



## **Episode 6: Christine Fletcher (CAS'91), Burns & Levinson Partner**

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

After earning a degree in French Language and Literature from BU, Christine Fletcher (CAS'91) went on to become a partner at the Burns & Levinson law firm in Boston. Christine was selected as a 2018 Woman Worth Watching® by the Profiles in Diversity Journal and is also a regular online contributor for Forbes where she shares her expertise on trusts and estates.

### **Podcast Transcript:**

**Jeff Murphy:** I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU Podcast My guest today is Christine Fletcher, a partner at the Burns & Levinson law firm here in Boston. Christine actually earned her degree in French Language and Literature from BU's College of Arts and Sciences in the class of 1991. We spoke about the lessons she's learned from the study of language, the business and practice of law and why she wishes she started networking way earlier in her career.

Christine, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview for our podcast. I'm really excited to chat with you. If you could just get us started by giving us a little bit of a background. Did you grow up in New England or are you from elsewhere?

**Christine Fletcher:** No, I'm from New Jersey and like so many kids from New Jersey at that time going to school in Boston was one of the ideal things to do. It was wonderful.

**Jeff Murphy:** So did you grow up knowing that you wanted to be a lawyer? Did you have lawyers in your family? Is that how you sort of ended up in the profession or how did that develop for you as a kid?

**Christine Fletcher:** No, I know lawyers in the family and in terms of my immediate family, I was actually the first one to graduate college. My brother who was a year older went to Northeastern, so he was on the five year plan and graduated a year after me, a month after me rather. So, I was actually the first one to graduate. There were no lawyers in my family. I loved French in high school and decided to continue studying French in college because that's just what I like to do. And then probably about my junior year I kind of looked at my options and if I had stayed with the French track in terms of an academic career in French I would have gone onto that to get a master's and probably become a teacher or worked in the university setting. And that was interesting to me, but I found that in the academic circles, you are really working and speaking and presenting articles and ideas and theories about French language and literature in the same group. And so I thought I would have much more of an impact on people's lives if I went to law school and became a lawyer. So that's why I decided to go to law school.

Jeff Murphy: Okay. So, I'm curious to know how you ended up from New Jersey to Boston and at Boston University specifically. Was it wanting to be in the city but maybe not at the same place as your brother or how did you pick BU?

Christine Fletcher: Well, it was funny because, I got into BU and thought about going there. My brother who was at Northeastern said, "Don't go, you won't like it." And, I laugh now with my own children and I should not have listened to my brother. It was a terrible piece of advice. So I deferred going for a year and I went to a smaller school that had offered me a scholarship and I thought, "Well I'll just go there for a year and see what I want to do." And as soon as I got there I knew I should have gone to BU and I called up BU and they were great. They said, "Yeah, you can come in as a transfer student, sophomore year." And that's what I did. And as soon as I got to BU, I absolutely loved it. And I do think having that experience of being at a small school for a year really made me appreciate everything that BU had to offer. And I remember watching one of my professors, my anthropology professor, on a PBS broadcast when I had first gotten there and that was just so amazing to me that the people who were teaching me were actually out there doing this type of work and were experts in their fields. And that was just so wonderful.

Jeff Murphy: Well, the whole point of today's conversation is to dive into your career a little bit. We'll certainly get to the meat of that, but now that we've chronologically landed you on the BU campus, we do a thing in the podcast that we're sort of lovingly calling the BU lightning round. Just to hear more about your experience, where did you live on campus?

Christine Fletcher: So I lived in a brownstone on Beacon Street with a number of other transfer students and I thought BU did a really great job of assimilating the transfer students into the university and I loved living in the brownstone. It was wonderful.

Jeff Murphy: And did you have any sort of favorite hangouts on campus? Places that you'd like to grab a bite to eat on Comm Ave? Anything that sort of stands out in your memory?

Christine Fletcher: Well we often spend a lot of time at marsh plaza kind of in between classes, meeting up with folks there, and at the student union, I think it was called the George Sherman Union back then. I don't know if it still is.

Jeff Murphy: Yeah it is.

