

Sapientia Law Group

A Model of Diversity

By Haley Freeman



Sudha Rajan, Sonia Miller-Van Oort & Sarah Oquist

In 2011, an innovative group of attorneys came together with a shared vision for creating a new kind of law firm, one that brings diverse professionals together and honors the strength that comes from their differences. While this group differed in gender, racial and cultural backgrounds, life experience and legal expertise, they all agreed on the core values that exemplify diversity in action, and they named their firm Sapientia Law Group. Fittingly, the word sapientia means “wisdom” in Latin, and this law group is committed to a new law firm model that puts wisdom in flight.

Working at this NAMWOLF certified and MMSDC certified Minority Business Enterprise is a departure from the traditional legal model in many ways: there is no hierarchy of partners and associates;

every office has the same footprint; and the firm’s focus is on results, not billable hours. This shift in law firm culture is immediately felt by visitors when they enter the firm’s vibrantly colored offices and see the front closet door labeled, “Coat and Ego Check.”

Sapientia’s four women lawyers shared their unique perspectives about women in law and what they each value about their firm’s culture.

Sonia Miller-Van Oort is a notable litigation attorney who is also recognized for her service to the community. Miller-Van Oort was elected 89th president of the Hennepin County Bar Association, and was both the association’s first Hispanic president and second youngest president. She is now poised to become the first Hispanic president of the Minnesota State Bar Association in 2017.

Sarah Oquist is a seasoned attorney in the areas of banking, finance and Indian law, and an executive coach. She has been a corporate CEO, in-house counsel and a private practitioner, and she helps bring clarity, support and accountability to Sapientia’s multidisciplinary lawyers and their clients.

Sudha A. Rajan is a transactional and litigation attorney who represents individuals and businesses in a broad range of matters. Before joining Sapientia, she worked for a large Minneapolis law firm. She holds a certificate in health law and bioethics from the University of Minnesota Law School, and she applies her passion for health, wellness and diversity issues to her practice.

Vicki Bitner has more than 25 years of experience representing individual, corporate, government and nonprofit clients



Sarah Oquist, Vicki Bitner & Sonia Miller-Van Oort

in lawsuits and appeals in both state and federal courts. She began her career in Washington, D.C., where she became a special prosecutor for the federal government, before returning to practice in her home state of Minnesota.

AALM: How does your firm proactively demonstrate its commitment to diversity?

Rajan: Sapientia demonstrates its commitment to diversity by allowing people from different backgrounds to behave authentically at work. I have always felt that I can truly be myself and express my honest opinions at Sapientia, and those feelings greatly strengthen my commitment to my work.

AALM: How do you maintain work/life balance? How does your firm support you in this endeavor?

Oquist: We are flexible about working at home. Our priority is for people to get the work done. I have two young children – a preschooler and a kindergartner – and I am very supported by our environment to work early in the morning when I get up, or at night after the kids are asleep. I don't feel like I have to choose between being a good mom and being a good team member.

AALM: What do you feel is most significant about your societal role as an attorney in terms of your influence on diversity in the practice and in society at large?

Miller-Van Oort: I've seen many women and minorities come and go in law firm settings due to conflict arising from the unbending demands, the culture and stereotypes embodied in a typical law firm. A lot of talented female attorneys and attorneys of color leave practice in the private arena because of those things, which is a shame. At Sapientia we said, "Let's not have committees to talk about diversity; let's just be diverse and grow consistent with that principle. Let's develop a culture conducive to people wanting to stay in practice. Let's make it a great place for women and minorities to thrive." I hope we speak to that in the community by having a high caliber team of attorneys who happen to be diverse and by being a resource for clients who demand diversity within their legal teams.

AALM: Is there a woman hero inside or outside the law who has inspired you to achieve?

Bitner: I have two female heroes. One is my mom. She just recently turned 80,

but you'd never know it. She's active and athletic. She loves to read, travel and experience new things. When she graduated college in 1957, with a major in math, she was basically given two options: go into teaching or become a nurse. She would have excelled in so many professions, but those doors were not open to her. There was no Title IX in those days. My other hero is Phyllis Thompson. She's a judge on the D.C. Court of appeals, but for many years she was a partner with Covington & Burling in Washington, D.C., where I practiced from 1990 to 1998. I loved working with her. ... She also happens to be the first African-American woman to become a partner at Covington.

AALM: Do you think it would have been possible (or was it possible) to accomplish your career today 25 years ago?

Bitner: I started practicing law in 1990 – which was 25 years ago. By 1990, the doors were clearly open.... I think we need to travel back further – another 15 or 20 years – and look to women who began practicing in the 1970s. They were such trailblazers in the legal profession. They're the ones who opened the doors. I have so much respect for what those women accomplished, and what they made possible.

AALM: What is the most important message you wish to convey about your firm?

Miller-Van Oort: It's 2015, and law firms need to adjust and innovate in ways they have never considered before. Sophisticated clients want smart and efficient lawyers, alternative pricing structures that veer from hourly billing, and business partners who provide real diversity of thought and experience when problem-solving on their behalves. Sapientia Law Group is one of the few women-owned and minority-owned law firms in the Midwest who provides all of those things.

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