

# 9 MINUTES WITH TANAZ SALEHI (BA '02)



**M**iami insurance defense attorney **Tanaz Salehi** (BA Philosophy '02), whose family fled from Iran when she was 4 and who has supported herself since she was 16, knows what it means to struggle, work hard, get knocked down and dream.

When she moved to South Florida after graduating from UF, she had nowhere to live. So, she slept in her car, a Toyota Echo with one hub cap and no radio, and budgeted herself \$2 per day for meals. After earning enough at multiple jobs to afford an apartment, a burglar stole all her clothes and the cash she had saved from tips waitressing at Outback Steakhouse. Luckily, her

co-workers combined their tips that night and made up for the money that was taken. "It was life-changing," Salehi said. "When I see an Outback Steakhouse, I say, 'God bless this place.'"

While some people in similar circumstances may have thought a college degree was unattainable, Salehi dreamed bigger. "I'm going to make it work," she said. Today, Salehi is managing shareholder of the Salehi Boyer Lavigne Lombana law firm that she helped found. She's been featured in numerous articles about women in law and on conference panels about industry trends. She took a few minutes to share her insights with Gator Nation.

## Why did you choose UF?

I was in love with UF from first sight. But a conversation with the late, great Professor Richard Pierce Haynes clinched the deal. I was interested in philosophy and [called the department chair's number.] He actually called me back. He asked me questions. ... He was so invested, so genuine, true, authentic. Moments like that never escape me. I was ignited. I am aware that Professor Haynes passed in 2014. I just hope his family and friends know that he set a fire under so many of us. He is a legend.

## Describe your UF career.

As a philosophy major, the idea was to either go to law school or attain a doctorate in philosophy. But after my first semester, I fantasized about ways to slow down my degree. I relished every class, and I did not want it to end. I remember fall days under the trees in Turlington Plaza, reading Kant or Wittgenstein or Spinoza. In those days, the Architecture Lab (the only 24-hour computer lab then) was the place to be. I worked at Outback Steakhouse on Archer Road, so after work I would rush over to the lab, type up my essays, print them out, edit and re-edit them. I had a second job at Oakbrook Walk as a leasing agent. So between those two jobs, I made ends meet and had time to study.

## Who did you connect with most?

After sharing so many classes together, a few of us female students gathered regularly to review our material. My family had moved out of the country already at this point, so it was my college friends who became my family. We would study together, travel together and learn from each other. We ... sharpened each other. That kind of collaboration helped me later in life, not only in law school but also with my law firm. We cannot grow alone. We need each other to do great things.

## Why did you major in philosophy?

I was a kid and had too many questions. My father was generous enough to sit with me and genuinely engage. We would linger over odd topics ... until we landed at a stopping point where neither of us knew where to go with the conversation.

My father ... led me through logical, ethical, linguistic and metaphysical mazes. For example, the origin of certain words in English and Farsi: Why is the word for female, "she"? Why did they just add an "s" in front of "he?" Does that hold any meaning? Those conversations made me feel OK with questioning everything. He instilled that confidence in me to ask why before complying, to inquire why certain people had authority, or why something was the status quo. When it was time to choose my major, I wanted more brain training. Philosophy forced me to write long and complex essays every week, read complicated treatises, advocate a position, work on logic puzzles and build cogent arguments from scratch. A degree in

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Tanaz with her father in Kissimmee

philosophy is like a master chef class for lawyers. I gained an invaluable advantage from my college education.

## Favorite professor? Class?

Professor Marilyn Holly and her seminar on environmental ethics. Her passion came from within. She radiated grace, wisdom, a certain style, attitude and confidence that everyone admired. When I was in her class, I felt like I was in a different country, a different era, and she was timeless. The course material changed my mindset and ethics for the rest of my life.

## Why did your family leave Iran?

My father was both a math professor at the University of Tehran and a top-level employee for the exiled Shah. Once the Shah left the country, the Ayatollah stepped in, and the streets of Iran melted into a river of destruction, dictatorship and oppression. The country my parents knew and loved had turned into a horror movie.