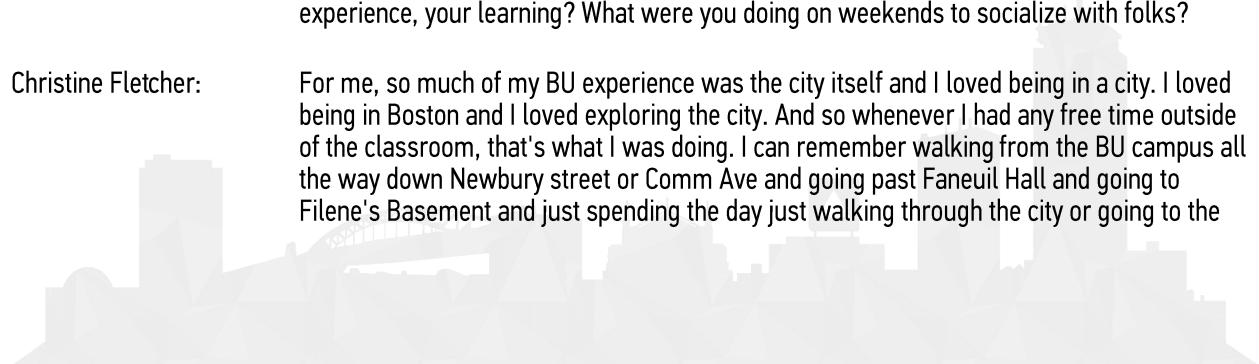
Christine Fletcher: And this was kind of early 90s. So a lot of the girls or women college students, we always got our hair done it Dellaria so that was a big thing.

Jeff Murphy: [laughing] That is what i was about to say. It is still there, you'll be happy to know.

Christine Fletcher: Yeah that is what I heard.

Jeff Murphy: What kind of things were you doing outside of the classroom? Were there any sort of student clubs or organizations that you were a part of that sort of augmented your experience, your learning? What were you doing on weekends to socialize with folks?

Christine Fletcher: For me, so much of my BU experience was the city itself and I loved being in a city. I loved being in Boston and I loved exploring the city. And so whenever I had any free time outside of the classroom, that's what I was doing. I can remember walking from the BU campus all the way down Newbury street or Comm Ave and going past Faneuil Hall and going to Filene's Basement and just spending the day just walking through the city or going to the



Museum of Fine Arts or the Museum of Science and taking advantage of everything the city had to offer. So that was so much a part of my BU experience, exploring Boston and living in an urban environment.

Jeff Murphy: That's so true. I think of a lot of people's experience and one of the reasons that people find themselves with BU is to have that experience in the city. But let's talk more about your program of study here at BU. You've touched on this a little bit, about knowing that there were these experts, showcased on television, that were teaching you in the classroom. Can you talk a little bit more about sort of classes that you remember as being especially important or professors that you had that really stood out as folks that impacted you and the life you've had since then?

Christine Fletcher: My French professor who was my mentor, I forget the term they use for it, like your advisor, was Susan Jackson. And I think she just passed away a few years ago.

Jeff Murphy: She did. Yeah.

Christine Fletcher: Yeah, she was wonderful. I really enjoyed spending time with her and having her help me with all the academic aspects. There was a French film class I took with, I think it was, professor T. Jefferson Kline and he was great as well. The classes were really enjoyable. I took a lot of English literature classes too. And they kind of just opened up your mind to different ways of thinking and different experiences. So those are the things I remember most about the classes. Just getting into the analytics and learning how to analyze texts, whether that was in French or in English.

Jeff Murphy: And that obviously has direct implications for law school. The ability to analyze what you're reading. And so I'm curious if you could elaborate a little bit more. You touched on this already about you're passionate about French, but also thinking about having an impactful career, that kind of thing. So, at what point did you sort of say like, "Yes, I love French but I'm going to go to law school."

