

# Minnesota Law

SPRING 2020

THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA LAW SCHOOL MAGAZINE



## Propelling the Emerging Economy

Alumni Lead the Way on New Frontiers  
of Law and Commerce

SHIVANI PARIKH '13  
HEAD OF WEST COAST OPERATIONS  
BLADE URBAN MOBILITY



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# PROPELLING THE EMERGING ECONOMY

Shivani Parikh '13



## From Uber to Tesla, from big data to CBD, Minnesota Law alumni are creating the future of work and leisure

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BY KATHY GRAVES

**W**hen **Shivani Parikh '13** took her first post-law school job working in mergers and acquisitions at the Chicago office of PricewaterhouseCoopers, few would have predicted that her career trajectory would take her to three emerging economy startups over the next seven years.

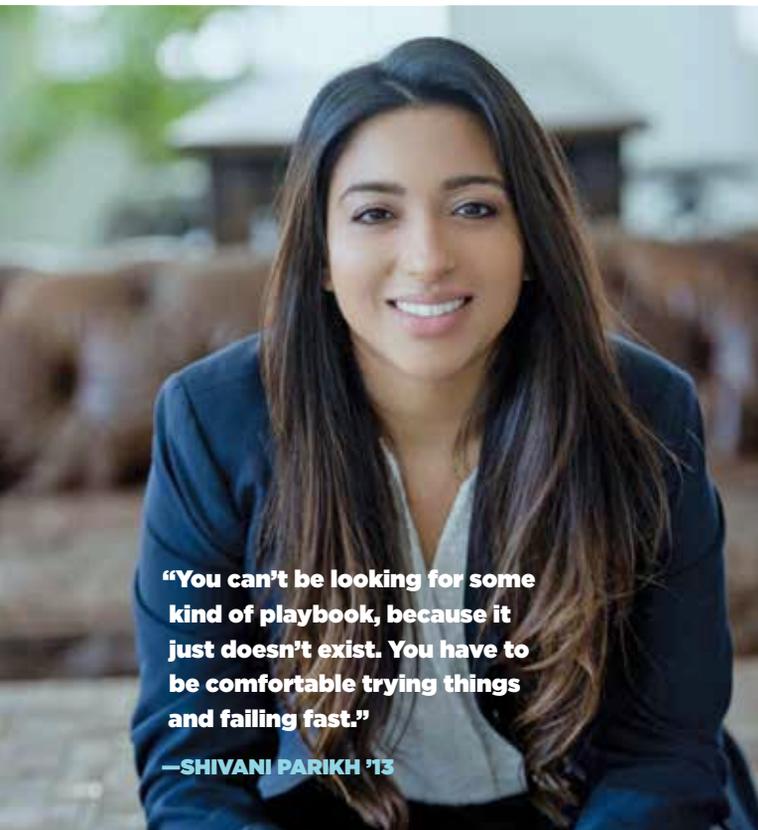
Today, Parikh's resume boasts major strategy and operational positions at ride-hailing giant Uber, electric scooter-sharing pioneer Bird, and, most recently, BLADE Urban Air Mobility, an aviation company that provides short-distance travel in and out of city centers, primarily via helicopter.

Parikh says her law degree has given her a big advantage in the world of new economy startups, where ambiguity is the name of game. "You have to be comfortable figuring out solutions," she explains. "You can't be looking for some kind of playbook, because it just doesn't exist. You have to be comfortable trying things and failing fast. I would write a check again tomorrow to Minnesota Law for learning how to become so comfortable with uncertainty. The way law school teaches you to think can make you ready for success in almost every aspect of life."

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The term “emerging” or “new” economy developed in the late 1990s, primarily in response to the tremendous effect of technology on businesses and the marketplace. The evolving definition now includes several subsectors, including the sharing economy, streaming economy, artificial intelligence, and big data. Concepts that are core to the new economy—innovation, automation, speed, fluidity, and rapid problem-solving—have profoundly affected both the practice and teaching of law. Minnesota Law has made significant additions to its course offerings and invested in field-leading faculty to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in the new economy (see related story, “Preparing Today’s Students for Tomorrow’s World,” on page 24).



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“We embrace our ability to propel legal education forward in important new ways so our graduates will become effective problem-solvers across a variety of fields and industries,” says Dean **Garry W. Jenkins**, William S. Pattee Professor of Law. “We seek to graduate pathbreaking, consensus-building, keenly trained professionals who can solve problems with creativity and integrity in a rapidly changing world.”

