A Lawyer for Art

In her sophomore year, Alexis Sandler ’99 took an art-history class with professors Irene Winter and Norman Bryson. It was there she first heard that “art has rights” (Winter said it), and started thinking about becoming a lawyer “for art.” Today she is associate general counsel at The Museum of Modern Art, but her first step was joining the student committee of the Harvard Art Museums. She was appointed co-chair and given a chance to plan student events and have some agency and input into certain aspects of museum programming.

Holding on to her dream, she studied law at UCLA. And as luck would have it, on her first day at her first post-law-school job, the firm asked if she’d like to join their entertainment transactions team as a junior associate. “It was pretty rare to start off in entertainment,” she explains. “People normally transitioned into it from other fields of law. But it just happened!” During the next six years, she gained expertise in intellectual property law atop the academic and analytic ways of thinking she learned at Harvard.

Although she enjoyed her job, she knew she would have to decide whether to continue or give it up to pursue her original goal. “The biggest challenge was to be brave enough to extricate myself from a perfectly good job and to take a chance on a career shift,” she says. A reintroduction to a curator from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for whom she had interned when she was a teenager, inspired her to take that chance. Because New York “is the center of the art world,” she enrolled in NYU’s master’s program in museum studies. While there, she interned at the Museum of American Finance, where she worked after graduating. When a position in MoMA’s legal department opened up a few years later, Sandler applied.

The job is everything she had imagined it to be. “I’m sitting in the same building as MoMA’s exhibition galleries. I am surrounded by art every single day.” Her work touches every department within the museum, ranging from education, exhibition planning, and information technology to finance, human resources, and security, among others. Sandler also serves on MoMA’s Accessibility Task Force, a cross-departmental group that develops ways to make MoMA even more accessible to people with disabilities. Each case comes with its own challenges; performance art, for example, “can involve multiple art mediums, and, to make things more complicated, the artists or performers themselves are a medium. A single performance art work can raise legal issues relating to privacy, copyright, contracts, visas, accessibility, employment, you name it!”

The challenge is what keeps her going. “When you work with artists and other creative people,” she says, “it’s rare that you can find case law with your exact fact pattern. People here are really creative, and smart, and passionate about the mission of the organization. No two moments are ever the same. I’m never bored and they never fail to present me with a new set of issues and predicaments that keep me on my toes! It’s very fulfilling.”

“I definitely think I ‘Robert Frosted’ my way through my career and chose the road less traveled, and it’s not always the easy route,” she says now. But following your passion, she adds, “helps you get up in the morning every single day.”

---SANYA SAGAR

Vincent Chiang has been elected to the governing board of Courageous Parents Network, a nonprofit organization and digital platform that brings support to families caring for seriously ill children. Chiang is a senior associate physician at Boston Children’s Hospital and associate professor of pediatrics and emergency medicine at the Medical School.

Sandler relishes having her office within MoMA.