



TIES THAT BIND

Bauer Alumna, Now a Corporate Attorney, Learned Life Lessons from Hardworking Entrepreneurial Family

By Wendell Brock

With her large Italian and Mexican families, Nina Bianchi Skinner (MBA, JD '01) was never at a loss for playmates or mentors.

Her favorite memories are of long summer days at her great-grandparents' house in Tampico, Mexico, where she spent hours greeting neighbors, listening to uncles tell stories and playing soccer with cousins. In the evenings she would sit with her mother and grandma under the mango trees, where they would gather with friends to visit.

Close friendships were a natural part of daily life — as was imparting words of wisdom. Often by the end of

the day, the talk would turn to life lessons and dreams of the future. As she sat on her mother's lap counting the stars, she recalls being told: "You have to do well in school. It's the key to your future."

Those simple words resonated with her then as much as they do now.

Such lessons — on the importance of hard work and education, on building meaningful relationships that bridge the personal and the professional — are at the heart of who Skinner is today: lawyer, Hispanic community member, wife, mom.

Nina Bianchi Skinner (MBA, JD '01) serves as a corporate attorney and shareholder at Liskow @ Lewis, a firm with offices in Houston, New Orleans and Lafayette.

After earning her MBA and her law degree simultaneously at Bauer College and the University of Houston Law Center, she spent 13 years learning the finer points of business law at the Houston firm Fulbright & Jaworski (now Norton Rose Fulbright).

Today, she's a corporate attorney and shareholder in the Houston office of Liskow & Lewis, a Gulf Coast law firm that focuses on the energy industry.

But before she tells you about her career, Skinner likes to talk about her roots, how she was shaped by her hard-working, business-owner parents. Her real training was in an East Houston warehouse, where she worked side by side with her family in their modest business: manufacturing and selling industrial work boots. As a teen, she logged late nights and weekends pitching in.

Growing up in this entrepreneurial family, she says, "empowered me to know from an early age that I had the ability within myself to build something of value." At the same time, she began to see firsthand how professional relationships pay off — whether it was the leather broker in Mexico, the import-export agent at the airport, the refinery worker buying boots at the store.

But above all else, her No. 1 job was to excel at school.

Fortunately, her grades allowed her to attend a well-respected high school. The first in her family to attend college, she received a full scholarship to Southern Methodist University and later transferred to Tulane University, where she graduated magna cum laude with a B.S. in Finance. In New Orleans, she worked as an intern with Black & Decker and was responsible for promoting the brand's power and gardening tools in area Wal-Mart stores.

She recalls (with a bit of a laugh) scooting around the Big Easy in her aqua Suzuki Samurai with a trunk full of pumpkins. Her job was to teach shoppers to carve pumpkins using jigsaws.

In high school and college, Skinner gained exposure to the energy industry, which was distinct from the family business she knew so intimately. "Growing up in Houston, the energy business was everywhere, but it was not a business I understood," she says.

After graduating UH, she clerked at and was later hired by Fulbright & Jaworski, where she proved nimble at mergers and acquisitions, corporate finance and securities matters. That made her an attractive candidate for Liskow & Lewis, an 80-year-old firm that established an energy presence out of its New Orleans and

Lafayette offices. The firm opened its Houston base in 2005 with a handful of attorneys and today employs approximately 35.

At Liskow & Lewis, Skinner handles M&As and financial transactions, for both energy and non-energy businesses, and has a specialty practice representing companies in derivatives matters. "Derivatives is a niche that has developed for me over the years," she says. "It is quite dynamic given the regulatory changes under Dodd-Frank."

Back to her higher education, Skinner was excited about pursuing a joint graduate degree after studying business at Tulane. Though she had good offers from other institutions, she chose UH because of its focus on energy. It also allowed her to help her parents.

In addition to exploring the energy-related classes at UH, she was drawn to courses that related to her parents' business. "Because my family made boots, my natural interests were in manufacturing. In business school, some of my favorite classes involved operations and management." She thinks the biggest advantage over the long haul has been the networking opportunities offered by Bauer.

"Being local has proven to be a tremendous benefit," says Skinner, who is active in the Women's Business Alliance of the Greater Houston Partnership and Houston's Hispanic Lawyers Network. (She is married to Tulsa native Stephen Skinner, who works in the healthcare industry, and is the mother of Matthew, 7, Rebecca, 6, and Madeleine, 3.) "Every few months I reconnect with someone who was in one of my classes at UH. With technology we can easily be in touch with colleagues around the world, but it is so nice to be in Houston and have the chance to meet for lunch."

When you think about it, it all goes back to the mango trees in Mexico, her family, their business and the values she learned as a young woman encouraged, and determined, to succeed.



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