Parikh clearly fits that description. She is one of many Minnesota Law graduates who are blazing a trail in new economy companies and in cutting-edge legal areas, ranging from cybersecurity to electric cars, cannabis to competitive videogaming.

## LAWYER AS ENTREPRENEUR

When Parikh moved to Chicago after graduating from law school, she became a frequent user of Uber. Intrigued by the then-emerging ride-sharing service, she kept her eye on the company and talked with people who worked there. A short time later, when offered a position with the Uber operations team, she decided to leave her job at PricewaterhouseCoopers to pursue a more entrepreneurial path.

“I wanted to create and build, and Uber allowed me to do that,” she says. In her position, she tackled regulations, signed up drivers, and quickly learned the world of pricing and on-the-ground marketing. “It was a total startup experience, and I learned I wanted to be a disrupter and leader,” she says. Uber promoted her to lead its West Coast team in Los Angeles, where she helped shape the company’s competitive strategy and investment choices.

When Bird, the electric scooter company, began popping up in California communities, Parikh took note and left Uber to be part of a wholly new startup team. “I was excited to build a company from the ground up,” she says. “We grew from 50 people to hundreds of people in dozens of cities over a year’s time. The business changed so much, and it was so much fun.”

Just a year ago, Parikh was offered another cutting-edge opportunity: to be head of West Coast operations for New York City-based BLADE Urban Air Mobility. “It felt futuristic, like the next mode, the next disruption,” she says. Parikh now oversees market strategy, flight operations, and business development for BLADE in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Parikh says her law degree has been particularly helpful in the early stages of a startup, when the company—including the legal team—is small. “You’re constantly working on business deals and contracts and partnerships, and you’ve got to be able to move on your own. My law degree helps me immensely in that respect.”

When she stepped away from her mergers and acquisitions work, Parikh initially worried that she was leaving her law degree behind. But she now finds that she uses it every day.

“Law school played a vital role in where I’m at today,” Parikh says. “I always had this linear way of thinking. I did accounting in undergrad and learned to follow the rules. But law is much more ambiguous. In fact, I learned in my constitutional law class that there are actually no easy answers! It was a big epiphany and made me accept ambiguity in my whole life.”

## LEADING IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING SPECIALTY

**Aalok Sharma '13** never imagined he would counsel sports businesses—both professional and amateur—on the future of their organizations. But today, as an attorney with Stinson in Minneapolis, Sharma focuses on the rapidly growing fields of competitive esports,

legalized sports wagering, and smart venue technology. Last year, he was named a “leading entertainment and sports lawyer of the next generation” by the American Bar Association.

“The world of sports is changing quickly,” says Sharma, who himself was a Division I track athlete. “The reality now is that people want something more from a sports event. They want to engage with the game and consume content in meaningful ways. At the same time, teams want to facilitate a long-term relationship with fans through memorable game day experiences. This is brand-new territory for sports teams, and the legal issues are constantly evolving. How much data are teams allowed to permissibly gather on their players, and what are they allowed to do with that data? How are front offices going to handle the challenges of legalized sports wagering? How are they going to account for demographic trends that do not value live television broadcasts?”

Sharma began his career as a public accountant in Washington, D.C. In 2008, he was working on an audit for a publicly traded company when, suddenly, the accountants were asked to leave. “I noticed that the lawyers were coming in and everybody was turning to them,” he says. “I knew then that I wanted to be rushing into the room rather than rushing away.”

Soon after, Sharma enrolled at Minnesota Law, where he found a community supportive of his entrepreneurial orientation. “I didn’t want to just follow the rules. I wanted to ask questions and figure out solutions,” he says. “I could do that in law school.” In 2017, he moved to Stinson to build a practice focused on protecting and expanding the future of sport. “I believed there was a business case for the kind of innovative work I wanted to do in the sports field, and Stinson supported my vision. It has worked out well.”

Sharma serves as a board member for the Minnesota Twins Community Fund and the ABA Forum on the Entertainment and Sports Industries. He also is an outreach captain for the Sports Lawyers Association.

As he builds his expertise and client base in the sports arena, Sharma says he is particularly grateful to the professors who taught him the importance of providing practical solutions to real-world problems. “Craig Roen, Brad Clary, and Mitch Zamoff all helped me understand that when clients call with challenges or concerns, my job is to come up with solutions. Because the kind of work I’m doing today is in a brand-new and sometimes risky area of law, I have to be able to think creatively and provide pragmatic advice in an environment without a lot of definition.”



