On Tax—JoAnn Chávez of DTE Energy

Len Teti: Welcome to On Tax—A Cravath Podcast. I'm Len Teti, a partner in the Tax Department of Cravath, Swaine & Moore, a premier U.S. law firm based in New York City.

On each episode of On Tax, I talk to professionals in the Cravath network about their life and work in the world of tax. We focus on the human side of tax law, highlighting the people, connections and stories that make the space such a fascinating and dynamic area of practice. I hope you enjoy this episode.

Today, our guest is JoAnn Chávez. JoAnn is the Senior Vice President and Chief Legal Officer at DTE Energy in Detroit, Michigan. JoAnn, welcome to the podcast and thank you for being with us.

JoAnn Chávez: Thank you for including me.

Len: Glad to have you, and I'm excited for this conversation. So, JoAnn, it doesn't appear in your title anymore, and I know that you have a tax background, so tell me—how far back do we have to go in your life or your career to think about the moment when you got put on a path to tax?

JoAnn: I think I first decided that I would like to be a tax attorney when I spent my second year of law school in London. And the interesting part of this is, I liked tax. I loved it when I was in undergrad—I have an accounting undergrad—and I enjoyed my tax courses in law school. But I loved my international tax course in London.

But then the secondary—and, I'll say, maybe sometimes primary—motivation was that I wanted to see the world. But, growing up first-gen with not a lot of resources, I'm very risk adverse. So, the only way I was going to see the world was if I had a good profession that allowed me to do that.

And I was able to meet a tax attorney when I was studying in London, and I thought, "I can do this. I'll be able to see everywhere in the world and travel the globe." And believe it or not, I was able to do it.

Len: And tax helped you do it. So, when you were growing up, then, I take it you didn't have very many role models for law or tax or anything like that. Is that right?

JoAnn: Correct. Yeah. We didn't know any lawyers. We didn't know any accountants. We didn't know any professionals, really. And everyone says, "Well, how did you decide you wanted to be a lawyer?" I said, "Because I was brainwashed by my grandmother."

My grandmother found that I was quite argumentative. I know that's a shock to anyone who knows me. And she said, "You need to grow up and be a lawyer." And I happened to love to read and was somewhat book-smart, and she said, "You really have to be a lawyer." And I'm like, "Sure." But I never really thought much about it.

By the time I was going to Notre Dame as my undergrad, I knew that I wanted to be a lawyer. But tax was nowhere on the horizon, probably because I didn't know it was even an option. I thought I was going to be an ACLU lawyer or work in the public defender.

In fact, my two summer clerkships, one was with the migrant farm workers on the west side of Michigan and the other was with the public defender's office in Washington, D.C. So, that's where I was leaning. I thought that's what I was going to do.

And I remember, right before I was going to finish law school, I had several offers, and the one that I was probably leaning most towards was going to Washington and work for the public defender. And my dad, he said, "Are you sure?"

We had limited resources, and so, I weighed it between this public defender role in Washington, D.C. and this New York job with Price Waterhouse in their international tax group—and there, a career was started.

I wouldn't say that I was 100 percent all in at that moment but I was starting on a path. When you're 26 or 27, you don't really know what the world will hold for you. But it was something—I was going to live in New York City again. So, that was exciting, and I thought, "Well, this could be a good start."

Len: I've had a couple of guests on the podcast from Michigan, and they each started at a Big Four accounting firm, but they were doing it in Detroit. So, you grew up in Detroit—or near Detroit—is that right?

JoAnn: I grew up in Southwest Detroit, which is the Latino section of Detroit. Yes.

Len: So, you grew up in Southwest Detroit. You have no lawyers or accounting or tax people in your family as role models. You made this decision to go to New York. So, one day after law school, you wake up, you get dressed and you go to work at PwC's offices in New York City.

What was that like? Walking in there and joining that team?

JoAnn: Fortunately, I had lived in New York before, so I was very blessed—even as a first-gen attending the University of Notre Dame undergrad and then Notre Dame Law School—because we had so many alum willing to take us everywhere.

So, right out of undergrad, I worked in New York City and worked for Chase as a financial analyst, and it was awesome. But again, I always thought I should be a lawyer. So, I knew I was going to go back to law school.