We had to flee and leave everything behind. We escaped to Turkey to hide and to allow time for my parents to decide their next steps. I remember being huddled in a small apartment in the city center in Istanbul with my family. My mother tried to keep us in great spirits. She hand-stitched our dolls and clothes, made us delicious food, sang us songs and read us stories. She was the light of our lives when things were dark.

One time, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw my parents sitting in the living room, listening to Persian songs, specifically Hayedeh. These were the songs they fell in love to, the songs they danced to, and now all of this was outlawed by the new regime. There they were, heads bowed, under dim light, crying, sobbing, holding hands, remembering their country, their lives, the possibilities that were now foreclosed. They sobbed quietly so as not to wake us. After hiding their sorrow all day from the kids, it just got too heavy, and this was their special time to unload, decompress, remember and to feel. I wasn't supposed to see that moment, but it still lives within me. They were lost people in a stranger's land but had to carry on as if it was just another day.



Salehi and her insurance defense law firm partners in Miami share Gator roots. From left are Donald Lavigne (BA '12), Scott Boyer (BSTel '97, JD '08), Salehi and Oscar Lombana (JD '14). Photo courtesy of Tanaz Salehi.

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#### Describe your childhood in the U.S.

When we arrived, we traveled from state to state [by car] from the West to the East Coast and back. I remember the pit stops, the hamburgers and fries, the fields and changing landscapes. My father had close friends in Newport News, VA, Bob and Lana Bolton, whom he had met while he was stationed in a military base in the U.S. They knew my father, but they'd never met us, and yet they welcomed our entire family, a foursome of ousted immigrants into their sacred space. That kind of generosity

is the stuff you only hear about in Jimmy Stewart movies. My mom continued to knit our dresses and dolls, she learned English beautifully from Lana, who also taught us all about Christmas cookies and American holidays. I still remember the fall leaves in autumn, being fascinated with the way the house lit up at in December, and how their home always smelled like cinnamon or broth or fresh baked goods.

My father applied for [and didn't land] a position with NASA in Cape Canaveral ... which brought us to Florida. My childhood was spent learning the American way in a very suburban neighborhood. We celebrated every holiday and dressed up for Halloween. My heritage and the new culture blended over time. I had parents who allowed me to morph and grow, become stronger, more opinionated. My father, still a Middle Eastern man, raised me to be a fighter. Both my parents valued my perspective, sought my input, came to me for advice. And as a young woman, God, how that can change your whole life.

#### When did you feel you belonged in the U.S.?

My father and uncle started an old-school rancher steakhouse in Kissimmee. My father, an academic, suddenly learned how to run a restaurant, butcher a perfect porterhouse and hang with the local

ranchers. He was featured in the Kissimmee newspaper because the story was so unique: Two Persian exiles, living in the middle of cow town, making steaks for the townspeople. Kissimmee Steak Co. became a Saturday night staple. There were lines out the door every weekend. The regulars and the staff became extended family. We finally purchased a home. After searching for where we belonged, we found our place.

#### You were on your own at age 16. What was that time like for you?

It's still hard to talk about it. We built a home in the U.S. My mother was not happy about the decision to return to Iran — she started to lose her hair from the stress. She silently cried when she was washing the dishes or doing the laundry. I always caught her in the midst of it, but she would wipe them away and put on a smile. I tried to convince my father to rethink it, but the decision was made. The day my mom left, I felt an emptiness inside me that never quite left. I didn't see my family for several years. I learned to live on my own. Those years taught me that life ebbs and flows. Every good spell is followed by a downturn, but it always, always picks back up. No feeling, circumstance or situation is permanent. I learned that any money problem can be fixed. I picked up shifts at the local

Outback Steakhouse, I made sure to only buy what I needed, and to save as much as possible. I also learned that friends can become family. The friends I made at UF and Outback Steakhouse are my closest friends today.

