

# S01E04: Prepare for a Successful Legal Career

**Andrew Bagley** 00:14

A lot of people think of history as something that's happened, and is over. And, you know, these events are academic. But that is just so far from the truth. And when you think about what law is, it's probably the best example of how history is alive that I can think of. It's just history that has created laws that we live with today. I mean, so it is very much alive. And I think that in a less formal way, that's true for so many things in our society, be it you know, race relations, or disparities between income and opportunities that people have. There is something magical, when you start to see themes in history, that's meaningful and applicable to your life.

**Scott Muir** 01:20

This is *What Are You Going to Do with That?*, a podcast where we explore everyday folks' decisions to study the humanities as undergraduates and their pathways to fulfilling careers. I'm Scott Muir of the National Humanities Alliance, an organization dedicated to promoting the value of the humanities on campuses and in communities. In the previous episode, we heard Catherine Woodling's story, which highlighted how the humanities provide a strong yet flexible foundation that enables students to adapt nimbly as their career interests evolve. But a humanities education can also prepare students quite directly for the workforce. In addition to occupations in humanities, education, libraries, and museums, there are ample opportunities to apply humaniie's knowledge and skills across a wide variety of industries. The legal profession is a classic example of this, and for good reason.

In this episode, we meet Andrew Bagley, who, like many successful lawyers across the generations, studied the humanities en route to law school. He explains how and why studying history was, in retrospect, the ideal preparation for the work that lay before him as a law student, junior lawyer, and now a partner in his own firm. No doubt many successful lawyers can make an equally convincing case for studying philosophy, religious studies, classics, languages, literature, etc. There are countless connections between the humanities and the law. But Andrew's story also illustrates a broader pattern beyond law. As Andrew progressed through his history major, he directed his own learning more and more, pursuing original research that provided a direct on-ramp to his chosen profession. As Andrew's experience illustrates, you can point a humanities education in whatever direction you want to go. Let's return to his story now.

**Scott Muir**

So you left high school already knowing that you liked history? You know, obviously, history in college is a different beast than, you know, the history curriculum that students all marched through K through 12, right. So I'm curious, you know, you land on campus at UGA, were you declared as any kind of major when you came in?

**Andrew Bagley 03:40**

Yeah, I wasn't declared as a major until after a couple years, and I was sort of just kind of poking around at different areas of study. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I just decided early on, I'm going to take the classes that interest me. And if I find good professors, I'm going to take classes from them and I'll see where that leads me. And so I didn't really have much of a plan. I'm glad I took the courses that I did. It's good for whoever the student is to gravitate towards the things that you get the most enthusiastic about when you do it.

But I think that I've always been someone who is just curious as to why things happen, the mechanics behind why something happens. And I particularly enjoy questions and events and things that have more than one perspective, or more than one explanation, that are subject to interpretation, that are a little bit gray, and it's not black and white. I think that the history courses that I took, and you know, the English courses in a lot of ways, they just activated this part of my brain that the more science-based courses didn't. You can always dig a little bit deeper, but it's not like a math equation where there's a right and a wrong answer. And there's just shades to it. I mean, it's trying to understand why those shades exist and how they manifest in different ways and influence things. It's human beings. It's like the world we live in, it's messy and dirty. And you're never gonna figure it all out. I just think that's endlessly fascinating.

**Andrew Bagley**

You know, I wrote my senior thesis paper on this guy who is a federal judge in Charleston, South Carolina. He was the very first federal employee to quit his position after Abraham Lincoln was elected to the presidency in the 1860s. And then a year or two later, as the Confederacy is creating their own system of government that is premised on this states' rights idea, they establish a federal judiciary. He goes on to become—he takes the exact same position as a federal court judge in the Confederacy. And I focused on the set of cases that he had written about, and he had written opinions for, as a Confederate federal judge. And basically, if you compared his jurisprudence from before the war to his jurisprudence during the war, he became more federalistic and less states' rights oriented. And so it was kind of an exposure of how, like, the idea that this was a states' rights issue is just a total farce. That paper, I'm proud of it. I made a point that that was not one that... I mean, I hadn't seen any other legal writings about this guy. And I think that it was a unique new legal analysis, or historical legal analysis. That type of academic activity sparked something, and now that's what I do for a living.

I graduated from college in '08. And it was right at the beginning of the crisis with the economy, and there wasn't a lot of stuff going on. And I worked at a large Atlanta, actually, international law firm. I was just like a low-level, post-college, you know, glorified intern more or less. It was a job that made me rethink whether law school was even, you know, something that was going to be in my future. I went to a Georgia Law School function. And this was like, kind of when I was on the fence about whether or not I was even going to go. And I met with a professor there. This guy's awesome. He was an old guy, and he was like, "If you like ideas, then you're gonna love law school." I was like, alright, well, I love ideas. So that was what sealed the deal for me, actually. And then I got out of law school, and it was still tough times, there weren't very many firms that were hiring. But I lucked out in a couple ways, because I think that if it had been better times, I probably would have maybe ended up at one of those large corporate firms. And there's nothing wrong with that. Some people are perfectly well suited for it. But I just don't

think that I'm that person. I ended up, you know, at a midsize firm and I was doing very hands-on work that had me making a lot of judgment calls and coming up with my own original, creative theories about things. It takes a few years to get to that point where you have the confidence to do that. But I think that my job and the people that I worked with, allowed me to do that in a way that I don't think a lot of other folks at bigger firms don't get to.

