left, the militia had no control over the city and local residents were safe in their own homes, but that

took a full year. I don't think we could have approached such a seemingly insurmountable challenge or actually overcome it without two things: a deep belief in the goodness of the local people, and a desire to provide them with stability and safety; and a tremendous amount of respect for the leader who had put us there.

When that mission was finished, I came back to the U.S. and started in the Goldman training program. The week I was supposed to start full time, I went to see my boss and said, "I don't want to waste your time or mine. This job isn't right for me, for a myriad of reasons." I left without any plans, and with no practical business experience – at that point, I had been in the Marines a really long time. I was fortunate enough to find a spot at a small private equity firm, where we focus on oil field services investments. I had really wanted to be part of an organization that was building something beneficial not just for itself, but for other companies it touched, and creating employment opportunities for Americans. This firm does that: we try to create and grow enterprises that are strong and sustainable – and make some money along the way. I began in December 2008 and so far it's been terrific.

When I started in this job, I put my foot down about work-life balance. During the interview process, I was really candid, and told the partners "I want this job, and I work hard, but I will not make it my life." For the first time in the past decade, I've made sure that the professional and personal pieces of my life get equal time and effort – and it's made a huge difference in my happiness. I've cut out this chunk of my life in which I can focus on personal relationships, and that's been very fulfilling for me, and it's developed my character in a way that professional relationships can't. My husband, Phillip, is one of the top three most important people in my life right now, and I am extremely dependent – in a positive way – on him. When I go horseback riding, it's nice to be able to enjoy that simple pleasure in life with someone by my side. When I'm nervous about making a presentation, or not sure if I can get through something, it's nice to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone who reminds me of all the reasons I can.

Jaime Irick

I was born in the Bronx, NY and grew up in various cities around New York and Connecticut. One of the important things I would say about my identity and self-awareness is that I grew up in several very, very different environments—from big city to small town to suburbs and across a wide range of socio-economic, ethnic, and racial lines. Embedded within that environment is my personal background and a big part of that is the fact that I am the product of an interracial marriage—my mom is white and my dad is black. Living in such disparate environments gave me an early and frequent lesson in two different, but related skill sets: first, the ability to adapt quickly to my surroundings; second, the ability or freedom to feel comfortable and at ease with pretty much all types of people. Neither happened overnight—both were a process. I grew up when it wasn't as cool to be multiracial as it is today, when you have such visible and accomplished figures as President Obama, Tiger Woods, and many others. Soon after I was born, my parents, my older brother and I, moved to Mount Vernon, New York, where we lived until I was five, then my parents got divorced. That was definitely a significant emotional experience.

My brother and I went to live with my father and his new wife in Scarsdale, New York, which was very affluent, very homogeneous. All my friends were Jewish, for the most part. It was a very different environment to be thrust into from age 5 through about age 14. Initially, my brother and I both had a really tough time. We had a Cinderella type situation with a step-mom who was very abusive, wanted to be married to my dad, but didn't actually want the kids. When I was in seventh grade, I didn't have any lunch money, so I sold gum to the rich kids at the junior high school to buy

lunch. The tough part was that our stepmother had some wealth, but there was no trickle down. My dad did a lot of different jobs, none of them special from a monetary standpoint. He worked at a bank for a little while, sold insurance, stationary, cars, and now has a small contracting business. So we grew up in the proximity of wealth, but with limited resources.

During those years I was a mediocre student—unfocused, and very upset as a result of being in a rough situation at home. Additionally, going out to see my biological mom every other weekend in New York City—while it was important family time, it was also disruptive. My saving grace as a youth was the fact that I was always a good athlete. Participating in athletics helped build my confidence early on and maintained my self-esteem. Had it not been for sports, I think it would have been much, much tougher.

One of the early turning points was when my father and stepmother got separated. At that point I was in the eighth grade; my brother and I went to live with my dad's mother in Long Island. Where we lived in Central Islip was a predominately minority area—black, Latino, and more of an urban environment. My grandmother is a strong, religiously conservative woman from Orangeburg, South Carolina. She was very much a disciplinarian, but also empowering. My grandmother is a woman full of hope. She definitely put us on the straight and narrow; we had three meals, which was nice, and a lot of support from home. And that was when I really started to turn the corner in the classroom. The natural competitiveness and focus that I had playing basketball or running track, I was able to translate into the classroom.

