

# ST. LOUIS BUSINESS JOURNAL



## St. Louis Character: Sonni Fort Nolan dreams big with career in labor law

RON JAMES

Sonni Fort Nolan has always had big dreams. As a young girl, Nolan planned to be the first in her family to go to college, but she wasn't done there. She also planned to get her law degree because that's just what people do when they are going to be president of the United States one day.

"As a kid I had a lot of different dreams," Nolan said. "But being president was definitely one of them. And honestly, I also wanted to be a lawyer because a lot of presidents have been lawyers."

And while Nolan hasn't made it to the oval office (yet), her big dreams have carried her a long way. At 47, Nolan is labor and employment partner at Husch Blackwell, where she has never lost a trial and is the firm's leading expert on labor relations like separations, reductions in force, charges of discrimination, and policies and procedures.

Nolan grew up in south Kansas City and came from a large family. Her mom and dad each had eight brothers and sisters. She graduated from Center High School and then earned a bachelor's degree in English from University of Missouri – Kansas City in 1995. Nolan

attended law school at Washington University, where she served as editor of its law review.

After graduating in 1999, Nolan was hired by Husch as an associate in its labor and employment practice group. She worked there nearly four years before being hired by Smurfit-Stone Container Corp.

"A Washington University classmate approached me about going in-house," Nolan said. "I thought that it fit my personality better, having one client that I could devote all my time to. Also, to be frank, I'd never thought I'd have my own book of business. I was a minority woman who was not from St. Louis, didn't have any contacts and didn't go to high school here. At that time, I didn't see a lot of women who had their own books of business in the legal field."

Nolan added that her law school professor told her she'd never work in labor law because the field was all male, all older and all Caucasian at the time.

After three years at Smurfit-Stone, Nolan spent seven years with Express Scripts before returning to Husch, where she has worked

as a labor and employment partner for the past five years. Husch, which had 2017 revenue of \$349.1 million, is one of the region's largest law firms with 179 local licensed attorneys and 708 total licensed attorneys.

Nolan was recently appointed to the board of directors of the Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri. Her friend Kit Sundararaman, principal, client experience strategy and insights manager at Edward Jones, recruited her to the nonprofit's board.

"Sonni possesses a high degree of integrity," Sundararaman said. "The truth and what is right and wrong mean a lot to her and she is not afraid to question or challenge ideas. She will stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves and is an incredibly loyal person."

Nolan lives in Frontenac with her husband, Michael, and their three children.

**When did you know you would be a lawyer?** Part of it was being from a lower-middle-class family where being a doctor or a lawyer was the thing to aspire to. And I have a lot of relatives, but out of my eight uncles and aunts on each side of the family, none went to college. The idea of going on in school was important to my mom. But at one point, I thought "maybe I don't wanna be a lawyer." I was a waitress at the time and going to college in Kansas City. My roommate was studying for the LSAT and I thought, if she can do this, I can. They say it's who you hang out with.

**What makes a good lawyer?** In litigation, it's problem solvers and people who are interested in people. As a litigator, you deal with people and you deal with problems whether it's in counseling or litigating them. Also, for me, I think my clients like working with me because I've sat in their chair. When a client calls me and asks me a question or gives me a case, they know that I have real-world experience, so I'm not going to give them some unrealistic answer from an ivory tower.

**What area of practice do you enjoy the most?** I always wanted to be a labor and employment lawyer. My dad was part of a class-action race discrimination lawsuit in Kansas City, and it took seven years for it to go through. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was involved. I remember when they settled and my parents got a check for that. It was a small amount. But I remember meeting the lawyer, Arthur Benson, who is a pretty well-known civil rights lawyer. And that was impactful to me seeing how my parents dealt with him. And when I was at Smurfit-Stone, manufacturing was 95 percent male, and I would train people on diversity. So here I am, lawyer, minority and female going to Birmingham for the first time to train a group of hardened manufacturing guys. I tried to bring it home for them by asking how they would want their daughter and wife to be treated. Or I would tell them, "When you are making a joke about the disabled, even though the person in front of you is an able-bodied person, they may have a disabled child and that really may hurt them." When you tell those kinds of stories to people, they see their situation differently, they see their co-workers differently and they see people like me differently. Those are ways to make changes without ever having a dispute at all.

**What was your most memorable case?** We won a jury trial in the Southern District of Illinois. It was a religious discrimination case. And at the close, they were ordered to pay \$100,000 dollars in attorney's fees. That almost never happens. This was such a frivolous case that should never have been brought up, which is terrible for the people who have real claims. Those cases hurt their chances of moving forward, especially in front of juries.

**What inspires you about your job?** Counseling employers. I really enjoy that part of my work. They come to me with this horrible problem believing everything is going to go wrong. Then they spend a little time talking with me, we go through some options and then they feel better and they're grateful.

**What is your leadership advice?** People need to learn about business, read business books and leadership books. I tell young lawyers all the time, it makes you more interesting for one thing, so you are not just reading lawyer stuff. There's lots of tools that you can use. And who's going to let you counsel them on their business if you don't know anything about business? I also highly recommend that people should look to create their own path. One of the reasons that I left private practice was I didn't see a path for me to have a successful practice. And when I came back, I didn't want to just do what someone else did. I think it's a recipe for failure because they have a different life, different values and a different practice in what they want.

**What are your hobbies?** I love to read. I've always read fiction until the past three years when I started reading a lot of business and finance books. I love the live theatre. We regularly see shows at the Fox, Touhill, Edison, Peabody, and The Muny. My youngest daughter Ryan (now 8) saw her first show at the Fox when she was 2. The Fox is an amazing theatre. We love going there and eating at the diner on the corner all dressed up. Family is an important part of my life. We love traveling together – especially going to the beach. I love yoga and hiking. We like going to Castlewood and Pere Marquette to hike as a family.

**What are you reading?** I'm reading "The Millionaire Next Door" by Thomas Stanley, because another thing they don't teach lawyers is personal finances. So, that and then Simon Sinek's "Start With Why." I usually like to be reading two or three books. I'm also reading "Washington: A Life" by Ron Chernow, and I'm reading "The Federalist Papers" right now. They are amazing.

**Where do you watch movies?** We love the Plaza Frontenac movie theater. We saw "Bohemian Rhapsody" there recently. I don't watch network TV but I love football. Go Chiefs!

**Where do you volunteer?** The Girl Scouts. One of my friends I worked with at Express Scripts got me involved. It's completely different from when I was a girl. They're doing money management badges presented by Edward Jones, and Centene did a health care badge. They have several teams that are building rockets and competing. One of their most amazing programs brings girls whose mothers are incarcerated to prison once a month where they have a troop meeting with their moms. It builds their relationship, it builds more confidence and it keeps them connected. The mothers benefit from it enormously. I also do the associates' reviews and mentoring program, the diversity program and I do a lot of panel speaking for our firm. We at Husch support a program called Kids in Motion for children whose parents are in prison. We buy them Christmas presents. I have adopted three kids through the program so each of my children can buy one of them gifts. It's a great program for lawyers in St. Louis to get behind. It helps people see us in a different way.

**What's your favorite hangout?** We like the trails in St. Charles and we love going to Kirkwood and walking around. My husband is from Kirkwood. And the Zoo. We love the Zoo.

**What's your favorite restaurant?** I Fratellini in Clayton. It's just this little, tiny restaurant. The service is so great and we go there a lot for a lunch.