

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Tanja Törnkvist

Helsinki OEP Tanja Törnkvist talks about her life to date.

I spent my entire childhood living in a small town, Riihimäki, in southern Finland.

My mother was a teacher of English and French and my father (who lived a couple of hours away) was a lawyer.

My grandfather, along with my uncle and several cousins, had all been lawyers as well, so it was always a possibility I'd go into law myself.

That said, my interest only peaked when I was 13 and heard that Laura Susi-Gamba, the daughter of my mother's colleague, was graduating from law school. I was inspired by the fact that someone cool like her was pursuing a legal career. I thought, if she can do it, so can I.

It was the 1980s and I was also a big fan of the TV series *LA Law*, so that only added to the appeal.

A few years later, Laura went on to study in the United States before joining the Paris office of White & Case. Everything about her life seemed amazing, so it cemented my decision to follow a career in law.

On completing school, I applied to Helsinki University Faculty of Law. Ever since I can remember, I'd always seen myself leaving Riihimäki and moving to a big city.

Only around 10 percent of people who apply to law school in Helsinki are accepted and, unfortunately, I failed the entrance test because the exams take place very quickly after the graduation exams at high school. However, this initial setback turned out to be a good thing.



An early birthday

“The entrepreneurial spirit of the Firm means you get the chance to shape your own career. Opportunities are always there if you’re willing to step out of your comfort zone.”



During my first year at school

It gave me a chance to take a year out, which was a great learning exercise, because it taught me to never give up. The next year, I passed the entrance exam with the highest score of anyone that year.

Law school is great for giving students a generalist overview of law and a broad range of skills, but I quickly realized that there is no substitute for real-life experience, so I arranged internships both in Helsinki and in Brussels in the European Commission, took part in a moot court competition at the International Court of Justice in the Hague (where my team came second), and applied unsuccessfully to be a trainee at White & Case's newly opened Helsinki office.

I didn't give up though and, at the end of my studies, I successfully got a summer job at the Helsinki office before being asked to stay on as an associate.

The office, which opened in 1992, was very small, with just one partner, and the bulk of the work we did was in capital markets, so that's how I spent most of my early years at the Firm.

I can't remember my first day, but I do remember how welcoming and friendly everybody was. I also quickly realized life as a lawyer wasn't as dramatic as LA Law had made out!

The office was largely made up of young associates, including Laura, who had joined from Paris, and Timo Airisto, who is now our most senior partner. When I showed my dad a picture of the team, he joked that it looked like a kindergarten!

We were incredibly busy, so everyone had to use their own initiative and take responsibility. While that was nerve-wracking, it meant I learnt so much.

According to the famous 10,000-hour rule (popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*), you need to work 10,000 hours in a job before becoming an expert and it felt like that time passed very quickly!

One of the benefits of being in a small office is that you get to try out different specialties and, as well as capital markets work, I worked on mergers and acquisitions before focusing completely on debt finance in 2007.

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That's certainly what I've found, because I've gone from being a trainee proofreading the documents and preparing closing binders, to an associate in 1997, partner in 2009 and my current role as office executive partner in 2018.

People assume I'd have become bored working for the same company for more than 25 years, but it's not felt like that at all. The office and my role have changed so much over the years that it's never been dull. Also, the ever-changing world, new clients and industries make sure that even after all this time, there are fresh things to learn every day.

When I joined, it was like working for a start-up and now we're much more organized and integrated in the wider Firm. It's been great to have played a part on that journey, particularly during my time as OEP, where I've made so many connections, been a spokesperson for the Helsinki office, and learnt so much more about the wider Firm and the incredible resources we have.

That's made me even more passionate about trying to ensure we do all we can to deliver the full power of our international and cross-practice expertise to deliver a truly distinctive client experience.

There have been so many highlights over the years, but two matters in particular stand out. The first came in 2001 when we were mandated on a groundbreaking whole-business securitization for forest products company Stora Enso Oyj, which was one of the first matters of its kind in the world at the time.

It was an extremely unusual transaction and to be given that responsibility as a fifth-year associate with no experience in that field was brilliant, particularly as we worked closely with the London team to learn from their experience.

Doing something that hadn't been done in the market before was stressful, but that was outweighed by the feeling of pride when we pulled it off.

Another matter that stands out was when we completed a large restructuring project with the help of our London and Frankfurt teams. We received a large bouquet of flowers from the client at the end of the matter and they told us how much they wished they received such a brilliant service from firms in other jurisdictions.



Celebrating my graduation from law school

“My cousins and I spent so many summer days outside from morning to dusk and didn't worry about a thing. I'd love to recapture that carefree time when we lived totally in the moment.”



Perhekuva: With my family, husband Niklas and our two children, Teresa and Robert

I don't think my younger self would be surprised at where my career has taken me, but she would be surprised I've not worked abroad except for the brief internship at the European Commission during my studies. That's the one thing I'd change about my career actually – I wish I'd taken advantage of the Firm's international footprint to work in other offices.

Another piece of advice I'd give my younger self would be to work on your network from early on, be interested in the world around you and be willing to learn from people.

Finally, I'd say don't take no for an answer. Be persistent, but never rude.

I've been inspired by so many people during my career at the Firm but the deepest gratitude for my career I owe to the Helsinki office founding partner and former OEP Petri Haussila. He had a lot of belief in me and often pushed me to work outside my comfort zone, but I knew I could always rely on his support. He also led by example when it came to delivering an exceptional client experience long before the concept was even 'invented'.

If I could live one day again it would be tempting to say my wedding day or when my kids were born, but I think I'd choose a random day from my childhood.

My cousins and I spent so many summer days outside from morning to dusk and didn't worry about a thing. I'd love to recapture that carefree time when we lived totally in the moment.

If I could have one last conversation with someone who is no longer with us it would be my grandmother.

As I said earlier, my grandfather was an attorney but also my grandmother studied law. In fact, they met in law school. I have always found my grandmother particularly inspiring because she studied law during the 1930s at a time when aspiring to be a female lawyer was highly unusual.

Unfortunately, her studies were interrupted by Finland's Winter War in 1939. My mother was born during the short peace time in 1941, but only a month after her birth, the Continuation War started and my grandmother had to bring up my mother during wartime, which must have been hard. After the war, she did not go back to law school, but worked most of her life as an assistant and paralegal in my grandfather's law firm. I'd ask her so much about her life, how she coped and lived through such uncertainty and stayed optimistic.

I'd thank her and tell her what an inspiration she's been to me.