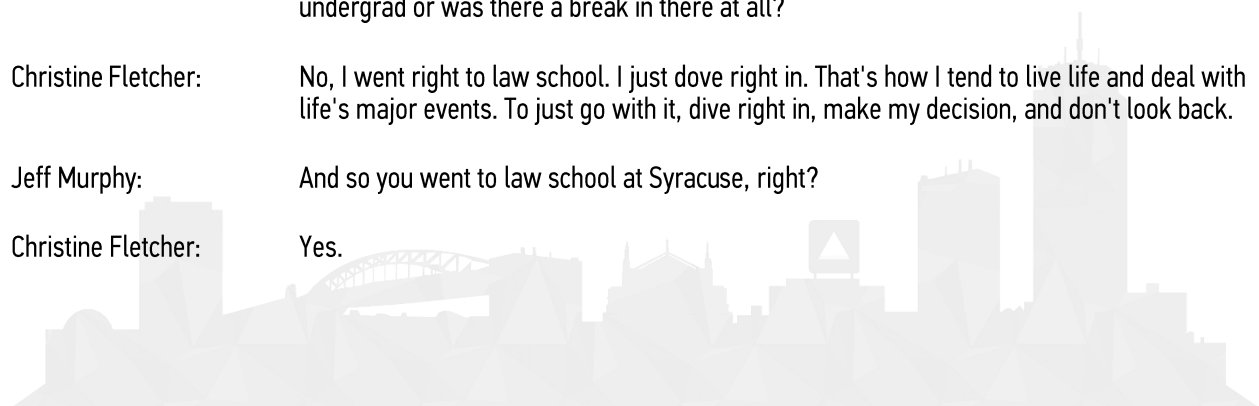
Christine Fletcher: Well, I think it was like junior, senior year when I decided that that's what I wanted to do because I felt like I would have more of an impact with helping people and dealing with people's lives. And it's funny because when I got to law school and since I've been a lawyer, a lot of people will ask about what I studied in college and they'll say, "Oh French. What did you do with that?" And actually it really prepared me for being a lawyer because I went from reading texts in French which wasn't my native language to reading legal treatises which are kind of like foreign languages and being able to analyze them and dissect them. And I thought that was really great training for my years in law school. So it was really a benefit to me and I really didn't realize it at the time. But looking back, it was wonderful training and preparation.

Jeff Murphy: So junior, senior year BU you're thinking about law school and you've got a decision to make. At what point do you decide? I believe you went right to law school right out of undergrad or was there a break in there at all?

Christine Fletcher: No, I went right to law school. I just dove right in. That's how I tend to live life and deal with life's major events. To just go with it, dive right in, make my decision, and don't look back.

Jeff Murphy: And so you went to law school at Syracuse, right?

Christine Fletcher: Yes.



Jeff Murphy: And of course you didn't have nearly as good an experience at another institution than you did at BU.

Christine Fletcher: [laughing]

Jeff Murphy: No, I joke of course. But you came back, I think you came back to New England right after law school. Was that always in your mind or did you kind of not know where you might end up?

Christine Fletcher: Well, I didn't know. What I didn't plan on doing in law school was meeting someone and getting married. So my husband and I met first year. We married second year and had our first child third year in law school. Yeah. So we got out and we had this small child and my husband's from the Boston area, so we actually lived in the New York City area for a few years. And then to be closer to his family, we moved up to Massachusetts and we've been here since. So, that's been 20 plus years now.

Jeff Murphy: So if you would, tell us a little bit about the experience of being a newly minted lawyer, fresh out of law school. What kind of work are you looking for at that point and what are those first few years like of establishing yourself in the legal field?

Christine Fletcher: So at that time the job market was not great especially for lawyers and so it was really get whatever job you could possibly get. And my husband and I do owe a lot of thanks to BU because at that time when you would go into the law schools, they actually had books where you had to go and look for jobs. There were big binders in all the law schools.

Jeff Murphy: Yeah, a lot of people talk about those binders. [laughing]

