



Engage, Collaborate, Innovate

By AMY LINDGREN
Photos by Stan Waldhauser

When you ask colleagues and family members to describe Sonia Miller-Van Oort, incoming president of the Minnesota State Bar Association, answers pour out almost before the question is finished: magnetic, visionary, caring, scary-smart, passionate, fun, ego-free, terrific dancer, tireless, grounded in her faith, able to do anything. Those are adults talking, of course, about the adult Sonia. But the reviews might have been very similar for the teenage Sonia, at least according to her younger sister, now Maria Miller-Rinaldi. As a child seven years Sonia's junior, Maria admired her older sister so much, she imagined that church hymns had been written about her. As she recalls, "When we sang 'Hosanna' in church, I thought they were saying 'Oh, Sonia' because everyone else thought so much of her too."

It's a charming story, especially now that the two sisters are grown and raising their families only blocks apart in the town of Hopkins. Although Miller-Rinaldi—an Air Force veteran, dentist, and parent of four young children—is highly accomplished herself, she says she still turns to her older sister for advice and support. That's a role Miller-Van Oort seems to fall into naturally, in any environment. Growing up in bucolic Iowa Falls, Iowa, she was an inveterate do-er, joining everything from choir and theater to speech and student council while also lettering in tennis, volleyball, basketball, and softball.

where their mother was raised. For Sonia, it was an early and lasting lesson in diversity and acceptance.

Coming up in Iowa Falls, Miller-Van Oort and her sisters enjoyed the stability of small-town life and friendships. They took special trips with their paternal grandmother, studied ballet under the town's best instructor—their mother—and pursued their interests by participating in a multitude of school activities. Sonia also worked in her parents' shoe store, going on buying trips with her parents and eventually managing a second location during one summer in college. The combination of hard work, scholarship, and extracurriculars served Miller-Van Oort well when she went off to Notre Dame for her Bachelor's and then on to Indiana University for her law degree. She was completely acclimated to a life of nonstop activity by the time she came to Minneapolis as an associate at Faegre and Benson. Indeed, if it weren't for her ongoing commitment to attending church between her undergrad days and law school, she might have been too busy to even date, much less start a family. As luck would have it, her future husband Mark was keeping an eye out for her, although he didn't quite know it at the time.

Mark Van Oort had a unique strategy for finding datable women in the 1990s: In those pre-internet days, he would attend mass on Sunday morning, then hang out with the priest in the afternoon to learn the names of women he had noticed

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SONIA MILLER-VAN OORT

Winning an award in her senior year on a vote from all of the school's athletic coaches was an acknowledgment of her leadership and teamwork, two qualities that underpin her life today. "Frankly, I was shocked that I got the award," Miller-Van Oort says. "I was a good athlete but I wasn't the best. My role was to be the glue, to get everyone engaged and work hard and try to have fun with it."

Miller-Van Oort is still the glue when it comes to the various teams and projects in her life, only now the situations are much more complex. In addition to being deeply involved in volunteer and bar activities, including leadership of the Hennepin County Bar Association (2007-08), she's also the president of Sapientia Law Group, the firm she and five others launched in 2011. In some ways, she is an unlikely seeming leader. With her wide smile and explosive laugh, and her partiality to bright colors, Miller-Van Oort is hardly the image of the buttoned-down attorney one might expect. But then, she's used to running contrary to stereotype, having grown up the blue-eyed cousin to her mother's Ecuadorian family and the dark-haired daughter of her Iowa farmboy father. Although hers could have been a difficult "fish out of water" story of not fitting into either culture, Miller-Van Oort had the opposite experience: Her Hispanic mother and the three Miller daughters (Natalie, the youngest, is a sales professional in Chicago) were as welcome in their small Iowa town as they were in Quito, Ecuador,

in the pews. Sensing his own opportunity, the Father used Mark's interest in Sonia to rope him into a planning session for a young adult group. Ironically, Sonia was also part of the planning team—but the two never met until the day of the group's first picnic. As Mark tells it, he initially thought Sonia didn't fit the situation. "She came dressed sharp," he recalls, "and I'm in shorts and a t-shirt. I'm thinking, 'Somebody overdressed for the park,' but there was a revelation. We had a volleyball game and she was diving for everything in her Sunday clothes. She didn't care about her outfit as much as she cared about winning."

