At the young age of three, Norah Avellan, ’15, found herself fleeing her native country, Venezuela, with her mother, twin sister, and older brother. With a mere two hundred dollars and the clothes they were wearing, Norah’s mother, Eleanora, took her family to Houston, Texas, leaving behind a dangerous life and an abusive marriage.

From her earliest years, Avellan remembers her mother’s words and how determined she was to show her children how to live by them. “My mom has two tenants that she lives by: the first is to always pick yourself up by your bootstraps, and the second is to educate yourself as best you can,” Avellan said.

In the ensuing years, her mother did just that. “My mother is amazing. Every morning she drove us across Houston to the best public schools in the city, and then she juggled three jobs for food and gas.”

The path to fulfilling Avellan’s educational goals was always clear — she wanted to go to law school and practice law like her mother had in South America. Avellan, who admits she is her own worst critic, completed her undergraduate work at the University of Texas at Austin and began preparing for her next big step — law school. At the time, Washburn Law wasn’t even on her radar. Avellan had dreams of going to a prestigious school in the northeast and pass the New York bar exam.

At the time, Jay Vanier, ’87, who through the years had become a close family friend, urged Avellan to consider Washburn Law. Avellan remembers Vanier telling her if she attended Washburn she would be ready to practice the day she graduated, something Avellan wouldn’t fully understand the value of until after graduation.

“Norah is bright, talented, and politically savvy. When she decided to go to law school, I suggested she really consider Washburn,” said Vanier. “I had such an amazing experience there. I wouldn’t have traded those years for anything. I wanted Norah to get that same great education, the same opportunities.”

At Vanier’s urging, Avellan applied and was accepted. Without a lot of conviction, but trusting Vanier’s advice, Avellan and her twin sister, Andrea, made the trip to Topeka for orientation a few weeks before the semester began. Remembering her first impression, Avellan amusingly said, “When we drove around Topeka, I said ‘No way. I was used to a big city like Houston.’ She went to orientation and still was not sold on the idea of coming to a small institution in the Midwest. It was a chance encounter with three Washburn Law students that was the turning point. Avellan remembers Brian Cox, ’13, Michael Fowler, ’14, and Eloy Gallegos, ’13, introducing themselves and inviting her and her sister to join them for dinner.

“Washburn Law was the right fit for me. It gave me the opportunity to build strong professional relationships with my professors, lifelong friendships, and the confidence to take on challenging opportunities.”

“They were so upbeat about Washburn Law and the opportunities they had,” she said. “I was really impressed with their openness, passion, and enthusiasm.” They later became close friends and remain so today.

One hurdle remained. She visited a school she had been accepted to in the northeast and recalls walking through the library. “The atmosphere was very different,” she said. “The librarian was shushing everyone. No one spoke or reached out to me. I walked away more conflicted than ever about what was truly important.”

Returning home, Avellan called Dean Thomas Romig and asked to talk to some of the “toughest” professors on the faculty. That led to a conversation with Amy Deen Westbrook, co-director of the Center for Business and Transactional Law, a conversation that eventually helped Avellan choose Washburn Law.

“Washburn Law was the right fit for me,” Avellan said. “It gave me the opportunity to build strong professional relationships with my professors, lifelong friendships, and the confidence to take on challenging opportunities. I graduated a more improved version of myself, professionally and personally, because of my time at Washburn Law.”
“It wasn’t always easy; there were many times in the thick of studies when I knew my goal but doubted how to get there,” Avellan said. In those times, she turned to Rory Bahadur, professor of law, for advice. “Professor Bahadur really went above and beyond for me. He always knew when I needed a little encouragement, but never missed a moment to toughen me up by challenging me in a classroom full of people. I know I’m not alone when I say he is a great professor and an even greater person.”

Initially, Bahadur had some reservations about Avellan’s chosen course of study. “She had such an intense, almost pained, look on her face,” he said. “I thought to myself, ‘She may be one of those students who isn’t grasping the materials. She’s struggling.’” It wasn’t until Avellan came to his office and shared with him her doubt about law school being the right path for her that he understood. What he had mistaken for struggling was actually Avellan’s incredibly deep thinking and soul searching.

From that point on, Bahadur came to realize Avellan was an extremely bright, driven young woman. “She is so determined. She has a really clear sense of what she needs to do to succeed,” he said. “Norah has a passion, a sense of justice that’s infectious. She really is a force of nature.”

That passion, that determination led Avellan, then a 3L, to land a prestigious internship at the White House under the Obama administration, her first real glimpse into the inner workings of a presidency. “I worked alongside interns from some of the top-rated schools in the country, and I always felt as well prepared, if not more so, than others, and because of that I was proud to say I was a Washburn Law student.

“It was very humbling to see so many people from all walks of life willing to work together to serve their country. I learned so much during my time there, but mostly, I took away a strong belief that as Americans we should care less about party affiliation and more about showing the rest of the world the true power of an inclusive democracy.”

With her law degree under her belt, Avellan tackled the New York bar exam, passed it on her first try, and landed a wealth investment management position with Wells Fargo Bank, N.A. in Washington, D.C.

“When a recruiter contacted me, I knew it was a less traditional track after law school but it’s what God put in my path, and I’ve learned to trust his work through me. At this stage in my career, it’s perfect. I get to take a more holistic approach with my clients and their fiduciary needs, and I really enjoy that.”

And the future? “Right now, I’m where I need to be. Someday, I would like to return to Kansas to serve the people and the state,” said Avellan. “Kansas came into my life in such an unexpected way. I am very proud and grateful for all that it gave me.”