

Pioneers and Pathfinders: Juan Carlos Varela
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Kevin Young: Welcome to Pioneers and Pathfinders, Seyfarth's podcast about the people and ideas reshaping the legal industry. I'm Kevin Young, an employment litigator and counselor, and I've spent my career putting new tools and ideas to work in client service and helping colleagues and clients to do the same.

Zeynep Ersin: And I'm Zeynep Ersin. I lead innovation and design thinking at Seyfarth, focusing on reimagining how legal services are built, delivered, and experienced. Each episode, we sit down with someone on the front lines of legal innovation to unpack what they're doing and what it means for where our industry is headed. We'll keep it fresh, we'll keep it fun, and we'll keep it to 30 minutes. Let's jump in.

Today, Kevin and I are joined by Juan Carlos Varela, office managing partner of Seyfarth's Miami office and chair of the firm's Latin America practice. Throughout his career, Juan Carlos has advised clients on complex cross-border matters throughout the Americas and built a reputation as a leading international business lawyer.

Kevin Young: With Miami rapidly emerging as one of the world's most important hubs for international business investment and cross-border commerce, there's perhaps no better person than Juan Carlos to help us understand what that means for businesses, the legal industry, and the future of global business. So let's get into it.

Zeynep Ersin: Juan Carlos, welcome.

Juan Carlos Varela: Thank you so much for inviting me. It's a pleasure to be here and an honor to talk to you today.

Zeynep Ersin: So to kind of kick things off, from your perspective, in the opening of the Miami office and the "why now" in particular, what do you think makes Miami an important market for Seyfarth or really any global law firm?

Juan Carlos Varela: Miami is no longer just a simple getaway or place that people come to have a nice tourist vacation. It is no longer only the getaway for Latin America. It is becoming that true global business center in its own right. I mean, it connects the United States with Latin America. It connects now the United States with Europe, with Asia and the Middle East and many other international markets. For any law firm, being in Miami is the place to start doing business in a great scale.

Kevin Young: I think I told you before, I'm a Floridian as well. I'm from a different part of Florida, from Jacksonville. But I know from spending a lot of time in the state just how much Miami has changed over the years. What are the changes you've seen in this city that kind of brought it to this moment, to this point where it is really this gateway to so many important international markets?

Juan Carlos Varela: Great question. I think that, number one, the GDP of this city has increased triple in the last almost 20 years. We have seen almost 200 elite firms for

venture capital, private equity. We host more than 2,000 multinational headquarters in Miami. And the volume and complexity of the cross-border business has increased significantly. So companies from Miami are entering new markets, restructuring supply chains and nearshoring, moving people across, dealing with sanctions, compliance risk. That wasn't here in Miami 20 years ago and now it's here to stay and it's actually increasing. If you just walk through some of the main financial sectors at Brickell, you see a new building coming up every single year. And the landscape has changed completely. I was talking to my wife the other day. I was driving downtown Miami and said, "Look, when we came here 27 years ago, nothing of this was here. It was two buildings. That's it." Now it looks like a new Manhattan all over the place.

Kevin Young: If you could share with us and with the listeners kind of what your career was like, how you landed in legal and obviously ultimately what brought you to Miami to begin with?

Juan Carlos Varela: I'm a very proud son of immigrants. They went from Spain a long time ago. They went to Venezuela. I was born in Venezuela, born and raised. And then I decided, because of the political situation, to move my family to the United States. So I was admitted in Venezuela and started practicing international law. But then I moved to Miami to practice international law from Miami. It was just easier. It was, of course—my family was safe. And then I was looking for the American dream, and that's what I did. What I did when I moved to this country, I started studying law school again. I got admitted in the Florida bar and I also decided to get admitted in other countries as well because it was important for my practice. So I'm admitted in Mexico and admitted also in Colombia. I have two kids. One was brought when he was three years old and also another was born here in Florida. So for me, Florida is my second home or my real home. And being a son of immigrants, I know how difficult it is to be in a new city, but I have seen Miami and Florida in general grow from almost nothing to be a determining factor in the legal community and many other industries like real estate, private equity, as I said, innovation, security, defense, government contracts, and so on.

Kevin Young: Juan Carlos, your story is interesting and unique and quite frankly inspiring. I'm curious, the tour you took to get where you are today, how has that shaped how you view leadership, both within the firm context and I'd say also within the business context with the deals you work on, the transactions and the matters you get to oversee?