Mark made a favorable impression on Sonia when he kept setting the ball for her—something she didn't expect at 5'4"—"but I knew she was a hammer and I wanted her to hit the ball," he laughs. So apparently, wanting to win was a shared quality, and one which reappeared later in the afternoon when Mark was quarterbacking the flag football team. Throwing to Sonia turned out to be a reliable way to gain yards—another encouraging sign for Mark. He advanced to stage two of his strategy, which was to invite Sonia to play volleyball on a team he and his friends had formed at the YMCA for the purpose of getting closer to women they might want to date. But Mark's dawdling almost lost him the prize. When he finally asked her for a date after two months of volleyball games, Sonia replied, "Sorry, I have a boyfriend now." It was several more months before they would finally start dating, by which time they were good friends.



Now married for 20 years, they have two children (son Quinn, who is 15, and daughter Kiara, 11) and a goldendoodle in a color-filled house that Miller-Van Oort says she expects to stay in until their knees can't handle the stairs. It's a home known to any number of friends and colleagues who have been guests at regular poker parties, Ecuadorian-style dance parties with "años viejos", and karaoke nights hosted by the family. It's probably no secret that Mark masterminds the smooth management of the household, a division of labor almost demanded by the differences in their temperaments and schedules. As the proprietor of Woodlines, a small furniture-making studio, he is able to flex his workload to meet the family's needs, while Sonia very frequently finds herself racing home from late meetings. As Mark says, it's a situation where being very different from each other works brilliantly for family balance. His business is instrumental to that balance, but it might not have happened without Sonia's encouragement. "We bought Woodlines 17 years ago, before we had kids," he notes. "I was working at Cargill at the time and I wasn't fulfilled. She encouraged me to either buy a business or start one. She has much higher risk tolerance than I do."



"SONIA IS CREATIVE AND HAS AN INSATIABLE DESIRE TO DO THINGS BETTER. SHE WILL NOT SETTLE FOR 'THAT'S HOW IT'S ALWAYS BEEN DONE.'"

— Sarah Oquist,
Sapientia Law Group

Little did he know that their tolerance for risk was going to be tested a few years later, when Miller-Van Oort would take the same entrepreneurial leap herself. It started in 2009 when the country was just barely emerging from the recession, although that wasn't totally clear at the time. Miller-Van Oort was working as a partner at Flynn Gaskins & Bennett when she was invited to participate in FutureFirm, a project conceived by Professor Bill Henderson of the Maurer School of Law at Indiana University — her alma mater. (See https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2425014# for Henderson's report on the project.) The concept of FutureFirm was to organize 40 attorneys, clients, and students into four teams over the course of a weekend to envision a new operating model for law firms. Their work would be judged by a panel, with the winning team receiving a \$15,000 cash prize. Naturally, Miller-Van Oort didn't turn down the opportunity to participate when asked. And naturally, her team won, although the prize wasn't her goal (they donated their proceeds to the students in the competition). For Miller-Van Oort, the point wasn't winning but innovating. She found it exhilarating to be part of a group whose only purpose was to envision de-constructing

the current model of practicing law in favor of a new, better process. In her mind, that had to involve re-aligning the goals of the attorney and client—which would almost certainly result in a different fee structure, getting away from the billable hour model that permeates a firm's culture in many ways—and living diversity, not just talking about it.

Miller-Van Oort came away from the weekend in Indiana determined to build on what she had learned. She first tried to encourage changes at the firm where she worked, but over time experienced difficulty in revising an entrenched system and advancing change. She eventually realized that starting a firm from scratch was the most effective way to implement serious and significant change. Two years later, she took the leap with five others chosen for their varied strengths and perspectives. They named the firm Sapientia Law Group, from the Latin word meaning "wisdom," and rented their first offices in downtown Minneapolis.