At the end of that year, my father got back together with his second wife, and I moved again to Winsted, Connecticut—a small town of 10,000 people, not affluent, pretty much all white and located in Northwestern Connecticut. I was in a very different scenario again. I started out there as a freshman, my sophomore year I was the only black kid in the entire school. That was an interesting experience. I think a lot of minorities, whether you're the only woman, the only African American, the only Asian—name the minority group—you're very aware of your identity, because to some people in those environments you represent the entire population of that specific identity group. That is often all they know. Fortunately I was a really good student (an A/B student). I excelled athletically and academically; I was the captain of three sports teams, I was on the National Honor Society, and I helped to run a local soup kitchen on the weekends. I was very, very involved in every aspect of my environment.

As I look back on what enabled me to be successful in high school, I reflected that I had always had a strong belief in God. Even earlier when I was going to school in hand-me-down clothes and didn't have lunch money, I always felt hopeful. I always prayed, which I definitely think was of value. My grandmother, who was very spiritually balanced, reinforced that. My parents also had an influence. My father is an extremely powerful example of a confident, well-spoken, smart, charismatic man. And that definitely gave me something to aspire to. My mom is one of the kindest people in the world. She was in her 30's, a divorcee in New York City without a job, but pulled herself up. My mother always volunteered, always worked with groups in the city, and was involved with the church. I think her example—how she treated people and her kindness were definitely things that made a true impression on me. I think I'm a blend of both of my parents.

I had no intention to ever go to West Point. And then after my junior year I got invited to an Invitational Academic Workshop at West Point – the military academy version of a summer math/science camp. I went to this camp and at the end of the week my dad picked me up. It was like a *Breakfast Club* father/son moment. He proudly asked, "How was it son?" And I'll never forget, I looked at him and said with utter disdain, "Dad, this place is a prison. I'm not applying. I'm not going here." And my dad very coolly looked over at me, started the car and said, "Yes, you're going to apply. You may think you're not. But you're going to apply!" So I have to credit my dad with

having the foresight to see a wonderful opportunity and give me a little bit of prompting. I started the application process, because my dad is a very strong individual and I probably was afraid of disappointing him. But I also had a yearning to do something different and to join a school where I could match some of my broader interests—academics, leadership, athletics, and service. A main goal of mine was also to play division one basketball, and West Point is in division one. Lastly, but very important to my family and me was the fact that West Point was a "free" education (in exchange for 5 years of obligatory service in the Army).

I applied to West Point and was fortunate enough to get in. I also walked onto the basketball team while I was there in my freshman year. The story about my basketball experience is a theme of some of the opportunities that I've been able to create. I was not a recruited athlete. The second week at West Point they gave the recruits and non-recruits a chance to go up and compete for a spot on the team. There were 200 people in the gym and the coaches came in and said, "Okay, all the recruits on this side of the court and everybody else on this other side." So 190 people migrated one way and the ten or so recruits the other way. I said, "Well I'm kind of recruited, my athletic director sent tapes." So I went with the recruits and never left. They found out after a few weeks that I wasn't a recruit, but by that time I guess I had done well enough that I stayed. I played four years. I walked on my freshman year; I started my sophomore year. I definitely was not a prolific college player, but I learned a tremendous amount on the court about people, teams, leadership, motivation and how to inspire people.

At West Point I had a "too cool for school" mentality for three years. The summer just after my junior year, I had a terrific experience in a leadership role. That was when I decided that I wanted to be serious about the Army when I got out of West Point. I committed to do a lot of professional training, including attending Ranger School, Airborne School, and the Army's Scout Platoon Leader Course. Training schools are very important in the Service—both for the skills gained and the credibility that comes with successful completion of that particular school. My mentors at West Point helped me realize that such advanced training would set me up for a successful Army career. All that said—it was still pretty difficult to sign up for "optional punishment/development" at these places. Before I went, someone told me, "There's no good day at Ranger School." And it's definitely true, at least not until you graduate. At Ranger School, you don't arrive with any rank on your collar. Leadership assignments rotate and are unpredictable. If you have a platoon of 50 people, one day you're the 50th guy and just have to worry about yourself, the pack on your back and your rifle—and the next day you're the platoon leader. If you haven't fostered trust and respect, if you don't know people's strengths or weaknesses within the platoon, you'd never succeed while you're there. So that was a great experience—just getting through that adversity and reinforcing some of those core leadership and teambuilding skills was a terrific way to start my Army career.

