

An adventurous spirit drives California health care lawyer

By Brian Cox

Attorney Elissa Niccum isn't inclined to put life on hold.

The young California attorney is spontaneous and bold in her approach to experiencing life and she rejects any suggestion that she should wait for some imagined ideal time before venturing out to seek adventure.

"Life is short and we don't always know that we're going to meet the perfect partner in life or meet the perfect friends," she says. "I want to see the world. There's a lot of places to see."

Even if at times it means packing up and heading out to see the world alone. Niccum says traveling alone has benefits beyond just the freedom to go and do whatever you want.

"I think it builds a confidence with learning who you are and learning to be comfortable with yourself and learning to be comfortable being alone," she says.

Not long ago, for example, she took a three-day camping trip to Yosemite National Park by herself.



Elissa Niccum's first sunset in Yosemite at Olmstead Point, which gives a view of the northern side of Half Dome.



"I've been waiting for years to make a camping trip happen with people and I was like, why am I waiting?" she says. "I think we get so afraid of the horrible long list of things that could happen instead of saying here are the steps I'm going to take to stay safe and be smart and I'm going to do this."

Her first solo trip was to Hawaii just last summer. She stayed in a hostel and made friends with fellow travelers. She discovered she particularly enjoyed striking up conversations with strangers and embraced the excitement of meeting interesting, new people.

"I still remember conversations I had at Stonehenge or Monet's Gardens with totally random people that I'll never see again," she says. "They were friendly, nice interactions. That is something that is great about solo travel. You get to meet people and make these connections. And some of them can become lifelong friends."

Which is exactly what happened when she went to Hawaii, where, incidentally, she also set aside a few days to take the Hawaiian Bar because, of course, why not?

"I thought I might as well do it while the information was still fresh," Niccum says with a laugh.

During her days when she wasn't taking the bar, though, Niccum became such good friends with a woman from Switzerland that this year she took a European trip to visit.

"I wouldn't have met her if I'd gone with somebody else," says Niccum. "When you go with people, you have people you're comfortable with. There's no incentive to talk with strangers and to put yourself out there."

Born and raised in a suburb of Sacramento, Niccum was voracious reader as a child and perhaps a bit precocious. She first thought of becoming a lawyer in the third grade when she saw the 2001 movie "Legally Blonde" starring Reese Witherspoon as a fashionable sorority queen who gets into Harvard Law School where she excels.

"Best thing ever," thought 8-year-old Niccum. "I will now become a lawyer."

But in high school and into her early college years at University of California, Davis, she actually considered becoming a biomedical engineer – until she discovered she lacked a passion for calculus. Switching gears, she graduated with a degree in sociology and headed off to UC Davis School of Law.

Now an associate attorney with the health care transactional team at Wilke Fleury LLP in Sacramento, Niccum says her interest in health care law was piqued during an internship with Legal Services of Northern California where she was placed in its health care division.

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“It’s a unique time to be involved in health care law,” she says. “We are having such major changes in technology that it is really forcing the medical industry to adapt.”

Rapidly developing technology around tele-health, for example, can raise challenges in the area of privacy laws that need to be regularly updated concerning electronic health records storage systems and patient platforms. New questions and dilemmas arise around regulation and licensing. California, in particular, can present a complicated health care landscape because the state is so highly regulated.

“If you’re a health care plan coming from another state and you decide you want to operate in California, there’s a lot you have to adjust to,” says Niccum. “California just has so many different regulations, it’s a new beast.”

The Wilke Fleury health care transaction team that Niccum is a part of represents not only licensed professionals and regulated entities, but also Knox-Keene licensed health care service plans; health, life and disability insurers; professional and trade associations; pharmaceutical companies; and medical equipment providers. Much of Niccum’s work specifically involves health care plans, which are often concerned with striking a balance between ensuring people are accessing their care and the reality of running a business within the state’s highly regulated environment.

Niccum joined the firm last year after a challenging stint as the general counsel for a small health care company that operates children’s pediatric sub-acute facilities, including a hospital, in the Bay Area. She helped guide the company through the chaos brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

After law school, Niccum had continued to work with Legal Services of Northern California for a few months before accepting the position of general counsel at the health care company. She couldn’t have known it, but she was about to enter uncharted territory and be baptized by an unprecedented fire.



On one of her last days of a trip to Switzerland, attorney Elissa Niccum visits the town of Zermatt and the famous Matterhorn, which straddles the Italian-Swiss border and is one of the highest summits in the Alps.



Attorney Elissa Niccum at Seealpsee, a lake in the Alpstein range in Switzerland. Less than an hour after the photo was taken it started thundering and hailing, but the sunshine was beautiful while it lasted.

The legal upheaval caused by the pandemic was a harrowing time for veteran attorneys. Niccum, who was less than a year out of law school and still living with her parents, felt a tremendous weight with her new responsibilities.

“People were relying on me as an authority – when I was living at home with my parents in my childhood bedroom. It was a weird dichotomy of life.”

For two years she worked largely on her own to create policies and procedures to address staffing shortages, implementing vaccination requirements, and ensuring compliance with federal and state regulations that were changing sometimes daily.

“It was a very intense time,” she says. “There were challenges trying to understand both the c-suite concerns and goals and then talking with the RNs, nurses, and LVNs about their concerns and trying to piece together policies and procedures that worked for everyone.”

Niccum was mostly flying solo. She had no other lawyers to turn for advice or feedback. She says the experience taught her to have patience with herself and to understand that in a rapidly changing environment where there wasn’t much guidance, she could only do her best and not expect to always be perfect.

“I think it taught me to have confidence in myself,” she says. “To trust that I had the skills to find the answers that were going to see us to the next day.”

In May 2022, as the whirlwind of the pandemic slowly died down, Niccum joined Wilke Fleury in an effort to branch out and to find an environment where she felt she had broader support.

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“It was refreshing to see other people and other lawyers and to be able to bounce ideas off of colleagues,” she says. “It was such a breath of fresh air to come to a place where I felt there was such expertise, mentorship, and camaraderie.”

Niccum says she’s still learning what it’s like being at a firm where she has the necessary resources.

Primerus has proved to be one of those resources. She was first introduced to the group when she attended the Western Regional Conference, which was held last June in Los Angeles. She only had three hours of notice that a slot had opened up, but as a spontaneous traveler she was undaunted.

“It was an amazing meeting,” she says. “You feel that you’re part of a community beyond just the people in your law firm.”

She followed the Western Regional Conference up by attending the Global Conference that was held in San Diego in October.

In addition to traveling and seeking out adventures, such as a trip to England that was plotted around the life of Jane Austen and locations in “Pride and Prejudice,” Niccum collects books and guitars and is a woodburning hobbyist.

“You’ve got to find ways to enjoy life because life’s not going to make it easy for anyone,” she says.



Elissa Niccum in Sorrento, a town on the southwest coast of Italy that is famous for its Sorrento lemons and the Limoncello made from it.



Elissa Niccum at Trevi Fountain with Isabelle, a law student from the Netherlands, who was her roommate in a hostel in Rome. The two met their first afternoon in Rome and ended up exploring together for a week, before meeting up again in Bari on the southeast coast of Italy. The pair has kept in touch and look forward to traveling together again.