Juan Carlos Varela: I think that my way of thinking has changed so much since I moved from country to country. Just being international and being part of so many cultures at the same time gave me the opportunity to understand that things are done differently and there is not only one way to do things. There are many different ways to solve a problem. And especially if you have different backgrounds like me—I have Spanish culture from my parents, I also have Venezuelan, Latin culture from my days that I lived in Venezuela, but I also have an American culture from all the years I've been working and living in this wonderful country. So it gives me a different perspective. So putting that into perspective, it allows me, when a client has an issue, to give that client solutions based on different perspectives. It's not the same thing that maybe a lawyer

that is always in a specific industry or in a specific country that tries to practice international law. It is not the same way they can approach issues and offer solutions to our clients. And the reality is that the clients are not located in a single place anymore. They are located globally. They're in different places and they have multiple nationalities in the same office.

Kevin Young: The landscape has evolved to the degree in which it has. What do you think clients in Miami and in Latin America are asking or expecting of their law firms and outside counsel differently today than maybe, say, 10, 15, 20 years ago? How has that evolved and changed?

Juan Carlos Varela: Our clients are asking for greater coordination. They are asking for more predictability. They want more commercial judgment. They don't want just multiple lawyers and local firms just telling them what the law is. They are asking more and more, especially in Miami and the region, for an early strategic plan. They want to make sure we can provide a realistic timeline, budget discipline, and regular communication. They also want us to use technology appropriately and how technology can reduce the cost, but at the same time offer more strategic advice. On that, our clients are asking for more practical advice. I had a call yesterday with a major client that wants us to deal with all Latin American matters. And the main reason they call us is because they know we give practical advice. They don't want to know what the law requires, but they want to understand options, risks, business consequences of each decision they make, because the region is so complex regarding all the sanctions imposed to certain places, but at the same time so many opportunities in different countries. They want to take advantage of the benefits, of course, and having no liability risks, and they want strategic advice. Just giving the clients what the law says is just not enough anymore. And we are seeing that every single time. Not even for very sophisticated clients—we are seeing it for every single client that is actually approaching us in the region.

Kevin Young: Well, Juan Carlos, we hear clients say that all the time, that they want the practical advice. Increasingly, knowing what the law says, that's just kind of the cost of admission. More and more people have access to that faster than ever before. But when you think about a multinational, multi-layer type of practice, I would imagine what's good practical advice one month might change a little bit and evolve all of it the next month. How have you and your team been able to stay current and to ensure that you're remaining both timely and up to date with the advice that you're providing? Because it's a challenge.

Juan Carlos Varela: We have people that are immediately in different jurisdictions that are able to practice law in different places that are up to date, that are the top tier of their practice in a specific jurisdiction. In our office in Miami, just to give an example, our initial hiring was based on: either you have to speak three different languages in the region, you have to be admitted—it's not a requirement, but it's something that we are looking for—you have to be admitted in three or four jurisdictions in the region and also, of course, the United States and specifically Florida. You have to have a master's degree in international law. You have to have been practicing for a long time in the area and be relevant in that practice. To answer your question specifically, so you can

surround yourself with very, very intelligent, very, very well-known people in Latin America that are able to be updated because they are basically changing the law as we speak. We have people coming from the private sector, from the client sector, from scholars teaching in universities, in different universities in Latin America. So they will be connected and up to date. It's just surrounding yourself by very intelligent people. They're always involved in academics and always involved with big clients, so they understand what is happening every single minute of the day.

Kevin Young: We've had the privilege of having a lot of similarly innovative and forward-thinking guests on the podcast. And I feel like a common thread that Zeynep and I hear a lot is a value that people from throughout the industry, from practicing lawyers to tech startups to academics, place on curiosity—just continued curiosity as a way of evolving and staying innovative. I'd like to hear a little bit about the team that has come together so far and kind of your experience bringing them both to Seyfarth and how you identified them and kind of a little bit about who's there already.