Upon graduation, I was at Fort Hood, Texas for three years. After that I did a deployment to Kuwait during peacetime, so nothing like the intensity of combat troops today. Then my last year in the Army, I was an admissions officer at West Point doing minority recruiting in their Outreach department. It was one of the most fulfilling jobs I've ever had. I would reach out to the inner city youth and share with them the opportunities at West Point. Of course it also helps that each student who is accepted concurrently receives a scholarship valued at about $300,000. This was a role where I felt I was really helping change peoples' lives.

During my second or third year in the army, I decided I was probably not going to make it a career. I talked to a teammate, who was in Business School at the time. He started sharing more about business school and what an MBA could do for me. I decided I was going to apply; and was fortunate enough to get into several schools. I entered HBS in the fall of 2001.

I had an early experience at HBS, which is kind of funny—but it helped my confidence greatly. It was probably the third day of class during Foundations or pre-term, and our professor didn't show up. Maybe it was impatience, but at some point I stood up and said, "Hey everybody, the professor is not here. At West Point, our rule was, if 15 minutes into class and the professor is not here, we leave. Let's just make a call, do we want to leave, stick around, or call administration?" I was ready to go to the gym and play ball or something when one of the guys I had a good relationship with suggests, "Jaime, why don't you teach us?" Without thinking twice, I said, "Okay Alex, what did you think of Germany's industrial move in the 1950s?" He started to answer and surprisingly I continued. About 40 minutes in, someone from administration peeked in and said, "Oh, the professor is not coming, but keep going." So I taught the whole class. That turned into a positive experience, one that helped build my confidence. Like a lot of us who came from non-traditional backgrounds, I wasn't sure how I would be able to contribute in the beginning.

During my second year at HBS I began to look seriously at different roles at GE. During this time, I met someone on the GE board who helped me to get in front of a few executives for interviews, which eventually turned into a full time offer. I joined GE's Corporate Initiatives Group (CIG), a strategy group based out of Corporate HQ in Fairfield, CT, and worked for GE's Chief Information Officer. Jack Welch created the group in the '90s as a pipeline for management talent from outside of GE. The group is designed to familiarize managers with the GE culture, expose them to GE's operations and also give them an opportunity to provide real value for GE business leaders. The intent was for business leaders to eventually "steal" talent away from CIG and into operational roles within the business units. I spent a year in the group before getting recruited away, and had a terrific time working for the CIO on strategic initiatives across the entire company. I chose to take a sales director role because I figured it would be a better opportunity to put points on the board, so to speak, and really be responsible and accountable for a number.

I joined a recent acquisition within GE's security technology business and moved to Wilmington, Massachusetts. I was going to be a sales director for new markets they were trying to enter. Six months into the job my boss was fired. Looking back now that I know more of GE, I was in probably in a dicier position than I realized, because even though I had good senior sponsorship, I had a new boss who seemed to be saying, "Who's this Harvard guy who's a sales leader, who has never worked in sales before at GE?" The next four months were painful. I often thought about quitting. Leading a sales team is tough. It's always very transparent how you are performing and at the time we were missing numbers. I remember my boss telling me one time, "If you're not coming back with the purchase order, don't come back." And he wasn't smiling. It was a harrowing experience because in addition to having a boss who was really tough, I struggled because we just were not aligned from a values standpoint. We just did not see eye-to-eye.

Eventually, though, we started to hit our numbers and I emerged as one of our top sales leaders. My team and I closed some really big deals. My boss reorganized the sales organization and sent me to California for a year where we were able to do the same thing, starting up the business on the West Coast. After it had been a total of two years and some of the cultural things that concerned me hadn't changed, I was ready to go. Fortunately some of my GE mentors realized what was happening. I had a very frank conversation with one of these mentors, where I basically said, "I feel confident enough to lead a business unit." It is probably the reckoning you can only do a few times in your career, but I think I did it at the right time, where I had enough credibility and confidence. My mentor helped me compete to get hired into the General Management role that I have today.

I interviewed for a job, which involved running a small P&L as General Manager of what was then a $50 million acquisition. Although I always wanted this type of job, it probably wouldn't have been wise or practical to take a shortcut getting there. There's no way I could have jumped from the

computers and used to build and sell them. I used to help him with that. My middle brother Roopam was like the coach Bobby Knight in my life. He had me running laps around our house when I was five years old, yelling at me as if I was 15 to try and get me to be a better athlete. Along with my parents, he always pushed me to do better and have high standards for myself.