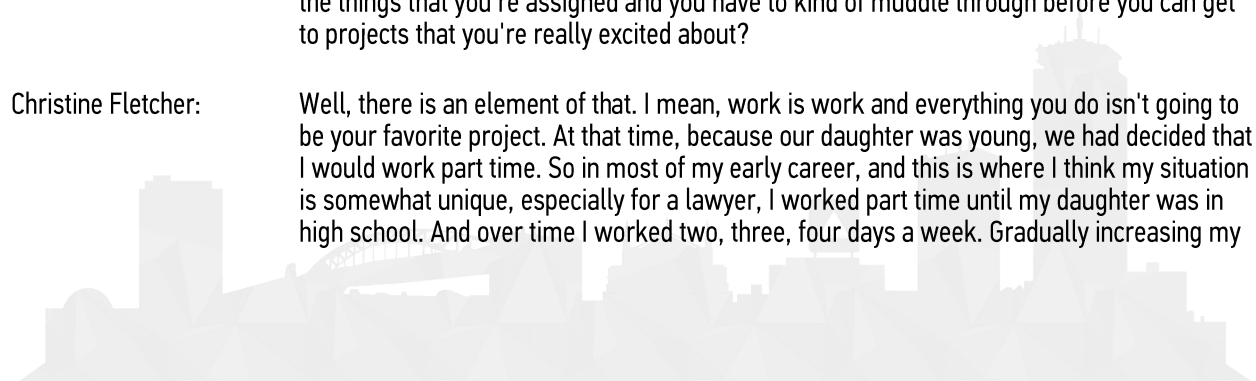
Christine Fletcher: And so, at one point we were at BU and I wasn't a BU law school alum but I was a BU alum and we went into the law school department and we found my husband a job. And we had decided whoever got a job first that would dictate where we went. So he actually got his first job through the assistance of BU law school. So we owe them a lot of gratitude.

Jeff Murphy: That is great to hear.

Christine Fletcher: Yeah. But then, we ended up in the New York area for a little bit and I started my job search. And at that point when the job market's bad and you're a new lawyer, you need experience, anything to get experience. And so that was really the goal. And so I started volunteering at a legal services project and did that for a few months and met somebody there who knew of a position. And then that led me to a position. And so then that kind of snowballed. And then once you get a few years of experience under your belt, then you really have the opportunity to go in different places.

Jeff Murphy: So those early years of full time work, what kind of projects are you working on? And do you find it rewarding or is it sort of like, you're the low person on the totem pole and you do the things that you're assigned and you have to kind of muddle through before you can get to projects that you're really excited about?

Christine Fletcher: Well, there is an element of that. I mean, work is work and everything you do isn't going to be your favorite project. At that time, because our daughter was young, we had decided that I would work part time. So in most of my early career, and this is where I think my situation is somewhat unique, especially for a lawyer, I worked part time until my daughter was in high school. And over time I worked two, three, four days a week. Gradually increasing my



time in the office based on them growing up and my area of law afforded me that ability. So that was really wonderful for me. And then, once they hit high school and I could take off in my career, I made a jump. There was a point where I made a jump to the firm I'm currently at and my career just took off from that point on.

Jeff Murphy: So you've been at Burns & Levinson now for how long? Is it just about eight years or so?

Christine Fletcher: Yes, about eight years.

Jeff Murphy: And at what point in your career as a lawyer, and I'm asking this question kind of as an outsider, I don't know much about the legal field, but is there always that drive to "I need to make partner." Because the firm that you were at before Burns & Levinson you were also there for a very long time. I looked on your LinkedIn, it was like 11 years or something like that. Was that part of the motivation, making partner?

Christine Fletcher: I think so. I mean for me, I was at a small firm for so long and there are definitely benefits to being at a small firm, but I always wanted to be at a big firm and I wanted to be a partner at a big firm. So that was part of my motivation to move and to increase my practice and to increase the type of clients that I was working with. So that was definitely part of my motivation. I think in the early years you really have to learn your trade. I mean there's an element of you have to learn how to be a lawyer and how to be a good lawyer. And once you get that, there's also the aspect of the business of law. And the business of law is something I find that they don't teach you in law school and I've been asking some of the law students and the young lawyers if they teach that now and I don't know if the law schools are catching on to that quite yet. But there's a whole area of the business of law and what it takes to run a law firm. How you get clients. How you keep clients. How you bill clients. I mean that's a big part of it.