Mark Zitzewitz, the chief operating officer for TCI Business Capital, was an early Sapientia attorney who later left for new pursuits. He remains a fan—and is now a client—of the firm he joined when he wasn't certain what he wanted his own direction to be. That made him especially appreciative of Miller-Van Oort's emphasis on doing things differently. "I think she was personally hindered in her own growth by some of the politics of the bigger firms," he says. "So she decided not only was she going to fix that for herself, but she was going to fix that for anyone that she practiced with. The commitment ran deep—it wasn't a marketing ploy. Had she not been so passionate about everything, it would have fallen apart immediately."

Others feared Miller-Van Oort had bitten off too much. A self-described pessimist, Bill Tipping was one of them. Now a partner at Larson.King, Tipping had worked with Miller-Van Oort at Flynn Gaskins & Bennett before she left to start Sapientia. "When Sonia left the Flynn job, she was showing great courage," he says. "She was out front in a lot of things, and it was pretty clear that she had a vision of collaboration and collegiality that was going to be unique. I would say she showed her mettle after about three years; that's when it seemed solid."

Sarah Oquist was one of the co-founders who continues with Sapientia today, taking the operations role along with a client caseload. A licensed attorney, certified executive coach, and enrolled member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe who had previously worked



10 THINGS MILLER-VAN OORT IS PASSIONATE ABOUT

- HER FAMILY
- PLAYING TENNIS
- INNOVATION
- NOTRE DAME
- SAPIENTIA LAW GROUP
- DANCING
- DIVERSITY
- FUN
- CIVIC INVOLVEMENT
- THE LEGAL PROFESSION

in the business side of corporations, Oquist is a prime example of the multiple ways Miller-Van Oort envisioned building diversity into the very DNA of the practice. Oquist was one of the first to talk with Miller-Van Oort about the potential firm. From her perspective, Sapientia is succeeding, as is Miller-Van Oort. "Sonia is creative and has an insatiable desire to do things better," Oquist says. "She will not settle for 'that's how it's always been done.'"

Jon Strauss, another Sapientia co-founder, agrees. "I love collaborating with her. Practicing law with Sonia is never boring. She has an amazing leadership style and she's always trying to get everyone around her to do as well as they can." Strauss, who has known Miller-Van Oort since they were both "baby lawyers," expresses deep confidence in her vision and leadership when he says, "I trust Sonia with my professional life, and there aren't many people I would say that about."

Perhaps one of the most remarkable parts about Miller-Van Oort's initiative to start not only a new firm but an entirely new way of practicing law was her ongoing commitment to professional and community service during the intense startup period. In addition to bar activities and volunteering with her church, for example, she played a key role in guiding a charter school through its first eight years of operation. Karen Terhaar was the executive director of International Spanish Language Academy in Hopkins when Miller-Van Oort joined the board and initiated the school's first strategic plan. Watching Miller-Van Oort, Terhaar says, helped her add to her own leadership skills. She also recognized a fellow working mom juggling multiple commitments. "I saw the sleepy-eye syndrome when she was clearly coming in on limited sleep," Terhaar says. "There was a yawn or two, but her focus and energy were never compromised. It was just amazing."

Terhaar also recalls the spark Miller-Van Oort lent to meetings, often telling funny stories on herself. Most memorable was the time she inadvertently stole a van to drive home, which Mark Van Oort relates like this: "Sonia can be very 'tunnel vision' when she's involved in something. At her old office building, the valet attendants would bring you your car. One night the valet fetches the vehicle and she just drives off in the car she thought was mine because she had borrowed it for the day. Pretty soon she's on the freeway, rummaging through the compartments looking for the speed pass and she finds some gum and she's thinking, 'Hmm, Mark doesn't chew gum.' But it still doesn't click. She's driving along, chewing the gum when her phone rings and it's Jon, her partner at the firm. He's standing in the parking ramp with a concerned valet manager and a confused woman who wants to know where her van is. Jon's saying, 'Sonia, are you driving Mark's van? Are you sure?' And now she has to look around and put it together... finally, it's like, 'Crap, we don't have leather seats.' And she has to turn around and bring the car back to the woman who really owns it."

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— Brent Routman, MSBA president 2011-12

Not many people who hear that story about Miller-Van Oort would be surprised, least of all Brent Routman, a former MSBA president himself (2011-12). Now general counsel of Merchant & Gould, Routman knows Miller-Van Oort as a friend and colleague, and as a tireless contributor to the bar. “You hear this a lot,” he says, “but Sonia works so hard. She is always running. And yet she is always there when you need her. If you need something significant done and you need someone who is a self-starter who can take the ball and run with it, there is no one else in my mind. I can’t imagine the bar will have ever had a better president.”