So, I do that. I was familiar with New York, a little familiar with big office spaces. I'm not sure anything really prepared me for this world. You go into it and it doesn't look like you. It doesn't sound like you.

But again, fortunately, I was a little trained because I attended the University of Notre Dame, and back then it was three men to every one woman, and it was largely an Anglo population. So, I guess I learned at a very young age how to observe my surroundings. How to learn. How to gather all of the knowledge necessary to actually perform. Not technical, but just: How does a first-gen kid show up in this big New York office and not make a fool of herself?

Len: Are we talking about how to behave in meetings? Or when you go out to lunch at some fancy restaurant? What kind of cues you're seeing?

JoAnn: All of the above. How to dress. I feel like I'd already polished my speaking—I was born speaking only English, but it wasn't always great English. And it was definitely a space where you want it to be extremely polished.

Here you are, a lawyer working for a really large international firm, and you have to be your best. Len, I don't know if any of your other guests—I'm going to digress for one second—have ever talked about this, but imposter syndrome is real.

I never really talk about it as that. What I generally describe it as: Here I am, sitting at tables that were never constructed for me—no one even contemplated me—and I have to be great. And nobody put that pressure on me, but I just felt like if I didn't outperform everyone, they would think I was a failure.

So, it really was all of the above. It's making sure you eat right at great restaurants—use the right fork. And then making sure you dress appropriately. This is New York City. I had to make my clothes when I started at Notre Dame because I didn't have enough money to buy a wardrobe.

I'd gone to Catholic high school and almost all Catholic grade school, so I always wore a uniform. Think about this kid who used to sew her own clothes, and then she shows up at Price Waterhouse having to look calm, cool, collected and be the smartest person in the room. No pressure, Len.

Len: We've had some guests talk about imposter syndrome but not to this extent. I think this is really kind of useful to hear about.

There's all these sorts of unwritten rules about the way the world works. And honestly, I admire that you knew that there were unwritten rules out there to figure out because I think a lot of people never quite understand that this thing is going on around them and that people are watching.

But I'm now curious about the next step. At a certain point, you must have felt like you were getting traction in this world, that you were thriving in this world—either because you had mentors who were continuing to invest in you and the projects, or some other feeling.

And I wonder: Do you remember a couple of examples when you really felt that you were succeeding and had a very high ceiling in this sort of tax universe?

JoAnn: Yeah. So, one of the great benefits of working in a public accounting firm right out of law school in New York City—I'm not sure if this would've been the same in the '90s, in a small town or a smaller city—but, in New York City, I was in the largest international tax office that they had in the country, and that was their main headquarters.

And I was hired to do tax planning. I knew about an eighth of an inch about tax planning, and I was given a project. And I remember, I would stay there so late—even after everyone left—because I needed to find an answer and pull together something.

So, it was early on that I started thinking, "If I can just find these answers or come up with some solutions"—based on what I now realize were really good research skills—"then maybe I'll get noticed." And sure enough, it really worked. I found that I kept getting better projects and better projects.

I wouldn't say—I don't think I was mentored. And I think that it was largely the times. I can't think of anyone else, really, that was mentored in the area where I sat—all the brand-new lawyers who just started, or had been there just for a couple years.

But I will say that there was a woman who ran the international tax group at Price Waterhouse, Marianne Burge. I still remember it to this day. She usually had mostly men around her. I can't remember any female partners back in the day.

But I remember her, and it just kept telling us—telling me and my fellow female entry-level, starting-off-on-their-careers women—that we knew there could be a chance. But also, even though I grew up under resourced, underprivileged—not a whole lot of anything—I never thought that opportunities would be blocked.

And so, I—in my own head—I've always been fearless. In my head, I was going to do whatever I needed to do, and I was going to make whatever I needed to make happen. So, I think that this is a long way of saying I saw one woman there, and I thought, "Lady, you have a chance."

That's what I'm saying to myself, JoAnn. I had a group of female colleagues, and we all talked about it. "Who's going to do this?" Because everyone looked up to the partners—that's what you did. And I think that's what associates everywhere still do.

You say, "One day, I'm going to be a partner." In fact, I still have colleagues that are friends from my first days in New York, in 1990, and they will tell you that they never doubted that I would be a partner.

And it's interesting. It's not that I was born with anything special, or anything other than that internal drive and perhaps never allowing the imposter syndrome to overwhelm me.

Len: That's a really useful way of thinking about it. And I want to go back to this point about digging for answers and working hard late into the night. My experience was similar as a junior lawyer at Cravath, and that was you get asked the question, you got to go find the answer.

The whole point of legal research is to come up with the answer you should give to clients. But I have observed that now my job is actually less about answers. I know a lot of answers off the top of my head, but it's more about actually formulating the right questions.

When you're trying to attract new business, you want to ask a lot of questions about the type of transaction people are working on. If people ask you a question, you want to make sure you understand all the right facts. If people don't know what question to ask you, they're just kind of telling you a bunch of stuff.

It seems to me that my job at this point is to help develop questions—maybe hard questions—and then have my team answer them, or come up with possible answers to them. And I wonder, do you see your job now as more about questions and less about answers? To me, it's kind of a part of professional maturity that I'm really just starting to understand.

JoAnn: Absolutely. But I would advise our young associates, our young clerks, to learn how to look at the broader landscape. I think this is something that, when I moved over into the legal group with tax many years ago at DTE, I really worked hard with my team—my lawyers—because so often, I view it as like a deposition: asked and answered. That's all I see.

And sometimes I still see that from outside counsel: asked and answered. Well, what if I didn't ask you the right question? Then you're answering the wrong question.

And so, really helping our teams fully engage in that inquiry is something that—I don't think it's just our responsibility, I think it's all the way down. I think what happens, Len, is that we just get better at it as we get older, right? Because you do have to develop some technical prowess around all of this.

So, if you're not technical, it's hard to even begin to surmise what questions. But I love when you have a various-business-unit partner call you in the office, and they ask you a very specific question, and then I make them back up: "Can you tell me a little bit more? Help me understand what you're trying to do."

You need to develop a little bit of that inquiry and consulting desire. And it's even more important when you're trying to solve very difficult problems.

Because more often than not, in the tax world—and you and I have seen this—we don't have as much case law as everyone, and we don't have as many on-point or precedential information out there. So, it's really important that you understand the problem.

The reality is—especially my current job as general counsel—not everyone's going to take the opinion and utilize it in our building. But I want to make sure that I understand practically what they're trying to do, so that I'm not answering the wrong question.

Len: Well, one of the themes that's come up a lot in the podcast is about how tax people have different clients depending on the circumstances. Sometimes it's the tax director; sometimes it's the GC; sometimes it's the board.

But if you think about a client as somebody who's going to take your advice and do something with it, it's fine—it's passable; it's a C—to say, "Yeah. The answer is you get a deduction in this taxable period. Thanks for calling."

But it's better to say, "Well, interesting. The facts are complicated. There's a whole body of law that says you get a deduction in this taxable period, and there's a whole body of law that says you get a deduction in the next taxable period, and it sounds like you're really in the first one," as opposed to just like, "The answer is red. And the answer is blue."

Over time, the professional maturity and the real growth in this industry is about saying, "Well, are we sure we're looking for a color? How do we know we're looking for a color? Aren't we looking for something else? A shape?"

And as an external advisor, I constantly relearn how valuable it is to client relationships when you ask clients more questions, and you feel them trusting you more when you're able to have that kind of exchange before you give formal advice.

JoAnn: I love that, Len, and I think that's what I enjoyed about our time together. The one thing I would augment to that component is also: do homework when you have a new client.

So, the older JoAnn says, "Maybe I should read their most recent 10K." At least the verbiage—not necessarily the numbers, because not all of our attorneys will understand that.

Read the verbiage. Maybe pull their proxy, see if there've been any recent press releases, before I start researching what I perceive to be their problem. And I think that little investment will pay exponential benefits.

Because now, when we have a conversation, and I ask you a non-technical question—more of a pragmatic question—you're far more likely to be able to respond, or at least think about it.

I always think tax is somewhat industry-benign. Obviously there are some rules that are more specific to utilities, like I do at international. But overall, if you're a great tax professional, you can learn any industry. I like to think it is industry agnostic.

The art of it, though, is to be able to understand—going back to what I said before—this problem that you're trying to solve. And, in order to fully understand it—unless they ask me, "What is the length of depreciation for a given asset," which is probably pretty black and white, depending on the asset, most of the things that you encounter when you work at the Cravaths, when you work at the Price Waterhouses in New York City, are not that black and white.

And so, I think that investing in knowing as much as you can about the client, even pulling old memos—this is likely some partner's client that they've had for years—asking that partner, "Can you give me a little background on this?"

We don't mean not to tell you all the background. Sometimes we're all just running too fast and furiously. We forget that you know nothing about this, or what the context is of the question being asked.

So, I do think it is maturity. But I think it's important, especially as a young tax lawyer who wants to distinguish themselves—go above and beyond. Obviously, you want to dominate the technical component. Always do that, clearly—be right. Don't bring the wrong answer. But, more critically, know your landscape and understand the practical implications for that given client.

Len: It's great advice. So, I want to go back to this moment when you were growing in the accounting world, and I know that eventually you became an international tax partner at KPMG. Is it relevant to talk about how you switched from PwC to KPMG?

JoAnn: It is relevant. I was looking for a change of pace. So, here I am, this little girl from the Midwest with a working-class family.

We had good work ethics, but boy, New York was just intense. It never stopped. And I just felt like it was all so much for me. So, I decided that I was going to take my show on the road, and I had family that lived in Tampa, Florida, and—I don't know—hey, why not go to Tampa? I'm 27 years old, 28, single. I can go anywhere in the world that I want to. And that was really my mentality.

So, I moved to Tampa. And then, eventually, I joined the KPMG office in Tampa. But it's small. They had no lawyers, but it was awesome because I got to do research. I wrote PLRs, requests.

But then—even though I grew up in Detroit, I like to think I was groomed in New York as a big city girl. And so, I got a little bored. And eventually, I was able to find my first international assignment. Remember, I was going to travel the world. And, I went to Mexico City. And I went with KPMG in their international tax group, NAFTA. And it really changed my whole life.

I was learning Mexican tax, U.S. international tax. I was speaking about Mexican tax. I was perfecting. I had a tutor. So, I'm learning Spanish, and I'm living there as an expat. It was unbelievable. It was everything that I had anticipated or hoped for when I had that initial dream of traveling the world.

Len: And what kind of work were you doing? Were you doing big international tax puzzles and planning projects for multinational corporations that were KPMG's clients?

JoAnn: Yes. It was U.S. international tax. We had a group of U.S. practitioners down there, both on tax and audit.

Now, I'm still the junior tax person at this point, but it was amazing. And I think what I loved about it is it was both this eye-opening experience from an international tax perspective, but also this cultural experience.

What I learned was, I really belong nowhere. Because I grew up in the U.S., they didn't view me as fully Mexican. And then, when you're in the U.S., they don't view you as that, because I look more Mexican and my last name is Mexican.

So, that's a sidebar. It's just a very interesting perspective. And it was a two-year assignment, and then I came back—I had family things that I needed to take care of, and my family still lived in Detroit.

When I say that I didn't have resources—my dad actually died right after I finished law school. And then my one sister—I ended up moving back to Michigan to take care of her three kids, and I eventually adopted them.

And our kids are 27, 28 and 29. And I got them when they were 4, 5 and 6, the year I made partner at KPMG. I tell it: when I made partner, I got three kids and I built a new house.

Len: That sounds like a lot for a year.

JoAnn: It was a lot.

Len: Now, some people have described making partner at professional service firms like these as a pie-eating contest where the prize is more pie. How did you feel about it? Did you feel like, "Well, now I've got what I've always wanted and I'm going to keep doing this"? Or did you feel like the challenges were new challenges?

JoAnn: I've never said the pie analogy. I always say, "You always want to hold the brass ring, and then you realize you're just holding the brass ring." And so, it was great, but it was really hard.

It was hard because of the rainmaking component. And that's the part that no one teaches you. And I think it's the part, especially in our tax world—and I say this with the utmost love and adoration of every tax person across the country—you comfortably or uncomfortably need to learn how to really work and chat with clients, and not be hyper-technical.

Because, honestly, that's what makes or breaks all of the rainmaking. Not everyone needs to be a partner, nor will everyone be a partner. But it does require an extra bit of effort.

Len: This is worth dwelling on, because you can't become a partner at firms like these without being an excellent mid-level associate worker. And to be an excellent mid-level associate worker, you need to be excellent technically.