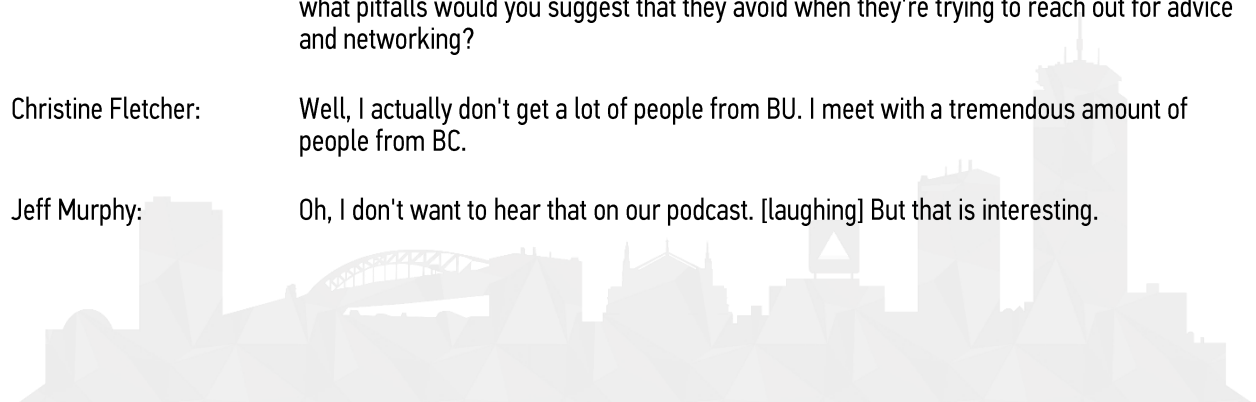
Jeff Murphy: So when you look back over your career, you talked about needing after law school learning to be a good lawyer. I'm wondering if there were sort of hard lessons that you learned along the way that you would share with somebody who's interested, maybe a newly minted J.D. or something along those lines.

Christine Fletcher: Well, I think the thing I mostly wish I knew then is that I wish I had started to network earlier. I didn't realize at the time, the importance of networking in terms of your career and also in terms of developing business and generating clients. So, when I made the decision that I wanted to go into a bigger firm in Boston, I started that networking process and I wish I had done that 10 years earlier because my network would have been so much greater.

Jeff Murphy: That's great advice and something that we spend a lot of time talking about with students and alumni. And, I think people know now that it needs to be a crucial piece of helping build and develop their career. I have to assume that there are constantly alumni and students from BU that are looking to connect with you. What advice would you give them about being a good networker? When people approach you, what are the things that they do well and what pitfalls would you suggest that they avoid when they're trying to reach out for advice and networking?

Christine Fletcher: Well, I actually don't get a lot of people from BU. I meet with a tremendous amount of people from BC.

Jeff Murphy: Oh, I don't want to hear that on our podcast. [laughing] But that is interesting.



Christine Fletcher:

I know. I don't know why that is but it's true. It is interesting. So, what I tell people is don't be afraid to go to these networking events and don't be afraid to put out your hand and introduce yourself. And I remember early on when I started to really focus on networking, I started to read all kinds of articles and I approached it the same way I would approach diet or fitness or health issues, just read up and get all kinds of different advice on what to do. And I remember reading an article about Jamie Lee Curtis, the actress Jamie Lee Curtis, where she said she was always so nervous at these events that she had to go to. And she learned how to stick out her hand and say, "Hi, I'm Jamie." And so I always think of that because I think, "Of course everybody's going to know who Jamie Lee Curtis is. If you're in a room with her, everyone would know." But I kind of think of that, of her sticking out her hand and saying, "Hi, I'm Jamie. Hi, I'm Jamie." And I think, "Okay, I could do that too." So that was kind of what I learned how to do is to just go find somebody in the room. And it always helps if somebody is kind of standing alone because they are going to be very thankful that you're coming over and talking to them. And just stick out your hand, introduce yourself and start a conversation. And then at some point exchange business cards, follow up with a coffee or a lunch or some other meeting. And I think one of the things that a lot of young attorneys think is that they're going to go to these events and they're going to walk away with clients and that's really not what happens and that's really not how it works. It's really about meeting other people and meeting other centers of influence who then you can help and they will help you as well. And then you'll eventually get clients down the road from that.

Jeff Murphy:

You're spot on with that advice that I think the approach needs to be about sort of doing what you can to help others, knowing that at some point with those connections that you've made it's going to come back and hopefully help you when you're looking for that assistance. So you're absolutely right. I couldn't agree with you more. So your current work at Burns & Levinson as a partner, you're in sort of estate planning. I know you work on things involving guardianship, trusts, family business, succession. I have to imagine that that actually brings you quite a bit of joy, knowing that your work is helping support other people and making sure that they can enjoy theirs. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Christine Fletcher:

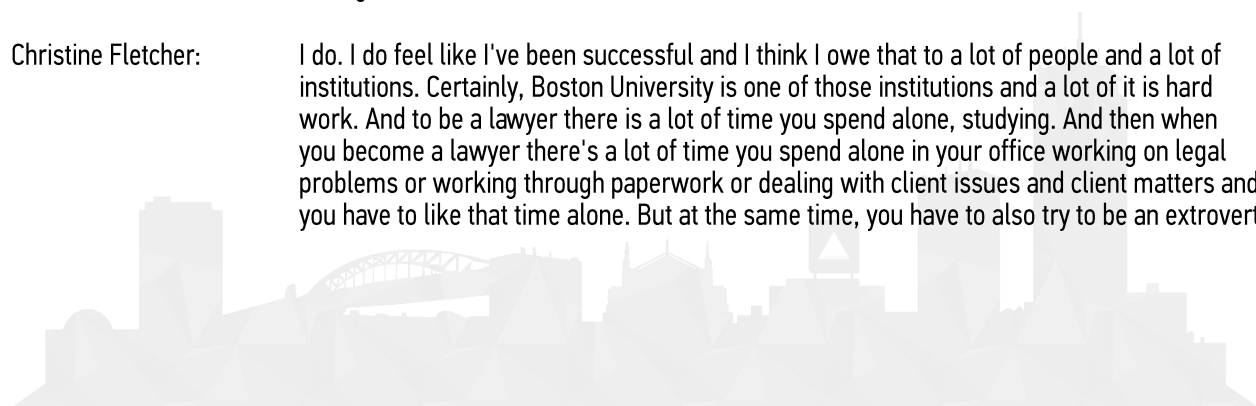
Yes, so I really enjoy working with families and helping them through life's ups and downs and navigating all the life events that they deal with. And for a lot of families I become more than a lawyer but I'm more of a trusted advisor. And they'll call me with questions that don't have to deal with the law, that have to deal with something else and they'll seek advice. I can remember one client calling me about whether or not he should get married and I said, "Well, I don't have a lot of time right now to speak. I have about five minutes." And he said, "That's all I need." And I thought that was quite interesting. And, in the five minutes he decided not to get married, which I think for him was the right decision. But, it's just kind of curious how you can affect people's lives. And it's really wonderful to see clients work through these processes and you can help them with the legal aspects of it.

Jeff Murphy:

Do you feel like you've been successful? I'm glad to know that it's rewarding, but do you feel like on a day to day basis you're able to sort of keep your eye on the impact that you're having?

Christine Fletcher:

I do. I do feel like I've been successful and I think I owe that to a lot of people and a lot of institutions. Certainly, Boston University is one of those institutions and a lot of it is hard work. And to be a lawyer there is a lot of time you spend alone, studying. And then when you become a lawyer there's a lot of time you spend alone in your office working on legal problems or working through paperwork or dealing with client issues and client matters and you have to like that time alone. But at the same time, you have to also try to be an extrovert



and kind of go out there and put yourself out there in terms of developing client relationships and developing business for the firm.

Jeff Murphy: Well, I have to congratulate you. I also know that you were recently named a "Woman Worth Watching" by the Profiles in Diversity Journal. So, that right there tells you that you've been successful. What is winning that award or that mention mean to you?

Christine Fletcher: Well, it's always very nice to have an award like that. And I guess I'm kind of modest about it. I just feel like, "Well that's awesome." You do feel like you've reached something where other people are noticing it. And in terms of your career development it certainly helps in terms of your career development because now other centers of influence and clients are seeing that and they're feeling good about working with you. So it enhances your relationships with your clients and the other centers of influence that you're working with.