That’s good, because Miller-Van Oort has a pretty substantial agenda in mind for her year as MSBA president. Taking the reins from her predecessor, Robin Wolpert, she intends to continue exploring how MSBA can meet more needs for members and maximize relationships with district bars. Using an approach that has worked for her at Sapiaentia, Miller-Van Oort says she wants to “engage (the diverse membership), embrace (change), and execute (a plan)” to help the MSBA find its best and most effective path forward. She is also planning to insert as much fun as she can into meetings, starting with this year’s convention, which she helped plan as part of her president-elect’s role. The gathering at the Mall of America was conceived to feature TED-style discussions on critical issues while also partaking of craft beer tastings and trivia competitions. “It could be great, or it could be a flop, but we’re changing it up to see what people have to say,” Miller-Van Oort explains.

Perhaps the convention will put wind in the sails for the other conversations and changes she has in mind, including difficult discussions about helping new lawyers who may be struggling, and safeguarding funding for the court system. “It’s a challenge I’m excited about,” Miller-Van Oort notes. “Change is hard, but I think we can make it fun and engaging too. Being an advocate for the profession is an honor and I’m excited to see what can evolve.” ▲

SONIA MILLER-VAN OORT OVERVIEW

Education

J.D., *cum laude*, Indiana University–Maurer School of Law, 1997
B.A., Dean’s List, University of Notre Dame, 1993
Study Abroad in Moscow

Professional

Co-founder and president, Sapiaentia Law Group, 2011-present
Partner, Flynn Gaskins & Bennett, 2005-2010 (associate 2001-2005)
Associate, Faegre & Benson, 1997-2001

Court admissions

State of Minnesota
State of Iowa
U.S. District Court – Western District of Wisconsin and District of Minnesota
U.S. Court of Appeals – 7th, 8th, and 11th Circuits
U.S. Supreme Court

Professional affiliations

Minnesota State Bar Association
(*president, 2017-2018; multiple sections and committees*)
Hennepin County Bar Association
(*president, 2007-2008; multiple sections and committees*)
American Bar Association (*multiple committees*)
Council on Litigation Management
Defense Research Institute
Minnesota Hispanic Bar Association
National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms (*committees*)

Honors

Top Attorneys in Minnesota, *Minneapolis/St. Paul Magazine*, 2014-2017
Top Women Attorneys in Minnesota, *Minneapolis/St. Paul Magazine*, 2014-2017
2014 Attorney of the Year, *Minnesota Lawyer*
Super Lawyer, Thomson Reuters, 2013-2017
Thought Leader, Future Firms, Indiana University–Maurer School of Law, 2009
Minnesota Rising Star, *Law & Politics*, 2005, 2006, 2008
Star of the Quarter, American Bar Association Young Lawyer Division, 2006
Up and Coming Attorneys, *Minnesota Lawyer*, 2002
Howard Flower Award, Iowa Falls High School, 1989

Civic involvement, past and present

International Spanish Language Academy, School Board (Chair 2009-2011); 2007-2015
Hennepin County Bar Foundation, Board of Directors
Volunteer Lawyers Network, Board of Directors
Indiana University School of Law, Alumni Board of Directors
Notre Dame Club of Minnesota, Board of Directors
University of Minnesota Student Legal Services, Board of Directors
Youth Empowerment Summit, Founder
Helping Kids Belong Project, Coordinator
We the Jury Project, Coordinator
Immaculate Heart of Mary, Lector and Volunteer Teacher

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Amy Lindgren is founder and president of Prototype Career Service, offering career counseling and job search strategies for individuals in transition. An accomplished writer, she writes a weekly employment column which appears in newspapers nationally and has profiled a number of incoming MSBA presidents for Bench & Bar.

What makes Sapiaentia different from other firms?



It’s not easy to convey just how different Sapiaentia Law Group is from more traditional firms unless you understand the core principles it was founded on. Here are a few, with comments from president and co-founder Sonia Miller-Van Oort and others.