Juan Carlos Varela: Correct. Happy to do so. It's a wonderful, wonderful team. When I was approached to open the office in Miami and to chair the Latin American practice, I had this idea way before that of dividing the practice in three main pillars. And those pillars are: corporate and everything related to corporate matters—how a law firm can help clients to do business and enter into a market and make sure that they are successful and they avoid risk even before the risk appears. Then, if we help the client to do that, eventually they will have an issue, a problem. That is why we have the second pillar, which is dispute resolution. We have there everything related to litigation, commercial litigation, international dispute resolution, everything that is cross-border. And finally, because Latin America is so complex and it involves many different interactions with the U.S.—and the U.S. sometimes imposes sanctions, certain prohibitions and certain limitations to do business with certain countries or certain specific people in those countries—compliance is the number one priority for our clients to make sure that they do business right, they incorporate properly. If they have any issues, they can solve it. But also, while they're doing business, they are in compliance with international obligations, specifically related to the U.S. and so on.

So based on those pillars, I reached out to people that worked with me before, but I was not in contact with them immediately—they just worked with me before in prior law firms, and I knew they had the capabilities and they had the drive and they were willing to work as hard as possible to make this happen. So they needed to be hungry. They needed to have that part. They should be very, very intelligent. They have different language capabilities, also admitted in different jurisdictions. So I reached out to each one of them separately, asking them to join.

So we have Dioletta Longino—she's coming from the corporate side, from the client side. She will provide us that corporate approach, what the client wants, because she's coming from that area. She's very well known in Miami and the Florida community. She's admitted in Mexico, also in the United States. She's going to help us with the corporate matters. The beauty of this is that the Miami office is not going to be standing alone. The Miami office is going to be the bridge between the United States and the rest

of the world using our capabilities from our corporate department in the United States. We have hundreds of very good practitioners in that area, specifically mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, real estate, all these specialties in that area. And the Miami office will help our clients to do what they do in the States and translate it into Latin America—also Florida and Miami, but in Latin America.

Then on the dispute resolution side, we have Daniel Vilvil, an expert in arbitration, an expert litigator admitted in Venezuela, Florida and New York. He's going to connect all the litigation and cross-border litigation within the firm and in Latin America. And finally, Victor Hugo Guerra—he's coming from the private sector as well. He's an academic. He's from Harvard, admitted in Venezuela and Colombia. He will help us with the compliance part, and with our office in Washington, D.C., will help us to provide clients sound advice on preventing liabilities in the compliance sector. So the idea of creating the practice was not just to bring a couple of guys with a lot of connections and clients and just build it and see what happens. So it's a different approach. It's a strategic approach to provide our clientele good service since day one. We are focused on being a good client service team and making sure that we have the quality at the highest level possible.

Kevin Young: As you now step into the role as an office managing partner in Miami, what are your thoughts? What's your approach and philosophy as being a leader of the office? Because clearly you've had so much success in your practice. You've got a lot of clients who trust you and you've assembled a great team. I'm curious, how do you think about being a leader of the office and moving forward in that role?

Juan Carlos Varela: For me specifically, this chapter in my life represents a great opportunity to bring together my experience, my relationships in Miami and the region, and my belief in the importance of building an integrated team. I really, really think that if we work together as a firm, as Seyfarth does all the time—and I encounter that in my brief period here so far—this firm has a unique way of approaching matters and approaching client relationships. It's a very good group, team effort. And Miami wants to be in the Latin American practice as well. And that's the way I would like to approach my leadership: a place where everybody in the firm is able to bring their clients, to serve their clients, both in Miami, locally, domestically, generally in Florida, and in Latin America. It is not going to be a place in which we hire a bunch of lawyers. It's going to be a place in which every single office of the firm is going to be part of it. And that's the part I want to convey to our colleagues inside the firm and our clients outside the firm. It's such an important part of my professional life that I want to make sure that it creates a big impact, not only in our firm, but also in the business community in Miami.

Kevin Young: I mean, we're seeing crazy advances in the technology that's available to us as a firm and as practicing lawyers. What are your thoughts as you look ahead on how AI will impact or might impact the way that you and your team and the rest of us are providing legal service to our clients?

Juan Carlos Varela: I think AI is already improving the speed and consistency for many legal tasks. I use AI all the time. Our firm is fantastic with all the tools and materials it

offers us to provide better service to our clients in a more efficient way. But I don't think that AI is going to eliminate our responsibility as a lawyer. I think that the legal judgment, the strategy, the negotiation part, understanding the client's business—that's going to be on us and it's going to continue to be a human lawyering responsibility. But of course, the future leaders of the firm and every single practitioner, they need to be tech-savvy. They need technological fluency because the clients are expecting us now more than ever to be more strategic and to do things faster than before without jeopardizing the quality. So I'm embracing AI. I am one of the great believers that AI is going to make me a way better attorney. It's actually making me a way better attorney.