At the end of high school, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to either attend Harvard or go to one of a number of combined degree programs that assured admission to medical school. My brothers had both graduated from NYU, and my mom liked the idea of keeping us all close to our New Jersey home. "You should just stay and go to NYU and go to the eight-year BA/MD program there." I was seriously debating it until I went to the NYU Medical School to interview with Dr. Mariano Rey, their associate dean. He told me that he was going to write me the highest possible recommendation and that I would get in, but I shouldn't come, "Go to Harvard. It will be a different world."

I was a government major at Harvard. Even though I went to this math and science high school, I used all my project time to do things that had a public policy bend because that was something I always interested in. During our family dinners, we would talk about healthcare and my questions would be on healthcare policy more than the clinical side of what my father was doing. In my freshman year of college something I always heard was, "You're at a research university. You should try to get yourself connected to some research." I started cold calling and e-mailing health policy professors, but wasn't getting very far. I mentioned this to a friend of mine, who said, "Oh, my mother's best friend, Deborah Stone, is a visiting professor at Harvard this year. You should go and talk to her." She ended up being a really fantastic mentor and someone I'm still in touch with. I worked with her on a home healthcare policy research project and in the process received a basic foundation in health care policy--Medicare, Medicaid, capitation, and different types of reimbursement. It was my first entry into knowing something about healthcare policy in a substantive way. That spring, she said, "There's this internship. I'm going to nominate you for it if you're not doing anything this summer." I ended up going to D.C. that summer doing some healthcare policy research. During that experience I figured out that I needed to do something a little more front line than research, because as much as I enjoyed the issues and the research, I fundamentally define myself as a people person and got lonely sitting in an office writing by myself, tabulating and analyzing data. I got a little more serious about a career as a clinician at that point. I was still entertaining law school. I don't think I was sure about medical school up until maybe my senior year or late in my junior year of college.

I ended up taking a course my junior year of college with two folks who, at the time I had no idea, are giants in medicine--Don Berwick and Howard Hiatt. They basically showed me the opportunity to have a career in medicine where you can have a broader policy impact. The summer afterwards, I was supposed to go to the White House to do an internship at the Office of Science and Technology Policy, but the internship fell through at the very last minute. I was pretty bummed about it, but I called Don who offered an opportunity to work with him at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and give me front-line exposure to the healthcare quality movement. At the end of the summer he said, "You've done great work. Why don't you tell me what medical school you want to go to and I'll pick up the phone and I'll call."

I was not the best science student at college and I surprised a lot of people when I got in to Harvard Medical School and the Kennedy School of Government for a joint MD/MPP program. I had wanted to defer admission and had a scholarship to study social policy at Oxford, but went straight to Med School from undergrad because I had a girlfriend in Boston at the time. The relationship ended right before I started medical school.

The unexpected thing about Harvard Medical School is that it's strangely non-competitive, small group driven, very pass/fail. It's like pass now or pass later. I also realized that a lot of the issues that I cared about were not taught in a formal way in medical school. Most doctors can't tell you the difference between Medicare and Medicaid. They don't really have a good grasp of how the healthcare system really works and there were no formal courses at the medical school to teach you those things. It wasn't even a consideration. It was hard to convince other classmates that these issues were important or necessary.

So I started talking to Don Berwick and Barbara McNeil, the medical school's chair of health policy, and was introduced to Steve Schoenbaum, who was a leader at the Commonwealth Fund, a major health care philanthropy in New York. The Commonwealth Fund funded a classmate, Kiran Kakarala, and me to create a project to improve medical students' literacy of healthcare policy issues. Kiran and I started the web site called ImproveHealthcare.org---that now has affiliated chapters at 17 different medical schools.

Somewhere along the middle of my third year of medical school I started to think about the fact that I already knew a lot about healthcare policy. What I didn't really understand was the managerial aspects in medicine. I knew I wanted to do something policy oriented with my life, but I also thought that it was important to understand practice in forming policy. That was part of why I was becoming a physician, why I was investing in all the effort it was going to take to actually take care of patients. I started getting exposed to people within the Harvard medical community who were making a difference through leadership of healthcare organizations. I spent a week shadowing Peter Slavin, who is the CEO of Massachusetts General Hospital and talked to Gary Gottlieb, the CEO of Brigham and Women's. Both of them were MD/MBAs. I just said, "I'll give this a shot," and applied to business school, not knowing whether it was a realistic expectation because I didn't have any real business experience. But I was admitted, took a leave from medical school, and went off to HBS.