**“I noticed that the lawyers were coming in and everybody was turning to them. I knew then that I wanted to be rushing into the room rather than rushing away.”**

**—AALOK SHARMA ’13**

## FROM REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE TO ELECTRIC CARS

**Lina Houston ’14** went from public defense work to program director for a reproductive justice nonprofit to a family law practice before landing at Tesla, the world’s largest electric car company. As a senior employee relations partner, she conducts investigations of employee concerns.

“I would never have expected to work at Tesla or in this field,” Houston says. “I didn’t even know this type of work existed. We didn’t talk explicitly about it in law school, and I didn’t expect to work in the corporate sector. But the environment at Tesla is so exciting. Everybody cares about the mission and about contribution to a zero-emissions future. It’s a fast-paced, innovative place to be.”

Houston is part of a dedicated team whose job is to conduct neutral investigations of harassment and other claims. “Employee relations is a growing field,” she says. “It’s mission- and values-driven work that speaks to me. Even though I’m now working in a business with 45,000 employees, the heart of my work has the same consistent thread: It’s human-centered and justice-

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oriented. I make sure people have what they need to feel safe, comfortable, and supported. It's a job that can positively impact the culture."

A law degree is advantageous and increasingly necessary in employee relations, Houston says. "My training helps me spot legal issues, and I use legal thinking and writing every day in the work I do."

Houston explored many interests and skills while in law school. "I started with the mindset 'Don't put me in the courtroom,' but then I got into moot court and eventually ended up working with the public defender's office," she says. "I appreciated the ability to be creative and expansive, and I also appreciated the emphasis Minnesota Law placed on making connections. Understanding the importance of a network made all the difference in the world to me."



**"Even though I'm now working in a business with 45,000 employees, the heart of my work has the same consistent thread: It's human-centered and justice-oriented."**

**—LINA HOUSTON '14**

## SPECIALIZING IN LEGAL 'NO MAN'S LAND'

**Lilei Fatehi '10** had just begun law school when the bottom dropped out of the U.S. economy in 2008. She, like many of her classmates caught up in the Great Recession, had to retool and think unconventionally about her career. "We were dealing with a new reality," she says. "As a result, a lot of us went in really interesting directions."

Today, Fatehi is a principal at Apparatus, a general benefit corporation in Minneapolis offering a rare mix of services to clients and projects that "seek the common good." Focused on initiatives at the center of the new economy, Apparatus has a client list that includes an initiative to make self-driving cars accessible and affordable for people with disabilities, a grassroots movement to build support for students with dyslexia, a craft brewers guild focused on creating economic opportunity, and a coalition for legalized recreational use of marijuana.

"My specialty is law in areas in which there is no law," says Fatehi. "I deal in regulatory 'no man's land,' helping clients consider legal and ethical issues in areas where there are few guidelines."

Apparatus's services include a rare mix of public affairs, communications, and advocacy. "We bring together lawyers with deep subject matter expertise, lobbyists who understand how to make things happen, and communications experts who understand how to influence," Fatehi says. "Usually, these fields are separate, but it was obvious to me that clients couldn't afford to have all of these different services on retainer. They needed an integrated option."

Apparatus has a growing portfolio of clients, including several in the emerging cannabis industry, a "passion project" for her and her partners, Fatehi says. "Cannabis prohibition has had a devastating effect on populations of color, yet it's not keeping kids from accessing it," she says. "We need to replace prohibition with legalization and regulation."

Apparatus helped form Minnesotans for Responsible Marijuana Regulation, a coalition of advocates and legislators who believe Minnesota should join other states that have adopted regulations for adult use. Recently, when Fatehi discovered women were underrepresented in the cannabis field, she formed the Minnesota Women's Cannabusiness Association for women entrepreneurs.

Apparatus also is advocating for legislation related to hemp and cannabidiol (CBD). "There is quite a bit of work that needs to be done in terms of product labeling, production standards, and consumer safety," Fatehi says. "And where there is an absence of a legal framework, you can really have an impact."

Fatehi says the opportunities she had in law school and immediately after equipped her to think broadly about how she could use her legal skills. As a law student, she worked as a research assistant with Professor **Susan Wolf** at the Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment & the Life Sciences and was editor of the *Minnesota Journal of Law, Science & Technology*, a position that exposed her to the many ways people were using their legal degrees.

After graduating, Fatehi continued working with the Consortium and joined the University of Minnesota faculty, with cross appointments at the Law School, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, and the Center for Bioethics. She also did a fellowship at the Minnesota State Capitol, where, she says, it became "pretty evident that this was my calling in life."