Kevin Young: So what has your interest right now that you think our listeners should know about or have on their radar?

Juan Carlos Varela: As I said before, I am very interested in how AI and the new technologies are going to solve and cure mental health issues. I think that's of great importance in the world, it's of great importance for me in my personal life and my family. I read all the time about the new AI approaches to solve mental crises and mental illnesses. So I was happy yesterday—maybe you didn't see it, but the Nobel Prize was given to a doctor from Stanford that was actually working on new developments related to how applying certain new techniques to cure Parkinson's disease and many other health-related illnesses, mental health-related issues and illnesses. And I'm reading all the time on that. I think that people and the world should know more about it, understand. By the way, October 10th is World Mental Health Day. And I think people should be aware and be more involved in how to solve those mental issues. Sometimes I feel like people suffering from mental issues are not well understood. And I think we have to change that. And I'm working very closely in my community to do that as well.

Kevin Young: Fantastic. And Juan Carlos, I've picked up that you read a lot of stuff, it sounds like, in a lot of different directions, which is excellent. Anything you're reading right now that you'd recommend, or anything you've read recently you'd recommend to us and to the listeners?

Juan Carlos Varela: Yes, I'm reading for the third time the book *Propaganda*, from Edward Bernays. I like that book because it's very current, believe it or not. It's something that, when I was reading it the first time, always influenced my way of thinking. And I think I'm reading all about how the society and the mind of the people can be changed from using the proper input. And one of the things I've done in my past was—I was a professor for a long time in an industrial relations school back in the day in Venezuela and also in Colombia. And I was trying to teach young people to think in a different way in order to change society. So I like that book because it gives you some ideas how to do it the right way and to put input in the mind of people to do things for the general community.

Zeynep Ersin: I love that. It is interesting how books that were written decades or even hundreds of years ago can still have applicability into the moments that we're experiencing now. So it's always interesting. Speaking of teaching, I'd love to hear kind

of two things. One, what was your favorite thing about teaching? And then, as part of that, pulling back into the current moment where we're thinking about how to best prepare—what can law students expect in terms of the future of law? What do you think are skills and attributes that they should be really focusing on and honing to develop as new law students coming into practice?

Juan Carlos Varela: My favorite thing about teaching was passing along what I thought I knew to other people. It's like, "Okay, I'm telling you what I think I know and I'm good at, and I'm telling you how to do it, the way you should do it in the future." So telling new generations how to approach things and not to make the same mistakes I made. That's what I liked about teaching. It was interacting with different people, not related to business whatsoever, with no intentions of selling anything, but just giving my knowledge. And talking about the book I read, recommending new books, new readings, new approaches, answering all the questions they have if I can, or just researching the topic and then answering the questions later on. That's why I enjoyed teaching. I decided not to continue teaching because I couldn't attend class. I was missing so many classes because I was traveling all over the place. And that's one of my regrets. I would have kept doing that—probably in my next life or maybe when I retire, I'll get back to teaching.

So your second question, regarding new generations of lawyers: I got a question from one of the friends of my kid the other day. He wants to be a lawyer. He also wants to be a senator. He's 12. And he said, "You know what, I'm going to start doing pre-law classes." And I said, "Well, it's too early. And also, you don't want to study only law." The best things I learned that helped me in my practice are from different books not related to law. In fact, I learned more from reading different stuff not related to actual legal matters that allowed me to be a better lawyer than actually specific law books. And I actually try not to read law books unless I need it because of my practice, but I try to read everything not related to law—everything related to science, everything related to psychology, everything related to sports, you name it. And every book I read, I can take a lesson that applies to my practice, always. And that was my recommendation to him. He actually paid attention to that and decided to enter a book club and is now in finance in some classes. So I was glad I got that right.

Zeynep Ersin: That's great. Broadening your perspective as much as you possibly can is never a bad thing—the information, the sources, the perspective. I think curiosity is a muscle that you can strengthen and improve and develop. And I like the suggestion or the recommendation of starting it at 12, Juan Carlos. You gave that kid advice. I was smiling as you were talking because I teach now. I teach one night a week, every other semester at the law school, at University of Georgia—actually Zeynep came and guest lectured. And I've had the same experience, where you realize when you start that, all the plans and preparation you do to put on a very good class, that just by opening your mouth and sharing your experience, you have something to teach. And that was a moment for me, I think when I first started, it was a really enormous realization that things that feel kind of everyday to me now are in fact knowledge that you have to share and to really impart to the next generation.