You need to always come with the right answer. You need to serve your clients well and effectively. But when you become a partner, your job is to create a team and to shepherd a team that does all of those things. And also, your job is to find new business for the firm.

And so, in tax, I think it's especially dangerous, because so many people can be outstanding technicians and therefore excellent associates. And they get to be at a certain level of seniority, and they become partner, and they realize that what's asked of them is so much different than what used to be asked of them.

And I think the firms sort of realize, too: "Oh, we need to be selecting partners maybe differently than we have been." It's not enough to be excellent technically but no good at the other stuff.

And you're absolutely right that it's kind of like an on-the-job training, and everybody has to develop this for themselves. My experience has been that, first of all, I enjoy getting to develop deeper relationships with clients and growing my network—this podcast is, I think, one example of that.

But there's no one way to do it. It's just a matter of understanding that it is part of the job, and then leaning into it in a way that resonates with your own personality or your own preferences. Some people like to go participate in panels; other people like to write papers (maybe co-write papers) with clients; other people like to go out to dinners or ball games. I mean, there's all sorts of different ways to develop relationships, but it's important that you pick one, or a couple, and get good at it.

JoAnn: I think you need to try many of them because we're not all great at them. I was never a great golfer, but I learned how to golf. I know the rules. I knew I was going to have to do that, especially as a female partner. Otherwise, they would only invite my male colleagues. And—just to put this into perspective—in 2000, when I made partner, there were only 35 people who made partner that year. Only three women.

So, we are definitely moving everything in the right direction, but I was still absolutely in the minority. And so, learning how to adapt through different things—not just speaking at conferences or writing, but trying a number of things.

I don't really love sports, Len. But I always read the front page of the local newspaper so that I know what the Detroit Lions are doing, what the Tigers are doing, what the Pistons are doing. Even today, it's something that I need to have so that at least I can bring myself into the conversation.

Not every conversation is going to be an in-depth technical conversation. And so, gaining those skills and having those outside interests, even when it's uncomfortable—and it's really important, Len, to say this—it is not always comfortable.

Every once in a while, I walk into one of those networking rooms, wherever it is. And I'm still part of this small group of people that doesn't feel like they belong there. No one's being rude to me. This is all in little girl JoAnn's head.

Because that little girl still sits inside there, believe it or not. But what I do know is that I have to force myself out of the comfort zone.

And you'll figure out, by forcing yourself out of your zones, which avenues are best for you.

Len: That's great. I mean, it is great advice to say you have to go outside of your comfort zone, and that is a skill. Beyond that is the skill of, "Oh, now I've formed a relationship. I've deepened a relationship." Sometimes it's luck, because the person you had a relationship with becomes a general counsel and can really become a great client. But first, it starts with just making the effort and trying to figure out what works well with you.

So, now let's talk about your decision to go in-house to the tax group at DTE. Do you remember how that opportunity came to you and what sorts of decisions you had to make?

JoAnn: I do. I had left KPMG probably a couple years before. Again, there's a pattern with JoAnn—she gets a little bored. I finally got the kids settled, and I got everyone together. I take in a relatively smaller job so I could get my family in order.

And this is important, especially for your working parents. I made what I deem to be the right decision by leaving KPMG. I made what I deem to be the right decision by taking a small director job in a small tax shop.

And I'm sitting here now as the general counsel of DTE. I think everything in life happens for a reason if you do the things that you believe are right, not what someone else believes. So, I didn't want to leave this conversation without that.

But then this headhunter found me at this—and when I say small company—really small company. And it happened to be in the petroleum business outside of Detroit. DTE was looking for a new VP of tax, and this large recruiting firm found me.

And it just happened that the CEO, COO and general counsel at the time were all Notre Dame alum. And what does that mean? It means that I come with a little built-in credibility. It doesn't mean I get the job—of course not. But it means they know how I was educated, and they know the rigor I went through.

And I had also been a partner, obviously, with KPMG, which thereby kind of rounded out my credibility. The one thing that was important for me to talk to them about was that I still had three small kids.

So, by this time they're like 7, 8 and 9. They're still little, and they were still going to be my priority. And I chatted with the then CFO who hired me, and I said, "Listen, this is really important to me." And he said, "No problem." And it was incredible, and it really worked.