Innovation as a bedrock approach

Innovation is a concept Sonia Miller-Van Oort has considered deeply in developing the blueprint for Sapiaentia Law Group. For her, the idea transcends simple revision: “I honestly think innovation is an overused word. Change isn’t innovation. Innovation isn’t just doing a small tweak. It’s actually quite a risk-taking venture. It doesn’t always pan out. I think you will see in history that innovators will fail but they will take that and innovate more. It’s a process.”

To create a new style of law firm, Miller-Van Oort turned to corporations such as Google and Best Buy as models, rather than other law firms. She also instituted an innovation advisory board for Sapiaentia, comprising community members, attorneys and entrepreneurs, to defend against inadvertently slipping into a traditional law practice mindset. As she says, “I really want to see this model work. What I hope is that this encourages other people to break the norm and to take some steps themselves. Hopefully we can continue to drive some of those things. I don’t think we’re done doing that yet.”

No hierarchy

With 10 attorneys and three staff, Sapiaentia is as flat as it’s possible to be. Not only are there no titles outside of president and operations, there’s no ranking according to seniority, specialty, or rainmaking prowess. There are no names on the letterhead, and the 10’x10’ offices are allocated by lottery. The flat structure extends to the firm’s daily activi-

ties, where decisions large and small are discussed as a group. The firm is not run as a democracy, but it does function as a collaborative process to make the best decisions. Rather than becoming tedious, as one might expect, former Sapiaentia attorney Mark Zitzewitz says he found the experience of talking everything through to be “weirdly invigorating. When you’re a junior partner at a law firm, you never have a say in anything. It was new to have a say in every little piece of running a law firm. Everyone had an equal say.”

Perhaps the riskiest aspect of the flat hierarchy has been the use of 360-degree evaluations. A relatively common—though perhaps under-used—concept in business settings, this is a tool that is nearly unheard of in traditional law practices. For Miller-Van Oort, the reason is wrapped up in power struggles related to hierarchy. “Think of a scenario where you have associates evaluating partners,” she says. “It’s not going to happen. At first I thought, how are we going to pull this off? We’re going to kill the firm. But it works if people are genuine, if they care about helping each other succeed. It’s been an important part of our process here.”

Fee structures that better align with client needs

When hierarchy is dropped, collaboration can eclipse competition as the standard relationship among staff attorneys—a necessary precursor to aligning the practice around client needs. As it turns out, lengthy periods of discovery and the use of the billable hour are not always helpful to clients, many of whom need to know costs before initiating services. Others would choose a lesser course of action if they understood the costs and likely outcomes related to a traditional process. By listening to clients and eliminating hierarchy, it becomes possible to imagine teams of attorneys lending just

the bit of expertise needed for a particular facet of the case without driving up the bill. In her frequent talks to the legal community about Sapiaentia, Miller-Van Oort is quick to note that it may not be possible to completely re-align fees away from the billable hour, as some clients do prefer that model. At this point, she says, about 55 percent of Sapiaentia’s billing is tied to an alternative fee structure.

Diversity: built-in, not retrofitted

A commitment to diversity runs deep for Miller-Van Oort, partly from her own experiences but largely from watching talented attorneys leave firms in frustration. Refusing to define diversity as a simple equation of race or gender, she has expanded the concept to include a broader swath of professional experience: hence, a firm that intentionally staffs from a broad range of legal and business backgrounds while also drawing from as wide a pool of cultural experiences as possible. As Miller-Van Oort notes, “Our concept was, rather than try to integrate diversity, why not just be diverse from the beginning? So we’re not going to have a diversity committee; we’re just going to be diverse.”

Miller-Van Oort reports that the results so far have been both positive and challenging. On the positive side, she says, “It creates a whole different energy in your work environment. There’s a vibrancy in the way that people interact, the different ways that people come to a situation and a perspective.” On the other hand, she notes the inherent difficulty in truly listening and honoring multiple viewpoints: “I will say that there are challenges with managing diversity that I didn’t necessarily foresee. It takes a different management skill to move forward with diverse views but still advance the ball. That’s been a good learning experience for me; it’s something I’m still growing with.” ▲