So I started to work there and got into the process. And you get these opportunities to stand up in court and make an argument for people that genuinely need you to make arguments for them. It's a little bit intoxicating. And just on a day to day basis, you know, getting a new file and basically trying to understand—it's like a small history of an event. I mean, it's history on a very micro level. You're reading a complaint, that's someone else's version of what happened, and then you have to go and find where the facts are, and talk to the people and see what this person says and what that person says, and all of it is somewhat subjective. And then you synthesize it and come up with the best ways to explain what happened or explain why it happened one way and not the other way, and why does it matter. And then, in the really good cases, there's an opportunity to put your case in the context of all of these historical cases that set the precedent. I mean, that's like comparative history. It's like one event can be compared to this, or it's dissimilar because of this and analogous because of that. It really draws on those muscles that you build when you're in a liberal arts degree like history. I think a degree like a history degree absolutely puts you ahead of the game in terms of doing that type of work.

### **Andrew Bagley**

Over the course of a few years, I started handling medical malpractice cases, which I never ever dreamed I would ever handle in my entire life, until I started to work on them. And I've really enjoyed them. They're fascinating cases, they are full of so many interesting nuanced issues. And every time you take on a new case, you're learning an entire area of medicine that you didn't know before, and you get to make all these nuanced, elaborate arguments. And then our group decided that there was a niche in the marketplace for a new firm that could handle medical malpractice cases in Georgia. And so we just decided that we'd start our own thing. And I'm fortunate enough that they asked me to be involved and to be a partner. Obviously, I jumped at that opportunity. But I think that I think I was in the right place at the right time in a lot of ways. But there's a reason why I was in the right place at the right time, and it's because I enjoyed what I was doing. I found that I was good at it for the same reasons that history attracted me, I think. There's a lot of room for creativity, like intellectual creativity in what I do. You've got to be flexible, mentally, you've got to be creative. It's a profession that rewards, I think, a little bit of independent thought. And I think that I was able to develop that part of my legal skill set from a very early period because of where I worked, and I think because of my training—you know, that's exactly what I did when I wrote that thesis paper.

### **Scott Muir 13:23**

That's what I was thinking! I really appreciate what you said about, you know, the confidence to make these interpretive leaps, because that's something you had done as a student. So I'm just curious about that. You know, it seems to me that you've maintained a healthy balance there; you've got a wonderful family of four, and how you were making decisions about how to kind of make this sustainable for yourself.

**Andrew Bagley 13:43**

The thing that I think drives a lot of people away from this profession, unfortunately, I think, is that there's a lot of people out there, that they practice law, like it's a competition, like it's a game. They're trying to find their strategic advantage in the nuances of the rules and the ticky-tacky procedures, you know, sleight of hand almost, rather than the merits of a particular position. I'm fortunate enough that I practice in an area of law in medical malpractice, where it's small enough that I see the same lawyers over and over and over again. Everybody knows that if you take that approach, it's going to be bad for your career [laughs]. It is a very collegial bar. And so people tend to be honest. And I, you know, try not to be snippy or caustic in my brief... It's just stuff like that. It just goes such a long way to making it a profession that's more enjoyable when you're actually just trying to solve disputes. And I think a lot of people that are drawn to liberal arts are this way. I think people who are led to that field of study—who want to read and learn about these different perspectives and cultures and histories and reasons why things happen—you're sort of naturally predisposed to being empathetic and to considering that there are other perspectives.

I think this is something that makes me a good lawyer. I consider my opponent's argument and I take it seriously and legitimately. No matter what I'm doing, I think about their best argument against it. You know, I heard a quote, I can't remember who it was, recently I heard it, but it was like something to the effect of “the best way to be persuasive is to start with a fair summary of your opponent's argument.” And I think history taught me how to do that. It helped me to develop that muscle. And when you do that, you not only become a better advocate for your client, but you become a more reasonable, less antagonistic opponent for the person that you're arguing against.

**Andrew Bagley**

Every history major that we interview, or that we look at, as an applicant, or an English major, or, you know, any of those the liberal arts programs—these folks know how to write. That is crucial in what we do as lawyers, and really in every profession. It's the ability to write clearly, and to pick out—this is what history probably taught me better than anything else and it was most applicable to law school—it's the ability to be nuanced. Like, you know, the law is gray, everything is gray. I mean, not just the law, like in all professions, there's gray areas. And I think that as humans, we have a tendency to want to classify everything very strictly. But history teaches you that that's a mistake. And it trains you how to avoid that trap. And when you can make a point that is nuanced, but clear—I mean, that is threading the needle in law and that can be extremely persuasive. So I think that helps. And it's not just law, I think that's everything, being persuasive is something that's good no matter what you do.

**Scott Muir 17:41**

Yeah, so maybe in closing, this podcast is basically for undergraduates today. It's aimed at the ones who are interested in the humanities, and maybe question, like, what is that really going to do for them? And so yeah, I'm just kind of curious, like what you would say—maybe they're interested in practicing law—like what you would sort of say to a student in that situation, and what you would advise them to tell, you know, their parents or whoever might be trying to steer them in a different direction.

**Andrew Bagley 18:12**

You know, the world needs people who are mathematicians and rocket scientists and everything else. But the world also needs people who can think these deep, intellectual, challenging things and provide balance across all these different professions. All of these liberal arts degrees, they're really important. I mean, they're not for everybody, but they are so useful. And it is a unique, I think, special brand of human being that those types of endeavors are meant for. If you're in undergrad, and you feel the pull towards a history degree or whatever it is, then you've got a calling that you should listen to. And I think that it's not for everybody, but it's for you. And you can take that special thing that not everybody will have. I mean, it's challenging, but it's a skill set that is important and unique. And it's helpful. Not only is it helpful, it's enriching. It's enriching individually and it's enriching to our entire society. So I think it's totally worthwhile.

Note: This transcript has been edited to make it easier to read.