I started at HBS with a little bit of trepidation, but quickly enjoyed it. At HBS you meet people who grew up in different communities, different towns and have many different kinds of experiences. One of my closest friends at HBS was a West Point guy. One of our other close friends was a private equity person. The three of us spent a lot of time dreaming about ways to transform healthcare delivery. It was just a place where you met a lot of very enterprising people. That said, the hard part about going to HBS, being like a Boston insider, was I don't think I fully immersed myself in the experience in the way that I could have. I just stayed in my same apartment in downtown Boston and commuted to school.

Looking back at my time at HBS, my mind was just hungry for something new and different. You end up learning a whole new vocabulary and it's exciting. I ended up doing 16 weeks of internships in the summer. I did eight weeks at McKinsey and eight weeks at the health insurance giant, WellPoint. I just immersed myself in the different things I was doing and learned a ton.

My second year at HBS was defined by an experience in the fall term. There was an MD/MBA dinner and even though I was a year late for the formal program, I was invited to the dinner. At the dinner, I ran into Jay Light, the Interim Dean at the time, who asked, "How are you enjoying it here?" I said, "This is a pretty neat place. I think being an HBS professor is probably one of the best jobs around." He said, "Come and talk to me about that some time." I received an email a few weeks later inviting me to meet with him, which I found really encouraging because usually people have conversations like that and it dies. He encouraged me to consider a career as a business school academic--and advised me to find a research area of interest and a mentor on the faculty. I had already got an email from Michael Porter saying, "I heard nice things about you from your strategy professor. Do you want to come work with me on my health care work?" My second year was really

spent working with him. That was pretty exciting. I think things went well with Professor Porter such that he said, "I'd like to keep you involved."

After HBS, I went back to finish my fourth year of medical school. Brigham and Women's Hospital has this special residency, called the "hemi-doc" program for basic science researchers, MD/Ph.D.s, so that they can do their medical residency 50% of the time and research 50% of the time. I met with Joel Katz, the internal medicine program director, and said I'd really love to do this, as it would enable me to keep doing research and engage in some teaching. Professor Porter offered to organize an appointment for me at HBS as a "research fellow." Dr. Katz advised that I should do at least nine months of internship full-time, but after that I could do it half time. So starting in July 2009, I'll be two months at the hospital and two months at HBS. That will continue for the next couple of years.

When I finish, one possible direction I'm thinking about is joining a business school faculty, while maintaining some clinical appointment at a hospital. The other possible direction is to do something of a more administrative nature at a hospital like the Brigham and also be a clinician at the same time. Or I could pick up and do something of a more policy-oriented nature. That's something I've been thinking about a lot lately with the change in administration and how exciting a time it is in health policy right now.

One thing that HBS taught me is that it's important to have goals, but it's important to also not marry yourself too hard to one concept of success or making a difference. Dogged determination has a definite place in our lives, but also recognizing that there are lots of ways to contribute. I've known a lot of really unhappy people over the years. They are that way because they've set some really ambitious goal for themselves that they may or may not achieve. I think the happiest people just really like the work that they're doing and the problems that they're solving.

For me, the broader aspiration is to solve population based health care problems, either at the level of the hospital, or health plan, or city, or government. Health care issues really excite me, but there are a lot of different, really fantastic jobs that allow you to do that, so I'm pretty hopeful that there will be cool opportunities down the road. I think we're in really exciting times in healthcare. It's key to the future competitiveness of the country, and practicing medicine you realize how little attention has been given to the structure and organization of healthcare delivery.

Alex Mandl

I grew up in a small town in Southern California called El Segundo. Even though the town is just south of Los Angeles, it has a much less cosmopolitan feel because it is isolated from other communities by the ocean, the airport, an oil refinery, and a large aerospace industrial complex. So growing up, I had very limited exposure to diversity. I'm also the youngest of four children in a close, tightly knit family.

My parents were on the moderately strict end. They both had difficult childhoods, and this resulted in them wanting to make our childhoods free of many of the circumstances they had to deal with, yet instructive for dealing with a world that is full of complexity and serious challenges. I was taught from a very early age that I could do whatever I wanted with my life, so long as I worked hard and developed integrity. As a result, I had a lot of freedom to play, explore, and imagine, but I also felt a serious obligation to figure out and work on who I was and who I wanted to become. To this day, this balance of purpose, play, and intensity remain central to my personality and character.

