



CHRISTINA ZABAT-FRAN: THIS GENERAL COUNSEL MEANS BUSINESS

by GLORIA J. LEE

For Christina Zabat-Fran, 2016 was a remarkable year in an already accomplished young career.

St. John, the luxury brand headquartered in Orange County, promoted her to vice president and general counsel, elevating her to a significant business management role during a crucial time in the brand's evolution and global expansion.

The Orange County Business Journal honored her in its class of Women in Business honorees and as a rising star at its General Counsel Awards, putting her in front of a large and star-studded audience in a moment captured on the newspaper's front page the next week.

The Corporate Counsel Section of the Orange County Bar Association also enjoyed her talents: she served as section chair in 2016, increasing the section's membership by more than 150 percent.

For Zabat-Fran, the achievements follow her natural path in life. She was a leader in the University of California, Irvine (UCI) School of Law's prestigious inaugural class, helping build an institution that's become a national force as it shakes up traditional legal education. She became one of the school's most accomplished early stakeholders, working with Dean Erwin Chemerinsky to start the student bar association and the law review, for which she was co-editor-in-chief. And her work at the forefront of innovation didn't begin there: as a high school freshman during the Internet's rise in the 1990s, one of the first emails Zabat-Fran ever sent was to an Orange County volunteer group, asking if she could join the board of directors. Her ambition and hard work earned her a full-tuition scholarship to UCI, where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa and cum laude with degrees in political science

and humanities.

She remains active in several charities, including Legal Aid, Public Law Center, Street Law, and California Lawyers for the Arts. She's also an artist, a classically trained pianist, and a second-degree black belt in taekwondo, who has a goal of conquering the romance languages.

Zabat-Fran's infectious curiosity and drive might be inherited: her paternal grandfather was a doctor and musician in the Philippines who turned his home in his poor village into a community center, and her father went on to build his own software consultancy. Her maternal grandfather built from scratch a company that, at one point, was among the largest sign companies in North America, and her mother is a designer.

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Even the waitress at Houston's—where we met for our interview lunch—noticed Christina's polished style, star quality, and gravitas. She asked me quietly, "Who are you meeting with? She looks like a *somebody*." Christina Zabat-Fran is definitely somebody *Orange County Lawyer* wants you to know.

Gloria Lee: How did you develop as an artist?

Christina Zabat-Fran: Dance captured my attention from a young age. I loved ballet, swing, and everything else. Then I found martial arts, thanks

to the encouragement of my father, who always strived for his daughters to be strong and self-sufficient. And it just clicked. I felt an inner strength swell inside me. I fell in love with the mental and physical ties, the history, and the great reverence for culture and tradition.

I competed in tournaments across the country, and the friends I made taught me early on the value of camaraderie and collegiality in competition. I always wanted to be as proud of how I was outside the ring as I was inside, so while we studied each other's moves hard, we also trained with each other, cheered each other on, and explored the cities we competed in together. I took home the bronze medal in the Taekwondo World Championships one year, and the best part is that

the women I was in the ring with are friends of mine to this day, and we've shared many milestones since then. I had great mentors and earned my second black belt at an exceptionally young age, which afforded me one of my first opportunities to serve as a teacher and share what I had learned, which I found so rewarding. Many times, I was the only female instructor in the studio, and as was tradition, we would do demos and spar for the students at the end of class.

I regularly won, and the young girls in the class would tell me afterward that they were determined to earn their black belts, too. They said they knew they could do it because I did. We built a program for children, and I coached girls to have the confidence to step into a ring, too.

How does your work as an artist influence your career?

For me, art and being an artist is all about thinking on your feet and solving problems. Growing up, my mother regularly would sit me in front of scraps and supplies with a

simple instruction: make something. It fostered a mindset in me that if I wanted something, I was going to make it myself.

I also started playing piano when I was young, and I took my classical training one step further by embracing sight-reading competitions. I felt like that was the ultimate achievement, to be able to pick up any book of work on a whim and play from it without practice. It was unnerving yet inspiring, and it taught a flexibility that I kept with me as I moved into teaching myself viola, violin, and cello. It also instilled a deep passion for reading; as much as I loved reading books, I craved sight reading sheets of music. I just couldn't get enough.

I took the spirit of entrepreneurialism developed as an artist to UCI, where I managed the campus art studios, which includes woodworking, metal, and film, and I helped organize shows for local galleries. Each artist we worked with wanted to achieve spectacular feats, from suspending great weight from the gallery ceiling, to creating life-sized sculptures of themselves. I would sit down with them, listen to their vision, and conceptualize how we would construct and execute the project. Then I'd bring it to three-dimensional life. This drew heavily on my knowledge of math and science, and it required significant resourcefulness of materials, tools, and experts that demanded constant updating. I also had to quickly learn to navigate marketing in the art world.

I loved the challenges, and I've carried what I learned through my ongoing work. I've recently won fellowships and juried competitions and had my work published in a national art journal. My medium will sometimes change—right now it is mixed media, metals, and patinas on canvas—but I'll always exercise my arts muscle alongside whatever else I am doing because I know it sharpens my quick thinking, my problem-solving skills, and my ability to think like an entrepreneur all the time.

Did you always want to be a general counsel?

I entered law school knowing that I wanted to be entrepreneurial and that a traditional path was probably not my style. After my first year, I interned with a general counsel and the experience intrigued me. I was attracted to the proactive role my legal expertise could play in helping enterprises move forward.

What attracted you to St. John?

I fell in love with the brand's legacy of dressing confident women, with its roots in Orange County.

Working at St. John has been invaluable. I learn so much from the CEO and executive team about how to manage people and how to build and grow a brand. I've seen firsthand how a general counsel can help steer a company toward its initiatives.

What about your role most excites you?

We dress power women all over the world for the times when it matters most, which is a real thrill. The brand's influence expands from Orange County to across the country and beyond, and it's really exciting to be part of. The company's vertical integration, meaning we're both a retailer and distributor, as well as a manufacturer, presents interesting business and legal challenges at all levels of the organization, as well as opportunities to add value. Our footprint is international, and I'm always excited to work with our global partners to bring our brand perspective and values to new markets.

What are some tenets to dressing for success?

Dress with intention.

Comfort drives confidence, and when you're confident in yourself, what you can achieve is truly limitless. Here at St. John, our design team strives to curate this feeling of effortless glamour and ease in each collection. We have an undisputed

reputation for luxury and quality, and I love that we continue to challenge ourselves as a brand to look forward and grow with the St. John woman. Our latest stride here is St. John Sport. Looking beyond the board room or the courtroom, this new collection is inspired by the art of relaxation, and empowers women to go anywhere without compromising style.

Sounds like you're not afraid of a challenge.

My parents instilled in me from an early age the desire to be curious and to take bold risks, to go for it and do things differently. It's just something I have always been drawn to do; it feels natural. People need advocates. People need leaders.

Last but not least, the readers want to know: what do you enjoy most about living and working in Orange County?

Orange County is really the best of both worlds—we have the energy of a world-class business community, with the benefit of great collegiality from this supportive, close-knit legal community. I'm excited every day to be a part of it, and to help shape what's ahead.



Gloria J. Lee is the Client Relations Partner at Rutan & Tucker, LLP, Orange County's oldest and largest full-service law firm. She can be reached at glee@rutan.com.

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