Melissa Hale: Hello I'm Professor Melissa Hale of Loyola University Chicago School of Law. And I myself was a first-generation student before I started law school so I'm having a conversation with two of our Loyola of first-generation students to talk about their experiences and just what advice they would like to give to future first-generation law students. So I'm talking to Kenzie and Natalie, would you guys like to introduce yourself?

Natalie Montgomery: Yeah I can start. My name is Natalie and I just wrapped up my 2L year at Loyola University Chicago. I’m actually in the weekend part-time program there. It's a four-year program, I'm trying to do it in three and a half years so I've got three semesters left.

Kenzie Milton: Hi I'm Kenzie. I just finished my 1L year at Loyola in the full-time program. I just came from the workforce and I've been out of undergrad for about five years before I started my 1L year.

Melissa Hale: So my first question for the two of you, because you are clearly still in law school and the experience of joining as your first year is still fresh, at least it's fresher than my experience, what surprised you about law school? Or what was different, I should say. Kenzie?

Kenzie Milton: The thing that surprised me the most is I didn't really have to study as much in undergrad as I do now and the studying is far different. It's not so much you read a textbook and you take a few notes on the important things. You have to read it and internalize it in a far different way. I also was really shocked by how much more free time I have than what people told me I would have. Everybody said that you would spend all of your waking hours in the library, but I actually have time to enjoy my life.

Melissa Hale: That is great can, can I ask you Kenzie were you, in undergrad, were you very involved with student organizations?

Kenzie Milton: I wasn't very involved with student organizations, but I worked out a lot, I swam, I went to the gym, and I had a pretty active social life with my friends.

Melissa Hale: I worked during undergrad and so when I came to law school I wasn't working and it felt like I had more free time than I was used to in undergrad. Natalie, what surprised you?

Natalie Montgomery: I actually had a very different experience than Kenzie, so, part of being in the part-time program, what it allowed me to do is to work full time during law school. So I'm working full time and then I do part time law school, and so, at least Loyola’s specific program, and other schools might have different offerings, but I was able to take classes on the weekends, whereas I think other programs it's, you know, five to eight evenings, so that's just long days for me. I would say I was super surprised about the collegiality of my colleagues, like, if I wasn't able to generate an outline like I had hoped, or I wasn't able to, you know, pull the cases that help guide sort of the lesson like I had intended, you know work or life took over, my classmates were just so awesome and it wasn't as competitive as it was in undergrad. Undergrad, for me, was a very like dog eat dog world and law school, I was just so surprised, like, the stakes are high, but everyone is literally incredible and so willing to help each other. So that actually really surprised me because I thought it would be so much more competitive than undergrad was.

Melissa Hale: That is so refreshing to hear because I always think that as a professor that Loyola is not cutthroat like you hear rumors of some schools being but it's nice to get confirmation that our students are actually being cooperative with each other, which is also how we practice law. So my next question, one of the hallmarks of being a first-generation student is really not knowing any lawyers, no one to ask about what things mean or ask about what law school will be like. There can also be pressure because everyone in your family is sort of like “oh you're the first to go off to law school,” that was a big thing in my family like, “oh we're so proud of her she's the first to go off to law school,” and that added a little bit of pressure that they didn't intend to add. So, what does being a first generation student, how does that shape your law school experience so far, do you think? Natalie?

Natalie Montgomery: Yeah, so, I'm the oldest of three, my parents didn't go to college much less law school or graduate school so, I found myself with an internal battle of like, I've separated myself in terms of my experiences and my education, even with undergrad, further from the experiences of my family but law school was like a completely different and additional level. So, I will say, for me it was sort of internally frustrating and difficult because not only do I not have the resources like a lot of my classmates did where they could have their parents like review a legal writing draft or ask questions about, “oh hey how did your professor address this,” like I didn't have that experience, but it was also super isolating that like my family couldn't understand what it was like to work full time and have classes and stress about finals. So I definitely appreciate the experience 100% but I guess, for me, it was, it wasn't really what I had expected like I didn't think that I would feel first gen again like I had in undergrad but I did in Loyola for sure.

Melissa Hale: No, that makes sense. Kenzie, what about you?

Kenzie Milton: My family definitely does not understand the time constraints, they don't understand what grading on a curve means or blind grading. They don't understand when I call and ask for advice or opinions on “should I do this internship or that internship or what do you think about taking a class on this type of law or that type of law” like when we were picking our perspective electives “should I do the perspective elective on business law or should I do the perspective elective on education law?” They kind of just said, “oh I guess you'll have to figure that one out” and I said “well I guess I will, but, it'd be nice if you just gave an opinion, it doesn't have to be right, but I would value some input.”