Now, my work ethic is pretty extreme. So, I worked when the kids went to bed and got up super early. So, I was always doing work. I just may not have done it always in the traditional hours when everyone else would stay at the office until eight o'clock at night. I no longer could do that. I had to get my kids to bed and then go back to work. And I never had a problem.

Len: A couple parts of this really resonate with me. First, I'm not sure if we've ever spoken about this—but my wife and I have seven children.

JoAnn: I heard about that.

Len: You heard about it, OK. I came to Cravath with four, and I had my younger three children all while I was an associate, including my seventh when I was a seventh-year associate. And I remember juggling stuff. But the point is really that nobody gets a pass because of these obligations.

You have to earn your reputation. You have to earn your credentials. You have to earn your stripes, even though you've got these things going on. And as you said, that sometimes requires working in odd hours. So, that's one point.

But the second point is the point you made about the decision that you thought was right for you. It really resonates with me, because my life is not just Cravath. My life is not just that I have seven kids.

My life is like all of these things thrown together in a blender, and every day it's kind of got a different flavor to it. Some days it's overbalanced towards work, other days it's overbalanced towards what's going on in my family.

But still, these are my choices, and I'm trying to make it work as best I can. And I'm hearing the same sort of thing from you, and I feel validated.

JoAnn: Yeah, I call it: "I lead an integrated life." There's no such thing as work-life balance. Not when you are a senior professional like we are, Len. There's no such life.

And so, I just know that I'm going to work as hard as I can on whatever is the most pressing—whether it be a DTE matter, whether it be my 9-year-old granddaughter who needs something. And I do my best with everything.

And I think this is something to remind all of our young professionals: they have to dominate their boxes first. I didn't get to sit in any of these seats without dominating.

Meaning, I worked really hard. I learned as much as I could in my area of specialty. I was able to be agile with the international and move that into a federal tax practice, a state and local tax practice, a litigation tax practice—all the various tax practices that I had within my home at DTE. And I think it's really important to never forget that.

But if you are a great integrator and a great dominator of your technical, they never doubt us. I remember calling my former boss years ago, and—there were some things going on.

I remember calling him, telling him, "Listen, some stuff is a little bit off the rails. If you need me to take a leave of absence, I will."

He said, "You don't need to. You've always brought your best." But that was earned, right? And so, I think that's my advice: earn that. Because there's going to be a moment that you're going to need it. Things in life are not predictable, and things at work aren't, and you just have to figure it out.

But I agree. I am far more than a mother, a grandmother, a general counsel, a tax professional. I have my own nonprofit now. I love to cut down trees on my six acres. So, I think there's so much more to us, and I think it's really important that our young people know that you can have more, because I've had more for a really long time.

Len: Amazing. OK, we have to come back to the nonprofit and to the cutting down trees on six acres. But the one last professional piece of this I wanted to get—at the risk of making you seem too one-dimensional—is the transition that you made from being the head of tax at DTE to being the general counsel.

I mean, that is admirable. It's unusual. It's fascinating. So, what's the story? How did that happen, and when did it happen?

JoAnn: So, in about 2014—what's my theme? I got a little bored. The kids were all settled, a little bit older— in high school—so things were easier at home.

And so, I was getting bored. So, I speak to the fam, and nobody wants to move—no one.

You've probably been through this, Len. And I thought, "Well, I still have a long runway ahead of me." Back in 2016, I was a bit younger. So, I looked around at DTE and thought, "Well, what other jobs can I do?" I'm like, "Well, don't really have any operations experience. That's probably a big stretch."

And then I thought, "Well, I'm a tax lawyer." And the beauty of being in-house was that I was running tax litigation. I was able to testify in front of Congress. I was working with the IRS directly in Washington, working with lobbyists. And what I love about tax is, there's so many different practice areas in tax.

And I had done so many of them, and I thought, "When we bring people in from the outside, they have very narrow concentrations. What's wrong with mine?" And mine is actually pretty broad, quite frankly.

And so, I started talking to senior leaders about "What about me?" There might be an opportunity in several years—"What about me?" And by 2016, they agreed to put me on an assignment with tax.

Tax came with me into the legal group, and I became the VP of legal and tax. And I found there were so many synergies, and it wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it could have been.