I was really shy when I was young. I was very sensitive and afraid of a lot of things, and I had a vivid imagination. When I was about nine, I started getting into drama, doing musicals and plays. This really helped me break out of my shell. I learned how to reinvent myself. I went from being this shy kid into being pretty comfortable taking on roles that were larger than myself. I was always a very good student and active from an extracurricular perspective, though I did not usually feel like I fit in socially. I was class president in 8th grade. I was in Key Club. I was on the track team. I felt a lot of hope pinned on me as an academic star and was voted "most likely to succeed" in both junior high and high school. I soaked it up.

I'm also gay. I struggled with this through all of high school and most of college, not really knowing what was going on and certainly not wanting to admit it. In that day and age, it wasn't something that was commonly accepted; it wasn't something that could be announced or explored. I just assumed that one day I would start liking girls instead. Lo and behold, that never happened.

When I was 15, there was a partial end to my silence. Toward the end of a heated family discussion that brought a lot of raw emotion to the surface for all of us, I chimed in with my own admission. This was very atypical behavior for me because I had always placed immense value on being emotionally in control and diplomatic. I don't know exactly why my guard dropped in that moment; it wasn't totally conscious. I think I needed to get it off my chest, and I just said, "Well, I think I might be gay." I was very careful to couch it in non-committal terms. Everyone immediately turned their attention to supporting me and reassuring me that it was okay to be confused. They asked me if I wanted to talk to a counsellor (I declined) and said that I could always talk to them about this, but that they would not intrude on the space and time I needed to figure it out for myself. I am deeply grateful for the way they handled that.

Then I went off to college at UCLA. It was half an hour away from where I grew up. At the same time, it felt like 30,000 miles away because it was such a different universe. I wasn't the smartest kid in the room anymore and people weren't pointing to me as a big success. And I was truly on my own. I was exposed to new ideas, walks of life, and people of different backgrounds, philosophies, environments, and ethnicities.

For my first couple of years of college I was still very much closeted and didn't talk about being gay with other people. I think my social awkwardness shone through more so than my gayness. I got involved in a musical and that was a big influence on me. I connected with a lot of people, but I never really had people I'd call all the time or people I'd go to parties with. I didn't feel particularly hip, but that also didn't stop me from exploring different areas or trying out new activities.

I was forced to reinvent myself again when I went to the U.K, to the University of Exeter, for my junior year abroad. I swam in a lot of different circles. There was a group of people I played basketball with, a group of people I did drama with, weightlifting buddies, drinking buddies, hiking groups, board game groups, you name it. Until this year of self exploration and re-examination, I really thought being gay was fundamentally at odds with who I wanted to be – which was a leader, maybe going into politics and government, or maybe being a powerful businessman. I felt like I had a lot of big opportunities ahead of me, but at that time how many gay leaders did you see? How many gay politicians did you see? How many gay CEOs? Not many. I had no idea how to go about this. There was no playbook. But I was maturing and coming more into my own. I needed that space to fully come out to myself and by the end of that year in the U.K., I was saying to myself, "Yes, I am gay, and you know what? In order to be happy, I have to be who I am. Who I am happens to be gay." That freed up so much emotional hard drive for me.

Back in LA for my senior year at UCLA, I met a wonderful mentor who was a professor of cultural anthropology and ran a gay support group. He was a tremendous influence on me. He had travelled

the world and encouraged me to take chances. He suggested that I pursue my interests in policy and government. I knew D.C. had a strong gay community and there was an election underway in the fall of 1996. I applied for an internship and moved there right after graduation. The internship didn't lead to anything else, but I knew that D.C. was the right place for me. I even started dating and developing friendships with other gay people.

When Clinton won re-election in 1996, a friend suggested that I volunteer at the Democratic National Committee, where I got a job working for a tough powerful woman on the inaugural committee. She chewed me up and spat me out on a daily basis and at times I hated it. Then I had my "Devil Wears Prada" moment with her. She said, "Well, how would you like to go be a White House intern?" So, I went to work in the White House Office of Presidential Personnel, which was in charge of coordinating political appointments and ambassadorships. There were tons and tons of candidates shoving at the gates for these appointments. At first, some of the people in the office resented me because I had gotten the internship over many others who had worked longer on the campaign. But I was able to thrive in that position and earn everyone's respect. I eventually got a paying job making $25,000 and I was over the moon.