Juan Carlos Varela: That's exactly the way I felt when I was teaching. It's great that you keep doing that. Kudos to you that you're able to have your wonderful practice plus teaching. You have to give me some tips how you do that.

Kevin Young: It feels a lot heavier some weeks than others. But that's why I call people like Zeynep to come guest lecture.

Juan Carlos Varela: Awesome. On what I was talking about, I finished a book that I love. It's from Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*. That book is fantastic. It gives you a perspective that the actual problems in law are basically very minor compared with the reality of the world. So I would recommend people to read it if they have time. I couldn't understand half of it because it's very technical in some parts, but I think I got the sense of the book.

Kevin Young: Two great recommendations. So *Propaganda* and then *A Brief History of Time*. I've read the latter. I've not read the former. I had the same experience with the latter, where I might need to revisit it because I had the same feel. I'm a big guy—I do the post-it flags in books when I read them. I usually don't come back to half of them, but that one had a lot of follow-ups on it. Juan Carlos, a question we've asked many guests on the podcast is what they're listening to musically right now—kind of, what would we find playing in your car if it was the most recently played album or song?

Juan Carlos Varela: Well, I don't listen to recent songs. I listen to my classics and I try to keep that very repetitive, very boring, I guess. But my thing is Billy Joel, that's my favorite one in English. Of course, because I have a different background, I have my English favorite one. And I think the best one for him is like the *12 Gardens Live*. It has all the best, and also the vibe and the energy on that record—that record is fantastic. And for the Spanish-speaking people, I like *Canción Animal* from Soda Stereo. It's an Argentine rock band. If you talk to any Latino or any Spanish person, they will say that's the right guy and that's the right rock band. So I keep switching between English and Spanish. It's funny because my kids, they make fun of me because I tell them I learned English when I was 25 years old. I'm a first-generation student. I was the first one in my family that got a degree—not only law, but any type of degree. And I got a scholarship from the Venezuelan government because I was the first law school student nationwide. I had the best score. So at that time, Venezuela was a different thing. So I got a scholarship. I didn't know English. So I went to study English for six months at Champaign-Urbana. I learned English there—learn meaning I was being high by whatever. And then I started my master's degree. So I was studying English at the same time I was receiving law classes at Illinois. It took me like maybe a day to review one case or two days to read one case. I'm still catching up with my business law classes from the professor in Illinois. And going back to the story, I was telling my kid the other day that when I was singing Billy Joel, I didn't know the lyrics. So I was just saying whatever came to my mind in English, but I didn't know the natural lyrics. When I started understanding the lyrics, I actually loved the guy even more—the lyrics of this guy and also the music. That's why I love Billy Joel, because he helped me learn English while I was at Illinois.

Kevin Young: Well, for what it's worth, I don't speak Spanish. I wish I did. One of my favorite bands of all time since I was about 10 years old is the Gipsy Kings. And I can listen to them all day, every day. And I know some of the lyrics, but again, it's so much of the music too. It's what resonates with you and you kind of connect with it. And it depends on the time in your life. In my case, that's why I love Billy Joel. I saw him at the university. I didn't have the money to pay for anything of that, but the university was so cheap. So I saw him performing live and I've followed him since then.

Zeynep Ersin: I would just say, Juan Carlos, that even as an English-as-my-first-language speaker, I made up the words to Billy Joel also, especially on "We Didn't Start the Fire." I want to say that to my kids next time. Well, on that note, I think we can wrap up. Thank you so much, Juan Carlos, for joining us today. It was an absolute pleasure to have you on the podcast. We loved having this conversation and look forward to the incredible success of everything that you're doing in our Miami office and the Latin America practice and beyond. So thank you for joining us today.

Kevin Young: Well, Juan Carlos, you're fantastic. Thank you so much for joining us.

Juan Carlos Varela: Thank you. Thank you for the time and the opportunity. See you later.

Zeynep Ersin: Thanks for spending time with us today on Pioneers and Pathfinders. I'm Zeynep Ersin.

Kevin Young: And I'm Kevin Young. We'll see you next time.