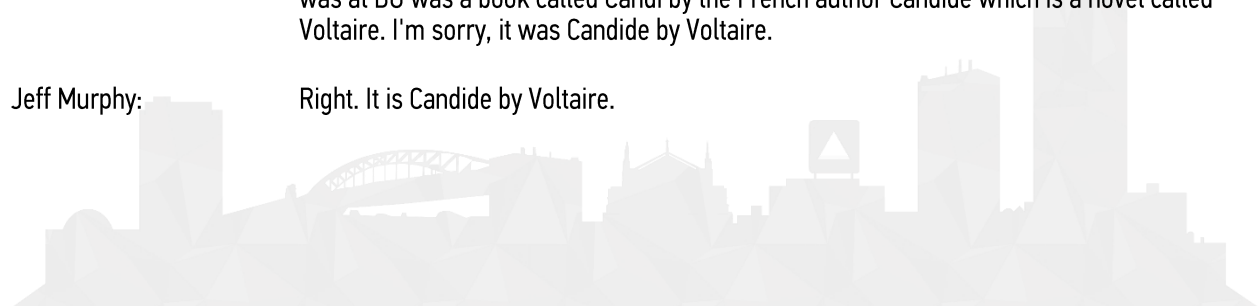
Jeff Murphy: So when you look back, you think about the experience that you had at BU, at Syracuse and the work that you've done for a couple of different firms. Do feel like this is the perfect job for you? Has this been a calling that you've responded to?

Christine Fletcher: I definitely love what I do. My husband and I talk about this all the time. I feel like I'm in a perfect place for me. I enjoy what I'm doing. There's certainly an element where work is work and there are some days that are better than other days. Some days you want to pull your hair out, but at the end of the day I enjoy what I do. I enjoy being a lawyer and I enjoy being a lawyer at the firm that I'm at. So because of that I'm very thankful.

Jeff Murphy: And, any final things to share with folks who might be listening who are thinking about getting into a career in law, just lessons that you would share?

Christine Fletcher: Well, I think it's a lot harder for kids today. My children are 25 and 21 and I think that as parents we control our children's lives. So much in terms of scheduling and in terms of getting them to get into college and finding the perfect college, finding the perfect university and you need to follow all of these things and if you do all of these things and check all of these boxes, you're going to get into the college of your dreams. And I think kids then get to that point where they're in college and they don't know what it all means. And I think it's easy for them at times to get lost. I think sometimes they feel, "What was the point of it all?" They don't see the point of life and I think sometimes kids get kind of despondent by that. And I would like to tell them, first of all, to definitely reach out. No, life is perfect. Nobody, no one is perfect and you should definitely reach out and certainly get help if that's what you're thinking about. But in terms of like professions, I think kids then think that they have to then work in that same fashion to find the perfect job or profession or calling for them. And it's then I think as parents, we're telling them, "Oh, just find your way. You'll find your way, follow your path." But that's not what we taught them all along. So they're getting these contradictory messages. So I think it's very hard for kids today to navigate once they get into college, what they want to do with their lives. So I think the best advice I can give them is to just stick with it. It's not going to be necessarily easy, but you just have to find a path and you may have to veer off that path or get on a different path. But there is no necessarily perfect path for your life or your job or your profession, but you just have to find what the right path is for you. And I know one of my French books that I had to read when I was at BU was a book called Candi by the French author Candide which is a novel called Voltaire. I'm sorry, it was Candide by Voltaire.

Jeff Murphy: Right. It is Candide by Voltaire.



Christine Fletcher: And there's something at the end of it and I'll probably butcher the last sentence, but it's something to the effect of "We must all cultivate our own garden." Essentially, everybody has to make their own path out of life. They have this plot of land that they have to make life out of it for themselves. And I think that's so important to think about, and I know I've thought about that over the years that you have to cultivate your own garden. What's right for you may not be right for the next person and you just have to be happy and content on your life's path. And that's what's most important.

Jeff Murphy: We'll you nailed the wrapping it up and tying it back to your undergrad days at BU. At the end of our interview here, [laughing] Christine, thank you so much for sharing your life story basically with us. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day.

Christine Fletcher: Thank you and I hope you can use some of it. [laughing]

Jeff Murphy: I'm sure we will. Absolutely.

My thanks once again to Christine Fletcher. I really enjoyed our conversation. It was fantastic to spend some time with her and I'm really glad she was willing to share her story here on the Proud to BU Podcast. As you heard, Christine is more than willing to help people out and make connections, so be sure to look her up on LinkedIn. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU Podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU Podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit [bu.edu/alumni/podcast](http://bu.edu/alumni/podcast).