And by 2019, when the general counsel was ready to retire, I had proven myself. And the board and the then-incoming CEO both asked me—and approved—my becoming a general counsel.

Len: I love a lot of things about this story, but the two things I think I really respect the most are: number one—whether out of boredom or something else—I really respect you appreciating your own ambition, your own desire to do something else.

But the second thing is, you are unafraid—and I think this comes from your personal characteristics but also your experience—you're unafraid to vocalize that to other people, to say, "Hey, I see myself doing other stuff. Here are some things I see myself doing."

And it really helps people view one in a different way, to sort of say, like, "Hey, yeah, JoAnn's not just a tax person. She could do a project like this." And it also helps them look for opportunities, so that when this opportunity came up, they gave you the keys, and they let you be the VP of this legal function.

And of course you're allowed to then shine in that environment. And then, when the GC job comes up, "Of course—JoAnn's perfect for this." And it really requires a lot of self-awareness, on the one hand, and then a lot of self-confidence, on the other, to be able to convince others to see you the way you want to be seen. That's hard stuff.

JoAnn: It is hard stuff, but it's worth every minute. My goal, I would say—I like to be intellectually challenged. It's who I am. But I will say that you kind of have to push yourself if you have those desires.

I'll tell you, Len, if my family had said they would've moved, I would be a tax professional still. I love tax. I love the problem solving. I love the questions. I love the ever-changing law. But that's what I love about my new role. It just gave me a new option to learn so much more.

Len: Well, on a personal note, for me—and I think for Cravath—it was incredibly fortuitous that all this happened, because it wasn't much longer after you'd become GC that we started working on the deal we worked on together—which was a spinoff, a separation of one of your businesses.

And that, of course, is an incredibly intense tax transaction. The fact that you are the GC who had this immense tax background and aptitude and affinity was remarkable, because we never do tax-free spins with GCs who have that background. Normally, it's like, "Oh my gosh, why do I have to talk to these tax lawyers again about these special, intricate rules?" It was a really quite a remarkable experience for us.

JoAnn: It was incredible. We should see more GCs from tax.

I think it's because our tax world—first of all, it's so broad, and it trains us to think so broadly when you're really great at it. And it makes you a great GC because I knew all about DTE's businesses because I've worked in tax in all of them.

So, I already knew all the businesses and understood our electric and gas companies. And I tell everyone, "I think this is an incredible foundation for any future position." But especially, I see it as a GC. You could be a CFO. You could be a COO, maybe. I just think sky is the limit.

Len: Yeah—I mean, I think the process of doing tax can be a very vertical thing. You got to learn a lot about a lot of things. You got to go very deep into some areas.

But at a company like yours, in an in-house role like yours, you're cutting across the entire business—you're dealing with finance; you're dealing with business operations; you're sometimes dealing with the board; you're dealing with accounting. And so, your facility with the company and all the constituencies within a company is just remarkable from a tax perspective.

OK, so now we've gotten to the point in the podcast where I like to talk to people about what you like to do in your spare time. And you've already mentioned a couple things.

You've mentioned this nonprofit, and you've mentioned something about cutting trees. Can we talk about those, and then any other hobbies that you like to do?

JoAnn: I'll start with my favorite hobby, and that's spending time with my 9-year-old granddaughter.

Len: OK. I figured that was part of it.

JoAnn: It's number one. She's an amazing human. And I think I have finally balanced my life. I think now I have integrated it almost to an art, where I feel like I can give her quality me time.

And so, it is just so fun. She's phenomenal. She's a very strong Latina who is going to be a boss like her mimi. She doesn't know what else I do—but she's going to be a boss. And so, I think that's awesome.

And then my part-time job, which is my purpose in life, is to help advance Latinos. I grew up in a family that didn't have much and had been in the U.S. for a very long time, because the border had moved on us in Texas when my great-grandparents were young—great, great, great. Just go back.

And so, it was important for me to build opportunity for other people that looked like me. And I've tried to be that voice of the underserved. In 2018, I started the Michigan Hispanic Collaborative with a group of other Latino professionals.

And what I can tell you is that my education changed my life, and I want every young Latino to have the opportunity to have an education. I navigated this path by myself, without any guidance—no mentors.