After about a little more than a year, my boss left and her arch nemesis took over the office. Everyone associated with my boss was quickly exiled to other areas. I went from dealing with high powered liaisons in cabinet agencies to coordinating little old lady volunteers responsible for answering "Dear Mr. President" letters. But I made a go of it and helped fix a severely disorganized system. Meanwhile, I kept in touch with folks I had worked with in my previous position, and eventually I was appointed to the State Department to work for the newly appointed head of logistics management. I went from working in a fast paced political environment to working in areas of government deeply entrenched in bureaucracy. This is where I learned to take on projects that other people had neglected and find value in overlooked areas. That's always been a trademark of who I am and what I do.

Around that time, I met my partner Matt. He was unlike anyone I had ever met and it was clear from the beginning that we had a deep connection. He was an artist. He was not a traditional professional like other men I had dated, and I was so intrigued by him. He lived in Boston and I lived in D.C., but we just started dating long distance and our relationship blossomed over the next couple of years. The distance wasn't easy, especially given my go-getter tendencies and strong desire for clear definitions. However, I knew that I had found someone and something extraordinary and this forced me to re-examine my expectations and learn to accept what I could not control. Looking back, I am so grateful that we had enough self-awareness and appreciation of our differences to let our relationship evolve naturally.

While at the State Department, I started thinking about graduate school. I chose business school because management and leadership challenges fascinated me and I thought that an MBA would give me maximum flexibility. HBS seemed like a perfect fit for me in terms of focus and approach. It also meant that Matt and I would finally be in the same city. Sure enough, HBS was a terrific eye-opening experience for me. I continued in the tradition of being an outlier - coming from government, a wacky personality, and someone who was out. There weren't a lot of people who were out at HBS, even then. In my second year, I really didn't make any career moves. I thought, "Okay. I'm supposed to be recruited by all these companies who will chase me now." I'd come to HBS thinking that everyone automatically leaves with multiple job offers in hand. However, the economy was tanking in 2002 and a lot of people were pulling their hair out looking for jobs. It was so important to me that my final semester at HBS not be characterized by all this anxiety that I decided to wait till after graduating to find a job. Instead, I got involved in writing the HBS Show.

Daniel Salvadori

I was born and raised in Milan, Italy. On my Dad's side, we have been Italian Jews for over 2,000 years. Jewish people have been living in Italy since the time of the Romans and have managed to keep their tradition throughout these centuries. My dad's family comes from Venice, where the first ghetto was created in the 16th century. Before World War II, Italian Jewry was generally very assimilated; we thought of ourselves as Italians first and Jews second. In Venice, my dad's family was both prominent and wealthy, owning several hotels amongst other businesses. During the war, we lost all those material possessions. My paternal grandfather barely escaped death several times, and towards the end of the war joined the resistance; my grandmother was a fighter too, helped him hide and saved his life several times. So from the paternal side of the family, I got an acute sense of awareness and sense of belonging: while we are clearly Italian, we are also Jewish and we are very proud of our history, which is part of Italy's history.

My mom's family is a totally different story. My mother's father was forced to leave Damascus in 1946, and landed in Israel as a safe haven; there he met my grandmother, who with her family sought refuge in Israel from Turkey during WWII. My grandparents were married in Tel Aviv in 1947 and had their first son during the 1948 war; they lived through the duress of the early days of the State of Israel, experiencing shortage of foods, bombings and uncertainties. They helped bringing in new immigrants and building the newly born country. Later, my grandparents traveled the world for business and ended up settling in Italy. From the maternal side of the family, I got a very deep attachment both to the state of Israel and to a more formal kind of Judaism.

When I was a small child, my family had dinner together every Friday night, with my parents my two younger brothers and I all together, but we weren't very observant, and I went to a public school. But in 1982, when I was five, a terrorist bombing struck the main synagogue in Rome during the High Holidays (on the day when small children are blessed in the synagogue) and my two-year old cousin was killed in the bombing. For me there were a few direct results of that day beyond the grief and fear. First, I began to acquire a sense of self – a sense that I was in some ways different from the other kids with my own history, traditions, values and roots. The trauma of the event made me mature faster, and grow a lot of intellectual curiosity about my past. Second, I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents who reacted to the family tragedy by developing a deeper attachment and sense of protection for their remaining grandchildren. During that period, my grandfather taught me things like how to count, and how to speak French. I became incredibly attached to him. And third, the entire family gradually became more religious. We began observing traditions like Shabbat, and I transferred to a Jewish school.