Melissa Hale: Although sometimes the opinion of those that don't understand how the legal world works can be counterintuitive. My grandmother, she passed away still wondering why I was not a judge on TV. That was a big thing for her, no matter what I did in my career, I think it was very much “why, why aren’t you Judge Judy?” or, anytime a law professor showed up on CNN she'd say, “well, why aren’t they asking you questions?” like because I'm not an expert in anything that CNN wants to discuss, Grandma.

Kenzie Milton: [Laughs] Why aren’t you Judge Judy? That's a valid question.

Melissa Hale: [Laughs] I know why, why am I not Judge Judy? I ask myself that all the time. Family issues can be hard because, even if they mean well, they just don't understand how different it can be. However, I've also noticed that, and maybe I'm biased because I am a first generation student, but there are some positive things we bring to the table, I think.Tthere are some attributes that make us sort of standouts in law school. What do you guys think that first generation students bring to the table that kind of make us the stars?

Natalie Montgomery: I think my experience, it was my ability to juggle everything under the sun, and I want to emphasize that that is not always healthy [laughter] but, the ability to do it and to not lose my composure, I think that it allows me to sort of be a support to my classmates or, you know, to tell them things that I'm dealing with them to say like “oh, I thought I was the only one” like no, I I get it. I get where you're coming from, even if our backgrounds are different, um, and to also like provide support for “hey you know I’ve been able to juggle a job and family issues and and the class, and you know, all the things, here are some techniques that I have for being successful and here's maybe something that you could implement to be able to juggle it better as well.”

Melissa Hale: Kenzie?

Kenzie Milton: I think that we bring to the table a ton of tenacity and the ability to find resources or create resources where none might be available. For example, we don't have the lawyers to ask, or we don't have someone in our family maybe who's gone to any other kind of professional school. So we maybe feel more comfortable getting out of our element and going to ask a stranger for help, or, creating a resource, creating a club that can help us ask strangers for help, things like that.

Melissa Hale: I absolutely agree, and, again I say that as a first generation student so there's bias there but I've also been working with first generation students for over a decade and there's a lot of grit and determination there and Natalie mentioned the ability to juggle and balance things which I think is really key. We have long before law school learned how to balance a lot of different things. And I think that law school can be daunting because we don't have resources that other people do, but it's also a time to shine because we've been balancing a lot on our plate for a really long time.

Melissa Hale: So I want to finish the podcast with thinking about what advice you might have for future first generation law students. What do you wish you had known before your first year? What one piece of advice or one thing do you wish somebody would have told you before you started law school? Kenzie?

Kenzie Milton: Everyone is going to have a terrible cold call and no one will remember it in 48 hours.

[Laughter]

Melissa Hale: That is absolutely, absolutely true. Absolutely. Natalie?

Natalie Montgomery: I think it was one thing that I was really nervous about going into law school, I had doubted myself and like, oh I'm not going to know how to do all the things that law school requires, where, all these people that I'm starting law school with are going to know it, and so, I was really tempted to join like early summer classes before my first year on how to outline and how to read cases and how to do law school because I thought that I was the only one coming without tools and I actually, once I started, realized that nobody's coming in with tools that I don't have, you know, we're all here, we're all learning how to do this together and for the first time.

Melissa Hale: Those are both wonderful pieces of advice. I remember always thinking that everyone else had a plan. Because I feel like my whole career has been a happy accident. A very happy accident. But there certainly wasn't a plan when I was in law school to be where I'm at now and that's probably a good thing. I don't know that it's necessarily a bad thing, but I sometimes wish I would have just known more about how the legal field works in terms of jobs, before I got involved in law school. Kenzie, speaking of cold calls, what advice do you have for future students that might be nervous about being cold-called?

Kenzie Milton: If you really don't know the answer you can just say that you're not prepared or you don't know the answer. Or, you can look through your notes and maybe ask for a rephrasing of the question, or you can say, “do you mean this part or that part?” and the professor will help you figure out what he's asking or she's asking.

Melissa Hale: As a professor, I can absolutely validate the fact that “I don't know” is a perfectly valid answer, and there is nothing wrong with that.

Kenzie and Natalie, thank you both so much for this. This has been so informative for future students. I hope they've definitely learned something. I appreciate both of your experiences and I hope everyone enjoyed the podcast.

Kenzie Milton: Thanks for having us.

Natalie: Absolutely. Thanks for having us.

Lawdibles are produced and distributed by CALI, The Center for Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction. Find more Lawdibles at www.cali.org/lawdibles. Send your questions and feedback to lawdibles@cali.org. The Lawdibles theme music is “Ask Me No Question” by [Learning Music](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Learning_Music/). Lawdibles are for educational purposes only. Please seek an attorney if you need legal advice.

CREDIT: Ask Me No Question by Learning Music is licensed under an [Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License.](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/)