##### Harper Talks Episode 21 Transcript

##### Guest: Erik Horvat

##### [00:00:01.630] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton, and you're listening to Harper Talks, a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Today on Harper Talks I'm excited to speak with Erik Horvat. Erik, graduate of Harper College, a 2021 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient, and is the managing director, head of Real Estate Americas at Olayan America, one of his most notable projects was leading the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site. Erik joined me for Harper Talks over zoom.

##### [00:00:37.390] - Brian Shelton

Hi, Erik. Thanks for being here today. How are you doing?

##### [00:00:39.790] - Erik Horvat

I'm doing well, thank you. Thanks for having me.

##### [00:00:41.890] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's a beautiful day. Are you in New York today?

##### [00:00:45.190] - Erik Horvat

I am in New York.

##### [00:00:46.360] - Brian Shelton

All right, fantastic. So you came to Harper College in the late 1990s. I've got to ask, what brought you here?

##### [00:00:53.460] - Erik Horvat

Yeah, it's interesting. When I graduated from school, I thought about going to a four-year university and then basically the realities of the world money being far away at that time. There's a host of reasons that ultimately decided to say going to community college for a few years would be really beneficial to the family and also make some money to save. So that was really the driver of it. And that was from 91 to 93.

##### [00:01:19.820] - Brian Shelton

91 to 93. So you lived in the northwest suburbs around here. Where were you? Schaumburg, Hoffman?

##### [00:01:23.870] - Erik Horvat

Yes, I lived in Wheeling, which is not obviously too far from Harper, and then went to school there. But when I went there, I also worked at I don't think it's around anymore. It was a Toyota dealership off of Dundee Road. So I worked full time at the dealership and then went to school like I'm sure many people do back then. So it let me save some money. It was just a very busy time.

##### [00:01:51.380] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Was that hard? It had to be, right? Going to school full time and working full time?

##### [00:01:55.590] - Erik Horvat

Yeah, it was really hard. I think there was one semester where I took, and I don't know why I did it, but I took 19 credit hours, which is borderline insane, and at the same time work full time, and I did not pull great grades. They were fine. They were good. They were good grades. But that was the hardest, probably single semester of my career. And then when I went to four year university and I just had to go to school, it was a real blessing to not have to work and you realize what a luxury it is to focus on your education. But I think that those early days really were I don't know, they toughen you up.

##### [00:02:32.680] - Brian Shelton

They definitely do. Yeah. And that's definitely the case here with our students. So many of them are working full time or part time while they're trying to go to school, and it's a struggle.

##### [00:02:40.160] - Brian Shelton

It's rough.

##### [00:02:41.360] - Erik Horvat

Definitely.

##### [00:02:42.410] - Brian Shelton

What was the Harper campus like during that time? I came to Harper as an employee in 2014, so I imagine a huge difference in the 1990s. What was it like here? Anything stand out?

##### [00:02:51.120] - Erik Horvat

Yeah. I mean, I played one semester. Not the semester that I referred to, where I had all my credit hours, but one semester where I was able to squeeze in playing on a soccer team. I think it was the first soccer team. I don't even think the records exist for that team. It was so early days, but it was the same thing with the campus. I think there were fewer buildings. It looks a little more modern now. It had really big wind effects. So I don't know how it is today, but in the wintertime, if you caught it wrong, you're freezing as you try to get around the campus. So it was pretty cold, but when I went back, it was familiar. So I don't think it's radically different than when it was there. Although there are some nicer structures and the art has been improved.

##### [00:03:30.250] - Brian Shelton

The art has been improved. Yeah. Harper is an interesting campus in that if you are willing to take the long way around, you can almost circumnavigate the campus without going outside. But, boy, is that a long walk. That's quite a ways to go in the winter. But I have to admit that there have been days in the winter where I have taken advantage of it. After Harper, I was looking at your resume here. You went to both to Purdue and the Columbia University. And I guess I just kind of giggled when I saw that, because I guess that kind of dispels the myth that community college students can't get into the really good schools.

##### [00:04:04.310] - Erik Horvat

Yeah. When I went to Harper, I sort of focused on accounting. Even then, I was really, for me, focused on what can I do that's going to pay the bills? And they said, oh, accountants seem to be able to make money and understand the financial world. So I did that. And then I naturally wanted to go to a great school that focused on finance and accounting, and they had a good program at Purdue. And it just so happened that my now wife went there as well at the same time, so we sort of went together, and so that was a big driver for that. But Purdue was an excellent thing, and it was a lot of fun to be on that campus. And it's not too far away either. So two and a half hours from Chicago

##### [00:04:45.340] - Brian Shelton

Still able to see family and that sort of thing. Not too far.

##### [00:04:48.110] - Erik Horvat

Exactly.

##### [00:04:48.720] - Brian Shelton

And then what drove you to Columbia? How'd that happen?

##### [00:04:53.850] - Erik Horvat

After graduating from Purdue, I thought, as I said, I wanted to be an accountant. I passed the CPA exam. I was really focused on that, and I realized quickly that it was not exactly for me. I wanted to do something where you could be out a little bit more, you could see things and just get a little bit more diversity, in my experience, day to day. So I basically got into the construction world through my father in law, and that was my first foray to doing something different. So it was a person working in construction that had a pretty good finance background, and ultimately I decided after a number of years to parlay that and say, I really like what I'm doing, but maybe I'd rather move up the food chain and do some development and be involved in building things at a higher level. And so that's when my wife and I both decided to go to school, and we looked at a bunch, and Columbia was the place we chose. And it was an awesome experience, radically different than being in Purdue or being in the northwest of Chicago to move to Manhattan and have to get around subways and figure out where dry cleaning is. And it was a little tough in the beginning, but you get used to it, and then you really become comfortable and this city becomes part of you.

##### [00:06:05.680] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. So your message to our community college students is the Ivy League is possible for you, right?

##### [00:06:12.270] - Erik Horvat

Yeah, most definitely. I definitely think so. I think that truthfully for any Ivy League school. You talk about any of those schools, diversity matters, and people with different perspectives matter. If they wanted to stick the school full of exactly the same people, they could do it. But for all of you that have a different background, I do think that those top tier institutions, if you can show that you have some educational competence, they would love diversity of thought. And that's what I think a lot of people provided at Harper.

##### [00:06:44.190] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. You kind of touched on this a little bit, but how did you go from accounting to the real estate business? What brought you to real estate?

##### [00:06:52.080] - Erik Horvat

Yeah, I always loved seeing things built, environment, and it was more interesting to me than stock trading or things like that. You got to feel and touch the product. You got to look at it when it was done. But I also love the financial side of it and understanding how it works. So to me, what's interesting about real estate is they're all their own businesses, if you will. And by going from where I was in the financial world, accounting world, to construction, I got more access to that. And then it just sort of built upon itself, where I wanted to get more and more exposure to different aspects of real estate, whether it was marketing or development or construction. So it's a fun, diverse business. There's a lot of aspects to it.

##### [00:07:35.950] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Now, I know that you've worked on a lot of different projects that obviously you're really proud of, but I think one of your most high profile projects is the World Trade Center site. Talk to me about that. Tell me how that came about and what it was like working on that.

##### [00:07:48.430] - Erik Horvat

Yes. The World Trade Center site was obviously super special. The first time I visited New York City was actually two weeks after 9/11. So I was there when you could see sort of the aftermath, which was absolutely horrible. There was a lot of infighting and there was litigation around what happened and how to rebuild it and what should this be. And it was a real benefit to come in when I did, because it was after a number of years of that fighting and that discussions had come to sort of ahead and people were ready to start developing and building things. So that was a very special time. Every day was absolutely entertaining and also meaningful and to be part of it. And when I was there, we did a bunch of leases. We finished One World Trade Center, which some people used to call Freedom Tower, but the property name is One World Trade, and we have now leased that building. We built a transportation hub which services over 300,000 people a day,

##### [00:08:48.520] - Brian Shelton

Which is beautiful, by the way.

##### [00:08:50.200] - Erik Horvat

It's very cool. Yeah, the oculus is special. It's a beautiful piece of work. And the whole space is, I don't know, just blossomed. It's so fun to see Lower Manhattan be as active as it is and how many people visit there and come to see the site and to learn about what happened, but also look forward and be part of the future. So it's definitely one of the highlights.

##### [00:09:14.610] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's a beautiful spot down there, which seems like a weird thing to say with the tragedy that occurred there. Right? But it has been reborn into something that is really quite lovely.

##### [00:09:25.110] - Erik Horvat

Yeah, it just shows that it was a horrible thing. But New York fights back, the country fights back, and it's very special and I'm honored to be a part of it with, by the way, many other people that no one does that anything by themselves. And that project took thousands of people to really commit themselves. But I'm very happy to have a meaningful role in it. It was awesome.

##### [00:09:44.500] - Brian Shelton

What are you working on now that you're excited about? Or can you tell us?

##### [00:09:47.670] - Erik Horvat

Yes, I do a lot of investing in real estate as well, obviously understanding the finance and how things are built. So a lot of what I do today is really investing. I really invested in multi family housing and really providing affordable housing to people from across the country in various states. And so that's been a big mandate for me and really thinking about how you can make an impact to the country, whether it's developing in New York City, which I still am able to do, luckily, and also just on a more national basis. So that could be investing. And it's interesting, when we were talking about this podcast, there were things that words I wouldn't have known at community college that are financial, like fund investing or doing private equity or things of that nature. And I think it's interesting as you start to peel back the onion about what you can do from a career perspective. But there's some really interesting investing you can do that really makes an impact to people's lives. So I do a lot of investing into real estate to push that forward.

##### [00:10:51.810] - Brian Shelton

Okay, that's awesome. Interesting line on your resume that you were or are, which the Slovenian Honorary Council to New York and New Jersey. Tell me about that. Just the title alone sounds

##### [00:11:06.390] - Erik Horvat

Yeah. So my father was an immigrant from Slovenia. I mean, I'm sure many students at Harper have family members, emigrated from other places. So my dad actually was a citizen, but he really grew up in Slovenia and came here when he was 13 years old, really, to honor him. He had passed away back in 2002. And as a way of honoring him, I went to the country, got educated on, really, the area, the people. Met family that I had never met. And then I had an opportunity to help give back a little bit. And they have honorary consult positions where you help people that need visas or people that want to have community events or things of that nature. So it's really a way of just honoring my dad and giving back. And the most beautiful country. If anybody gets a chance to go, I highly recommend it. And I'm no longer in that capacity, but I did that for a number of years.

##### [00:11:58.150] - Brian Shelton

That's really neat. Yes. Sloveia is beautiful. I mean, I've seen pictures. I haven't been there. It's on my list for sure.

##### [00:12:02.980] - Erik Horvat

Yeah. I have Apple TV and it put the screen saver on. And there was a picture of this place called Bled B-E-L-D, and it's like a fairytale. If you Google it, you'll see this beautiful little lake with an island, with a castle on the island. It's a really place of fairytale. Yeah.

##### [00:12:21.840] - Brian Shelton

Slovenia has become quite the tourist destination, from what I understand. People are really starting to travel there.

##### [00:12:27.390] - Erik Horvat

Yeah. You're between Croatia and Italy. It's a special spot, for sure.

##### [00:12:34.860] - Brian Shelton

So you became a Harper Distinguished Alumni in 2021. What was that like for you?

##### [00:12:40.460] - Erik Horvat

It was great. It's funny because I think people that go to Harper, you move on and you get focused on your next career, and you don't really reflect as much as you should, necessarily. So I haven't really talked about Harper much, to be honest, because you're so always looking forward, trying to get your kids or your job, and you're doing your thing. And it was really nice to come back and just think about how that helped me get started and do the things that I've been able to do. And it was a great time, and it was fun to be back and to meet people and to be on campus again. I know COVID was still out there. So we had some COVID mandates and stuff, but I feel like things are normalizing every day, which is nice.

##### [00:13:21.580] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's nice to be back on campus. Everybody's back and having classes here again, and it's quite nice to see the difference, especially over the last two years. Yes. I think that we hear this all the time with folks is that generally speaking, people identify with the institution where they graduated from with their four year degree. So Purdue would be the one that you would tell everybody out, but in your case it would be Columbia, of course. Right. And people don't necessarily think back and talk about their community college experience, but yet their community college experience is what put them on that path and got them somewhere. So it's always interesting.

##### [00:13:55.180] - Erik Horvat

Yeah, it was interesting when I think my wife had thought of raising that and bringing it to me. And what was interesting is when I really thought about it, you think about your kids and the values you want to instill in them, and then for them to really know the true arc of your life. And the truth is that working hard and going to the school simultaneous laid the groundwork for everything else you do in life. And it gives you the work ethic and it teaches you maybe that life has been so easy all the time you push through, and if you do, sometimes it works out. And so that was pretty special. And I agree with you. People don't think about it enough, and it's nice to talk about it.

##### [00:14:32.270] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it was interesting what you said earlier, too, that after working full time and going to school full time at community college, that going to school full time only was like a break.

##### [00:14:41.370] - Erik Horvat

It really is. I would argue for any student who goes like 40 hours a week on the job or 35 hours a week in a job and has a full class load, it's a vacation to go to a good school and just focus on your education in relative terms.

##### [00:14:55.780] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, I was going to ask you I try to ask everybody who's on the show kind of a last question sort of thing, because I think it's important to hear from folks what advice do you have for current Harper students? Or even so someone out in the community who's thinking about where they want to go to school and Harper might be on their list, what would you say to them?

##### [00:15:16.550] - Erik Horvat

I would say to them that Harper is an amazing spot. It's what you make of it right there's. The tools are there for you to start in a controlled way, meaning that you don't have to take the risk of a new state and a bunch of debt, and that if it's good for you and your family, it's a way to really focus and get the education without introducing more variables that could make it harder to complete school. And I think that it's really great for people that simply don't have the money to spend. And I remember wanting to go to school. I did want to go to four-year school, but when you really look at it and you make the call to do that, I think you're setting yourself up for success in the future. So for those of you who are on the fence of should you go four years, should you go to Harper? I think you'd be well served to think about it. Save the money and then pick the best school you want to go to for your four year. And then don't forget to talk about Harper when you're older.

##### [00:16:14.910] - Brian Shelton

Well, I know you've got a busy day. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us on the podcast, and we look forward to hopefully having you back here on the Harper campus sometime again real soon.

##### [00:16:24.170] - Erik Horvat

I'd love to visit again. Thank you so much.

##### [00:16:26.140] - Brian Shelton

Thank you.

##### [00:16:27.020] - Brian Shelton

Erik Horvat is a graduate of Harper College and a 2021 Distinguished Alumni. If you're enjoying Harper talks, please subscribe. And while you're at it, rate and review us so that others might find us. Harper talks is a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. This episode was edited by Brian Diaz. Our online content producer is Erica Berger. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman.

##### [00:16:55.390] - Erik Horvat

I'm Brian Shelton.

##### [00:16:56.620] - Speaker 3

Thanks for listening.