I had a very classical education. We studied Latin, Greek, history and philosophy. One of my teachers in high school, a woman named Carla Stucchi, had a tremendous influence on me. She was a very strict teacher: she would make us translate a page of a Greek author with 200 words on it and deduct one point off our grades for each mistake. Along with the routine of hard work, she taught me the value of time. It's easy as a teenager – or as an adult – to waste time doing things you don't really need to do. She taught us to be concise and to-the-point, to read and write and study only what was essential and perhaps most importantly, she taught us to a have a humanistic sensitivity and mindset. For her, education wasn't about translating Greek or Latin, but rather about how to interpret that text, understanding the events and trends of the time. Mrs. Stucchi taught us to be intellectually curious, to connect the dots and understand today's world through the insights of the past: Why do we shake hands to say hello to each other? What is the basis for the concept of private property? These things all have deep roots and tradition. And if we don't understand that history, we won't understand the present, much less the future.

During high school, my maternal grandfather died suddenly of a heart attack. I was at his home, it was a Sunday morning, and fifteen minutes after telling me he felt ill, he was gone. I felt a sense of powerlessness, which later changed me. When I finished high school I thought about studying medicine, but I couldn't stand the sight of blood or the idea of touching and dealing with patients. So I kept thinking of ways to fulfill my goal while studying economics instead. I also wanted to live in a multinational environment and since I was and still am a Zionist, I decided to study and live in Israel. So I took a big leap and went to study at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Some in my family were not totally convinced about this choice; some tried to discourage me saying it would be too hard to go straight into college with my bare knowledge of Hebrew, but my mother was always encouraging and her uncompromising support was key in helping me succeed.

My first six months in Israel were brutal. To begin with, school in Israel is very tough, and while I knew some Hebrew it was not at an academic level, so I was learning the language at night and studying English, too. My courses were also very quantitative, so I had to catch up in math (having primarily studied humanities subjects in high school). Everyone who knew me thought I was crazy, and would fail. But I ended up graduating summa cum laude. I also became the first undergraduate ever offered a teaching assistant job at the University. Looking back, I think that was the best job I ever had in my life – though it was intimidating at the start. Israelis attend school after serving in the Army, so my students were all a few years older than me. On my first day, I showed up in shorts and flip-flops – Israel has a very informal academic environment – and as I stepped towards the raised platform at the center of the lecture hall, one of the students called out, "Hey, where are you going? That's where the teacher sits!" They all thought I'd either had a facelift or was a fake. But as soon as my students realized I was a decent guy, and could actually answer their questions, they respected me and treated me as their teacher.

As a result of teaching, I got offered the opportunity to stay at Hebrew University and do a Masters in Finance. I had just started my coursework when one of my professors got an email from someone at Lehman Brothers. The year before I'd done an internship at Bear Stearns in London, and written a report about the securitization opportunities in Israel. A Lehman banker, Ron Lubash, (Head of the Israel office), had read it and offered me a job. My final interview was with his boss, Harvey Krueger, a legend on Wall Street: Harvey had been the CEO of Kuhn Loeb, a predecessor firm of Lehman Brothers and later became Head of Banking at Lehman. So, I left and went to Lehman in New York first and Tel Aviv later. I simultaneously got an offer from Goldman for more money, but Lehman felt more like a family, and in Harvey I found someone who really cared – a mentor. I lucked into a terrific relationship with Harvey. Here was a guy with an incredible network, who had helped build all kinds of companies like Teva Pharmaceuticals, who took a personal interest in me, giving me career advice and tips on life.

When I joined Lehman, I was part of a class of 300, and so as soon as training started I had already bonded with many people and made some good friends (some of those friendships last till today!). New York has a very warm and large Jewish community and so it was easy to meet people through synagogue; I was frequently invited over for Shabbat dinner and for the Jewish Holidays. Finally, a very good friend from Italy had just moved to New York to become the chief correspondent of an Italian newspaper. I found New York warm and welcoming. The most difficult and challenging part was the job. Those first couple of years in banking, I was working 100 hours a week and not getting enough sleep. A lot of the work was just menial too – moving; bullet points here and there. But the exposure to transactions, people, cities, and companies was paramount. My first day at Lehman Brothers I was asked, "Would you rather work on high-tech transactions or on healthcare