So, I just want to give them more guidance, and that's what we work on. We start with juniors in high school and stay with them all the way through early career. I have my own Chávez Family Law Fellowship, which is a Notre Dame scholarship for Latino law students. And so, I want more Latino law students out there to follow in my path.

Actually, I want them to be better than me. I want them to go to Big Law. I want them to be big partners. And I'm going to give a special shout-out to my most recent grad, Javier Gomez, who is going to be a first-year associate at Mayer Brown in Chicago.

And he comes from similar upbringing to me from Toledo, Ohio. So, just giving others that opportunity is the most critical thing for me—and try to pave the way. It shouldn't have to be this hard. It shouldn't have to be this complicated.

I work with a lot of great people who are in the organization, with a lot of remarkable talent—with kids with so much promise. And I want everyone to have equal opportunities.

Len: I imagine that you are now seeing, if you started in 2018, some of the very first students who've gone through your program go through college, go to law school, get these kinds of jobs. But it strikes me—and I'm sure you've thought of this—that in 10 or 15 years, you're going to have alumni from this group. It's just going to be a flywheel. They're going to be mentoring people just like them. That's really remarkable.

JoAnn: Yeah. And it's exciting. And I'll tell you, Len, people do want to be tax lawyers. And I think because they see opportunity—actually, sometimes you can't be what you can't see.

And so, when I go speak at the Latino Law Student Association—whatever law school—they see a woman who is formerly a tax partner, now a GC, and they think, "Wow. Maybe I can do this." It's what Marianne Burge did for me many years ago. I saw something and then said, "Maybe me too."

Len: It seems to me that a lot of young professionals who come from resources, they have a lot of exposure to these concepts.

Maybe their parents are lawyers (corporate lawyers, litigators, whatever). So, the whole idea of "I'm going to court, I'm going to trial," or these kinds of things, are more natural for them. But for tax, basically nobody has any kind of background in tax, right?

I mean, I didn't find tax until law school. You didn't. And I took four really hard tax classes in law school, and I did well in them, but I can still say 99 percent-plus of the tax I know I learned on the job. Nobody passed that down to me, and I think that's true for a lot of people in tax.

And so, maybe uniquely among some of the specialties that these big law firms practice in, tax is a slightly more level playing field. Everybody kind of comes to it with the same amount of, "I have no idea what this is." And they kind of have to learn it on their own. So, I'm gratified to hear that some of these folks are really finding traction in the tax world.

JoAnn: I absolutely agree. We all come in with our big eyes, like: "Oh my God, I have no idea what I'm doing. What is this problem?"

Len: There's something intuitive about it too. So, if you were, like, a great eighth grade student in math, OK, awesome. But that's not going to help you in tax.

JoAnn: I love that reflection. Now I'm going to work on that.

Len: I hadn't thought about it much before, but as you were talking, it sort of came to mind. OK, and the last thing I've got to ask you about are these trees. So, you have six acres, and you're cutting down trees. Tell me about this.

JoAnn: So, during COVID, we're all stuck at home, and I just needed some outlet. And so, I saw a dead tree on our property, and I thought, "I'm going to go cut that thing down." But first, I thought, "I got to go buy myself a battery-operated chainsaw."

So, I got a small one and started cutting, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this is the best thing on earth." And I still do it. I own like four chainsaws now, and I still cut down many of our dead trees and replant trees.

But yes, I love it—it's so cathartic.

Len: I believe it. There's something very physical about it.

If you spend an afternoon cutting down a tree, you have this big thing that was there—it's not there anymore. Now you got a pile over there.

And there's something, I think, very cathartic—as you say—about the fact that, like, I had that, and now I have this different thing over here. That's pretty neat.

Well, JoAnn Chávez, the Senior Vice President and Chief Legal Officer of DTE Energy in Detroit has been our guest today. JoAnn, this has been an absolute treat to catch up with you and to hear these stories. Thanks for joining us.

JoAnn: Thank you for having me. This has been my pleasure.

Len: That's all for this episode of On Tax—A Cravath Podcast. You can find us online at cravath.com/podcast. And don't forget to subscribe on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

If you enjoyed the show, please consider rating or reviewing us wherever you listen. We'd also love to hear from you directly. You can tell us what you'd like to hear on the show by emailing podcast@cravath.com. I'm your host, Len Teti. Thanks for listening.