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Attorney of the Month

Denise S. Rahne

of Robins Kaplan LLP

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Denise S. Rahne

Winning the Battle of Two Narratives

By Haley Freeman

When attorney Denise S. Rahne first interviewed for a position at Robins Kaplan LLP, she shared an observation about her experience as a teacher who engaged adolescents with literature. She told her interviewers, “It’s not that bad; you just have to find the human essence of the story, and they get hooked.”

Her comment elicited smiles from the representatives of this national litigation-focused law firm, who recognized that she had just exposed the crux of effective trial work.

Now a partner and head of the firm’s estate and trust litigation practice group, Rahne has proven her gift for discovering the soul of a matter and then innovating the best solution. “It’s the battle of two narratives,” she explained. “You have to understand your client’s narrative so they feel heard and represented, and then convey it effectively to the opposing side. We are thoughtful, creative problem solvers here who understand the intersection between the legal aspects of what’s going on with people and all the stuff that’s non-legal, because it matters. We’re really good at charting a course to resolution, whether through litigation or less adversarial means.”

Rahne began her professional journey as a civil engineering major at the University of Minnesota. She signed up for a class called “Reinforced Concrete,” and “in that moment, I realized, ‘I don’t think I love this.’ I was missing reading and literature. So, I left the Institute of Technology and marched over to the College of Liberal Arts.” She completed her bachelor’s degree in English and then followed the advice of her mentor and dean of the College of Education, Bob Bruininks, (later university president), and earned a master’s in education.

Rahne says that she enjoys a challenge. That trait was satisfied in her choice to spend the next 10 years teaching in what was then one of the most daunting high schools in Minneapolis. “The school nearly closed for poor attendance and gang activity. It was a challenging population, but I loved it. I was there at a time when the teachers and administration came together

to really build something. Those were some of the most enriching years of my career.”

True to her spirit of adventure, Rahne went looking for her next challenge in law school. “The law appeals to me because of all of that intellectual richness and stimulation. And, at the same time, it is a problem-solving profession.”

The first in her immediate family to earn a college degree, Rahne received a full-ride scholarship to William Mitchell College of Law, where she graduated from the night program magna cum laude while still teaching during the day. “At the time, my husband was working on his Ph.D. We thought sitting on the front step studying was a date.”

A neighbor suggested to Rahne that, having been a teacher, she would likely make a great litigator. That’s when she signed up for an on-campus interview with Robins Kaplan, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The progressive culture at Robins Kaplan combined with Rahne’s professional maturity opened opportunities for her to obtain litigation experience early in her legal career. “This firm is not rigid; we lack that stuffy, hierarchical culture and have an eclectic and diverse group of people here. I had the trust of my colleagues and was able to utilize the soft skills I developed teaching and do things sooner. I like to say that I was given enough rope to either run, or entangle myself. I thrive in environments like that.”

Rahne ran with her rope and then used it to tie up a diverse repertoire of cases. “I love nothing more than hopping into a case that’s hard to wrap my mind around. Most of my work is in the context of general commercial litigation practice, with a tighter focus on traditional fiduciary litigation and shareholder disputes. The thing I love most is estates and trusts litigation.”

She described herself as unusual for a Robins Kaplan attorney, “because we are purist litigators. I’m not quite that. What led me to live in this practice area of estates and trusts litigation is that my style fits there better than it fits in other places. I’m overridingly interested in problem solving, and a lot of times the courtroom is not the best place to accomplish that.”

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Rahne opines that she refined a certain skillset working with troubled youth that translates well to her role as a legal advocate, especially in estate and trust matters. She explained, “I often dealt with families and situations that became crises very quickly. I had to figure out what most mattered to people and work from that point of view to find a resolution. Now as a lawyer, I try to manage the dynamics of a matter, the family emotions, and the things they think they need or what they think they want to get out of litigation. I love the strategy of solving legal problems in a non-traditional way. I love to analyze what we have to work with and the different motivations of the people involved. Part of the art is in knowing when to unleash. I often approach opposing counsel and say, ‘We’d like to resolve, but there are things we feel strongly about. Work with us.’ Most of the time they

don't want to litigate against a firm like Robins Kaplan if they don't have to."

When litigation is necessary, Rahne has a habit of winning the battle of two narratives. She also collaborates with a highly qualified team of subject matter experts, all of whom work together to achieve the most beneficial outcome for clients. "I feel really bullish on what we're doing here in our practice group. We have an inherent value system that says we really do view our clients as partners. We're in it for the long term, not one-off cases."

Rahne is chair of the firm's hiring committee, a member of the diversity committee and is also active with Twin Cities Diversity in Practice. In these leadership roles, she operates on the belief that "if we buy 'em, we own 'em. I feel responsible for people once we've brought them in. I think I have an ability to look at what's missing for a person and what needs to happen to get them past an impediment that has them stuck. In my view, most firms are doing pretty well on recruiting and hiring diverse candidates, but the challenge is in advance-



ment and retention. When you hire talent, you have the most fundamental impact on the future of the firm. I want to ensure that we're not just finding good hires, but that both those who will stay, or leave will be a member of the Robins Kaplan community.”

Among her goals for the practice group is even greater collaboration among the firm's growing national offices and their subject matter experts and litigators. She is also working to develop more impactful relationships with solo and small practitioners.



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At A Glance

Robins Kaplan LLP

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Education

Juris Doctor, William Mitchell College of Law
Master's Degree in Secondary English Education,
University of Minnesota
Bachelor of Arts in English, University of Minnesota

Practice Areas

Antitrust & Trade Regulation
Business Litigation
Estate, Trust & Fiduciary Litigation
Government & Internal Investigations
Intellectual Property & Technology Litigation
Patent Litigation

Professional Associations

American Bar Association
Federal Bar Association
Minnesota State Bar Association
Hennepin County Bar Association

Honors

North Star Lawyer, Minnesota State Bar Association,
2013-2016
Minnesota Rising Star, Super Lawyers, 2008-2013
Burton Brief Award

Community

College Possible Minnesota, Chair
The Children's Law Center, Chair
Twin Cities Diversity in Practice
Twin Cities Iron Ranger Association, Committee Member

"It's a replication of what we do internally. I want them to think of us as a complement. They're not relinquishing their client, rather, they can bring us in to sit with them and be part of a discussion to talk about risk and look for opportunities for early resolution. We can help to provide maximum service to clients and build our karmic reservoir among our colleagues and community."

Finding these relationships is a challenge, but true to Rahne's character, she rises to the occasion and has succeeded in developing relationships where early intervention in trust and estate matters is key and litigation is a real possibility. In these complicated litigious situations, Rahne relies on the skills she gained as an educator to connect with her client and navigate through the unique emotional, financial and strategic challenges these complex scenarios present. Her clients depend upon her to be a best-in-class problem solver, and she has proven to be a master of the complicated system of laws and regulations that control various fiduciary obligations, the courtroom and the delicate, challenging relationships with the people she represents.

Rahne is known for leading the litigation conversation by crafting a narrative that reaches decision makers and inspires them to action. Her perspective as a seasoned professional in two careers provides her with extraordinary human insight and helps her to distinguish the outcomes that are most important to the people she represents, making her a formidable contender in the battle of two narratives.