

California IP attorney overcomes more than her share of adversity



By Brian Cox

Attorney Aisha Otori has withstood degrees of displacement and disruption that would likely knock down most people. She has exhibited a focus and resolve so strong that not even a Category 5 hurricane could sidetrack her from her obtaining her objective – literally.

Otori was in her second year of law school at Tulane University when Hurricane Katrina hurled itself into New Orleans, Louisiana in 2005. The horrific tropical storm and the consequent flooding from breached levees caused the evacuation of thousands of people from the devastated city. Otori and her family fled to Houston, Texas – a five-hour trip they had traveled before that now took nearly 20 grueling hours.

At first, they thought they would be gone only a few days – a couple of weeks, perhaps. In the end, it was five months before they were able to return.

Otori, undaunted by natural disaster, transferred to the University of Texas at Austin to continue her legal studies. She and her family made it back to New Orleans in time for her to finish her final year at Tulane Law.

She says it is only now in looking back on that time that she realizes all she had to overcome to earn her juris doctorate.

“I was young,” she says. “Everything seemed exciting, a rush. At the time, the severity of the natural disaster didn’t quite hit me.”

It wasn’t the first time that Otori and her family were forced to dramatically relocate and adapt to a new environment and changing circumstances.

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Otori is the second of seven children. Her father, Shuaibu, was a successful mechanical engineer for Exxon Mobil. Her mother, Habsat, was an educator. The family moved to the Niger Delta after Shuaibu was promoted to operations manager for the region. His appointment to the job was not received well by some locals who preferred one of their own in the position. The reaction ended in violence and Shuaibu was ambushed by gunmen and sustained a life-threatening injury. While he survived, Exxon Mobil decided for safety reasons it would be best for the family to leave the country.

So, abruptly at the age of 11, Otori and her family found themselves building a new life in New Orleans. She and her four siblings at the time began attending Ridgewood Prep School.

“It was tough,” admits Otori. “It was an incredibly difficult time.”

But she adapted quickly and fit in. It helped to have her siblings with her – she got to see them at lunchtime, and they could share notes about their experiences.

Otori says that after the near fatal incident with her father and the family’s immigration to the United States, her parents became much stricter, particularly when it came to school.

“Nigerian parents tend to be strict in general, in terms of emphasizing the importance of your education and making sure you’re able to stand on your own,” Otori says. “That strictness became more intense after the incident. My parents really focused on all their kids getting the best education to ensure a stable and secure future.”

Even Otori’s mother returned to school, somehow finding time while raising seven children to earn a master’s degree in social work.

“And she was still there to take all of us to school and after school extra-curricular activities,” says Otori, who ran track and field in high school and in college. “I don’t know how she did it, but she did.”

Her parents’ commitment to their children’s education has produced astounding results: two MIT graduates; two Cornell grads; a Stanford, a University of Michigan, and a Northwestern alum. Among her siblings are four engineers, a lawyer, and a data scientist.

Otori has a chemical engineering degree from Tulane University and two LLM degrees – one in Intellectual Property and the second in International Business and Trade – from the University of Illinois Chicago School of Law.

“Growing up in Nigeria, it is not uncommon for parents to heavy-handedly steer their children into becoming either doctors, lawyers, or engineers.”

That expectation was fine with Otori, who wanted to be a lawyer from an early age.

With her undergraduate degree in chemical engineering, Otori began exploring options in practicing IP law. She went to Chicago to earn her first LLM. The John Marshall Law School, as it was called at the time, was developing a reputation for its IP program.

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She had a sister living in the city, and so a move to Chicago was ideal.

“That experience of attending John Marshall Law School had a significant impact on my decision to double down on studying IP,” says Otori. “I could not have chosen a better school. I was fortunate to have had great professors interested in seeing me grow.”

She landed an externship at Leydig, Voit & Mayer in Chicago where she had the opportunity to gain first-hand experience in music licensing and IP work.

After earning her Master of Laws, as she considered the job marketplace for new attorneys in 2008 in the wake of the financial crisis, Otori entertained the idea of returning to Nigeria to seek opportunities and gain experience. The only drawback was that prospects in IP law in Nigeria were limited. That consideration influenced her decision to stay on at John Marshall to study International Business and Trade law.

In 2010, Otori returned to the country of her birth – and went back to law school because her U.S. degrees did not grant her access to the Nigerian bar. She was also required to serve a year in Nigeria’s National Youth Corps, where she worked in the regulatory department of the Nigerian Copyright Commission.

She ultimately accepted a position as in-house counsel with Geometric Power Limited, a company that prides itself on being a pioneer in the country’s power industry. Otori primarily negotiated power purchase agreements.

Initially living in Lagos, Otori soon found the traffic in the densely populated, fast-paced city unbearable and chose to move to Abuja, Nigeria’s capital. In Abuja, she lived with her father, who himself had returned home to establish his own corporation, an oil and gas consultancy which led him to a coveted assignment as the special advisor to the Minister of Petroleum.

Otori stayed in Nigeria for seven years. In that time, she saw her mother only twice and her siblings not at all, which was difficult.

When she returned to the U.S. in 2017, she was ready to “get back on the horse.”

“I had established myself as a reputable energy attorney in Abuja, and I concluded that California, with its rich culture of innovation, is where I would forge my path as an IP attorney in the U.S.,” she decided with renewed determination. “I knew what I had to do.”

Otori moved to San Francisco, where she prepared to take the California and Patent bars. She began building a network, volunteering with an organization called Cleantech Open where she worked with inventors and entrepreneurs.

At the encouragement of a close friend whom she had met while living in Nigeria, she moved to Fresno. Soon after, she heard Coleman & Horowitz, LLP was looking for an IP lawyer. It was the opportunity she’d been looking for. She joined the Fresno firm last year.

“My colleagues at Coleman & Horowitz, LLP were immediately welcoming, and so I knew this would be a good place for me to restart my career in IP,” she says. “Everyone is knowledgeable and willing to share their experiences with me.”

Established in 1994 by William H. Coleman and Darryl J. Horowitz, the firm represents businesses and their owners in matters involving agriculture, banking and finance, business transactions, collection and creditor rights, construction, environmental, estate planning, probate and tax, intellectual property, labor and employment, litigation, and real estate. The firm has six offices and 24 attorneys. Otori concentrates on patent prosecution and litigation, trademark prosecution and litigation, trade secrets, and is also part of the Business Transactions team.

The firm has been a member of Primerus™ since 2010. Its founding partner, Darryl Horowitz, encourages associates to get involved with the organization.

“Mr. Horowitz feels Primerus™ is a great way to build connections with people outside of your own bubble,” says Otori. “He has been intent on getting his newer members to participate in Primerus™.”

Otori attended the Primerus™ Young Lawyers conference in Las Vegas in March, and she has since started presenting webinars on issues surrounding IP law.

“This law firm provides you with a lot of opportunities to really get out there and learn your craft,” says Otori, adding that attorney Sherrie M. Flynn, who heads up the IP department, has been a strong mentor. “However you want to make your future look, they’re ready to support you.”

In the near future, Otori hopes to get a nonprofit charity off the ground that would fund scholarships for students back in Nigeria to continue their education. She has named the charity “The Daddy’s Heart Foundation” in honor of her now late father, who unfortunately passed away in 2019.

“My father was a deeply principled, disciplined, and hard worker,” says Otori. “He heavily invested a majority of his life in developing people. He quite literally helped raise a village. He was an extremely generous person.”

Otori says her father was always aiming to develop not only his own children, but also other young people into leaders.

“My father’s legacy is one of generosity and integrity, and I’d like to carry that on,” she says.