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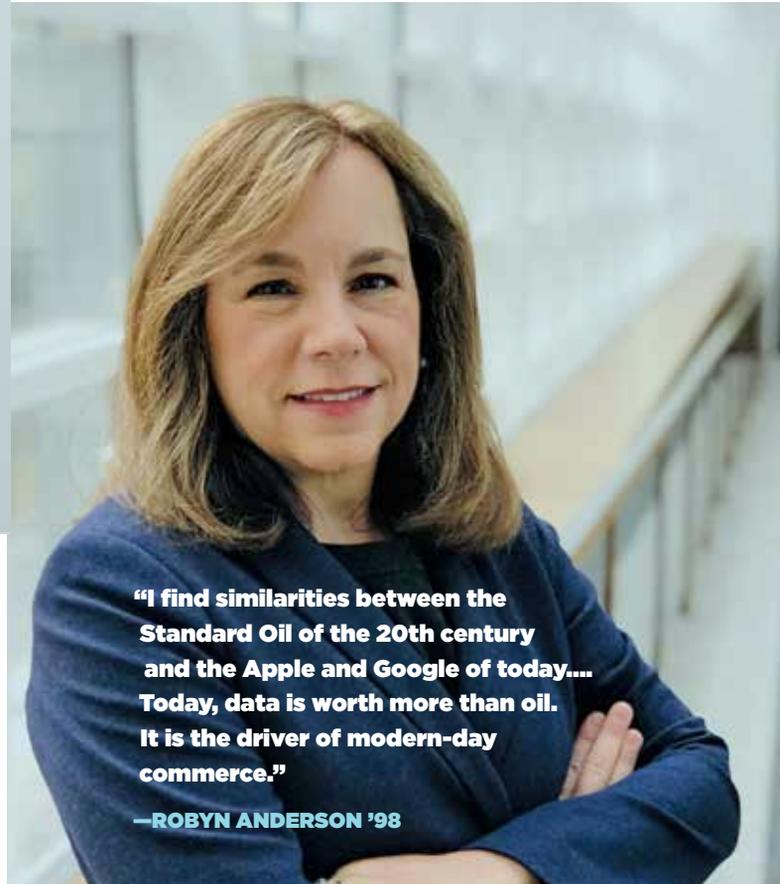
**—LEILI FATEHI '10**

## EMBRACING EMERGENT FIELDS OF LAW

The booming fields of cybersecurity and data privacy law did not exist when **Robyn Anderson '98** was in law school. Yet she notes that there are parallels to the cases she studied then and those at play in today’s new economy companies. “I find similarities between the Standard Oil of the 20th century and the Apple and Google of today,” she says. “Clearly, there are a lot of emerging privacy and data security issues, but at their core these issues are about understanding the role of powerful companies in our society and how we balance individual rights with commerce and innovation. Today, data is worth more than oil. It is the driver of modern-day commerce.”

Anderson served for more than a dozen years as chief cybersecurity and privacy counsel for Old Republic National Title Insurance Company and is a frequent lecturer across the country on topics related to data security and privacy. “Globally, there is an ongoing conversation about how we are going to order our society when it comes to data,” says Anderson. “Innovation vs. loss of privacy and individual autonomy, facial recognition surveillance vs. legitimate use, device encryption vs. backdoor government access are some of the tensions I see being debated now and into the future.”

Prior to her position with Old Republic Title, which she left in January, Anderson worked in both small and large firms with antitrust practices. Today, as she contemplates her next career move, she is clear that she will stay involved in cybersecurity and privacy law. “We are at the cusp of so many emerging technologies,



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**—ROBYN ANDERSON '98**

just within artificial intelligence alone. There is going to be an ongoing need for smart and creative lawyers who are interested in the intersection of law, technology, and individual rights.”

Anderson values the way law school trained her to approach and analyze a legal problem. “It’s not just about learning the law—it’s about learning the reasons for the law. What’s behind it, what effect it is going to have? That’s what’s beneficial about a law degree. It trains you to think about things in several dimensions rather than simply recite a law or statute or regulation. Certainly, it helped me learn to work with clients on issues that impact innovation.”

Because her fields of expertise are both expanding and changing quickly, Anderson emphasizes the importance of continual learning. “It’s important that you have a desire to understand and learn and want to keep learning. That’s what makes the practice of law so interesting. I like to ask people, ‘Are you willing to try something new? Are you curious?’ That’s vital.” ■■■

Kathy Graves is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer.