

Rising Legal Star in Minnesota

Sari Laitinen, business lawyer at Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi L.L.P., is the only Finn who has proceeded to a partnership status in a medium-to-large sized U.S. law office.

LIKE MOST HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, SARI K.M. Laitinen did not have a clear career preference when she graduated in her hometown of Mikkeli. "I was interested in many things - law, architecture and languages. I first went to the University of Jyväskylä to study English, but then ended up a U.S. lawyer."

After one year at University, she received a scholarship from the Finnish - U.S Educational Exchange Commission and traveled to Minnesota to study for a year. Fifteen years later, she is still in the United States. She received her B.A. from Hamline University graduating top in her class. In 1993, she received her U.S. Law degree (Juris Doctor) and graduated in third place in her class. While at law school, she received various scholarships, including one from the Finnish Foundation for Economic Education.

Today Sari Laitinen is a business lawyer at the Corporate Finance and M&A Groups of the 230-lawyer firm of **Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi LLP**. She started with the firm in 1999 and was elected Partner at the beginning of 2002. As far as anybody knows, Sari Laitinen is the only Finn who has proceeded to a partnership status in a medium-to-large-sized U.S. law office. The firm has offices in six states nationwide, with headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Laitinen lives and works. In addition to the business practice where she is a partner, the firm also boasts a sophisticated litigation practice with a national practice in intellectual property litigation and business disputes. A few years ago, the firm's attorneys also helped reach a landmark settlement for the State of Minnesota against the tobacco industry.

Transactional and advisory roles

Laitinen's law practice involves her in both a transactional and advisory role. The transactional part of her practice consist of structuring, negotiating and man- aging projects, such as mergers, acquisitions, or raising funds through public stock sales.

A 36-year-old single woman attorney, she is on the top of her game handling high stakes transactions. For example, she worked as an integral part of the legal team representing **Best Buy Co. Inc.**, America's leading electronics retailer, in its acquisitions of **Musicland** and Canada's leading electronics retailer **FutureShop**. She also masterminded the strategy to defeat an incumbent Board of Directors of a **Nasdaq** listed company in a heated contest for control.

The advisory part of her practice consists of counseling executive management and boards of directors on corporate governance and legal compliance. She represents private and publicly listed (NYSE/ Nasdaq) companies from a variety of industries, including **Transport Corporation of America, Inc.** (transportation/truck-load), **MTS Systems Corporation** (manufacturing), **Arctic Cat Inc.** (ATVs/snowmobiles) and **Peoples Educational Holdings** (school publishing). She has also advised a Finnish company selling manufacturing operations to a U.S. company and recently advised two Finnish companies on how to structure stock option plans for their U.S. employees. "I hope that representing Finnish corporations in the United States will be a growing part of my practice," Laitinen says. "It is rewarding to be able to share the experience and knowledge base of the U.S. business and legal culture with Finnish corporations."

Lately, she has spent much of her time advising public companies in the U.S. on the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, a major overhaul of corporate governance practices. She also lectured on this Act to the International Lawyers' Association of Finland in Helsinki on November 28th, 2002 at the law firm of Borenien and Kempinen.

Sari Laitinen has been recognized as a "Rising Star" in the Minnesota legal community by Minnesota Law and Politics magazine.



Sari K M Laitinen and Minnesota's Governor Jesse Ventura.

When asked about the nature of her work, she says: "I enjoy my career because I get to work with smart people who enjoy being challenged. My work with corporations is all about solving problems. It is very gratifying to me to be able to help a corporation solve a problem to meet its business goals. My work takes me to the Boardrooms and executive management of many public companies and smaller growth companies, where life is fast-paced and results-oriented, but also very rewarding."

Strong ties to Finland

Laitinen has maintained strong ties with Finland. In 2001, her firm hosted a two-day seminar for 20 Finnish high-tech executives participating in the Global Software Program, run under the auspices of the University of Oulu. Minnesota's famous Governor **Jesse Ventura** gave the Finns the welcoming address and various state and business leaders lectured at the seminar about how to do business in the U.S. and Minnesota. She is now an advisor for the Global Software Program. The program has since continued to its second phase and Laitinen has been lecturing for the group on several occasions about U.S. Capital Markets, IP Strategies and Non-Disclosure Agreements, for example. She also facilitates visits to Minnesota from Finnish science parks interested in the medical and medical device industry which Minnesota is known for.

Locally in Minnesota, Sari Laitinen is a co-founder of a Finnish Trade Steering Committee and The North Star Chapter of the Finnish American Chamber of Commerce (see separate story).

Laitinen grew up on the old military base in Mikkeli. Her mother is a retired businesswoman and her father a retired military engineer. In her free time she enjoys travel, biking, gardening and classical music. She takes frequent trips to Finland and up to Northern Minnesota to visit family, having found through her own genealogical research that she had a great uncle who immigrated to Hibbing, Minnesota from Finland in 1907. This great uncle lost contact with his Finnish roots until Sari discovered his descendants in Minnesota and wrote them a letter explaining who she was. The Minnesota family welcomed her like a long-lost daughter. According to the latest U.S. census, Minnesota boasts 300,000 people who claim to be ethnically Finnish. www.rkmc.com • KALEVI RUUSKA

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