#### Why start your own law firm?

My legal career started with federal civil rights cases and hefty appellate briefs. Weekends and late nights were spent pouring over voluminous files. It's true that most law firms feel like a factory warehouse. Eventually, I was lucky enough to develop clients. I do the work because it is absolutely fascinating and fun, all the time, every day. Every single case is new, unique and interesting. I like to find the golden nugget in every case. I think my clients understood this, which led to more cases and opportunities. At our prior law firm **Oscar Lombana** (JD '14), **Donald Lavigne** (BA '12), **Scott Boyer** (BSTel '97, JD '08) and I developed a mutual trust, respect and care that transcended the big-law culture of blood, sweat and billing. We relied on each other, cared for one another, celebrated our mutual successes and commiserated our losses. These guys — now my partners — were the best lawyers I had ever met. I wanted to forge a lifelong alliance with them.

#### Advice for young professionals?

Care. John Maxwell said, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” When you speak and act from passion, everything sounds and feels more beautiful — difficult tasks seem doable, unreachable goals are within arm's length. It's generous, and it will help you succeed.

Second, embrace discomfort with open arms. Ask the questions you need to ask. I've learned more from an intern's questions than from a judge. Look for a job where you can really learn and grow.

Third, hone your Zen method. It may not involve meditation and mindfulness. When I was younger and worried about the outcome of a certain situation, I'd imagine the worst-case scenario and work backward. Yes, the outcome may be X or Y, but how bad is X or Y? Am I able to survive that? Of

course! That mental exercise taught me that I can deal with any outcome. This cleared the way to visualize my true goal.

#### What is your greatest success?

Opening our firm is such a source of incredible and unending pride for me and my partners. But my greatest life success is bringing my family back together.

When my family left, every time I blew out a birthday candle, every time I prayed at night, every time the clock struck 11:11, I would wish for my family to return to the U.S. and to be reunited. It's difficult to describe but when the digital clock hit 11:11, I would visualize the four digits as stick figures, the first was my father, the second my mom, the third my little brother, and the fourth was me. I imagined the stick figures trekking up a hill and walking into our new home.

This was the vision I carried with me through the end of my teens into my 20s. Their return was not only unlikely, but it

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Tanaz Salehi (right) and her mother, Fary Salehi

was also practically impossible. They had upended their U.S. lives to move back to Iran, built a home from the ground up and established an entirely new life there. But suddenly, my father unexpectedly passed away. My mother and brother were lost with heavy hearts. Because of my law career, I was able to create a home for them here. We had a family again.

#### Who is your hero?

James Baldwin, Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Malala Yousafzai. On a micro scale, the first person who comes to mind is Fary Salehi, my mother. She was also ripped from her family when she was young. When she escaped Iran, she was a young mother, a young wife. Her parents had to remain in Iran, amidst the terror, chaos and revolution. My mother had no choice to but to think of us and my father. My father could have been arrested or executed, and there was no possibility we could stay. I was very young but certain memories from this period of my life are as fresh as yesterday. I remember my mother grabbing me to catch the flight, leaving my doll under the bed as we dashed to the airport. I recall my mother's tears, her arms draped around her father, sobbing. This was likely the last time she would ever see them. And yet, she got on the plane and transformed from a heartbroken daughter into my mother. We rarely saw her tears, but I know she suffered. She nurtured us with a full and open heart, every day. Her resilience is a power I have never known or seen in anyone else. After my father died, she had to find her purpose and create a new life for herself. She finished schooling, attained a career for the first time at 60, and now she wakes up every day ready to spread the purest joy and do the most good in this world. She takes care of patients for a living, and I have never seen anyone adore and care for her clients the way she does.

#### What do you value?

Passion. Nothing is more important. Albert Einstein said, “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.” Passion drives me to want the best for my clients, to share the best experiences with my family, to hone my skills, to be the best partner.