

**Attorney Kristine Zajac...  
Strong Criminal Defense...  
and Family Law**

# ABOGADA



**SENTINEL:** *Why did you become an attorney? Was it something you wanted to do since you were young?*

**Kristine Zajac:** "Well—I learned Spanish—I started when I was age 12. This will connect up to your question—my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, got me into learning Spanish. She knew that Spanish would be big in the future. I lived in Argentina for a year, and then I studied Spanish Literature at the University of Minnesota and graduated. I knew that I could either teach Spanish for a career, or do FBI work, or law. And so I chose to be an attorney—I thought it would be a good combination with the Spanish. So no, I can't say that ever since age five that I wanted to be an attorney. I thought that maybe I wanted to be a teacher. But I chose to be an attorney, instead.

"I think I had a 3.95 ["A" grade point average] or something like that in Spanish and I passed all the tests and whatnot, but to be honest, I don't think I got into the Masters Program—for *education*. Even though—I think they were looking for natives—native speakers, which I'm obviously not.

"So I applied then to the law school and decided to go to law school instead. So I almost became—I seriously considered being a teacher."

**SENTINEL:** *What law school did you go to?*

**Zajac:** "William Mitchell."

**SENTINEL:** *You said you lived in Argentina for a year—at what age and why?*

**Zajac:** "Right out of high school—age 18. Why? I just always wanted to have that inter-cultural experience."

**SENTINEL:** *So after you graduated, you just decided to take a year off and travel?*

**Zajac:** "Well, my Spanish teacher told her students how, in order to truly learn a language, you have to learn it through immersion. So I researched different countries and wanted to go to Argentina because it's very European while at the same time it's Latin, they speak Spanish there. So I went there for a year."

**SENTINEL:** *Did you go there by yourself?*

**Zajac:** "All by myself—but with the Rotary Exchange Program."

**SENTINEL:** *So they help you—*

**Zajac:** "You have families that you live with. So I lived with three different Argentine families down there. And I continue to keep in touch with them and I go back every two years or so."

**SENTINEL:** *That was a pretty independent thing to do.*

**Zajac:** "Well, at the time, I didn't think it was, but when I look at 18-year-olds today, I think, wow—then I realize how young I was."

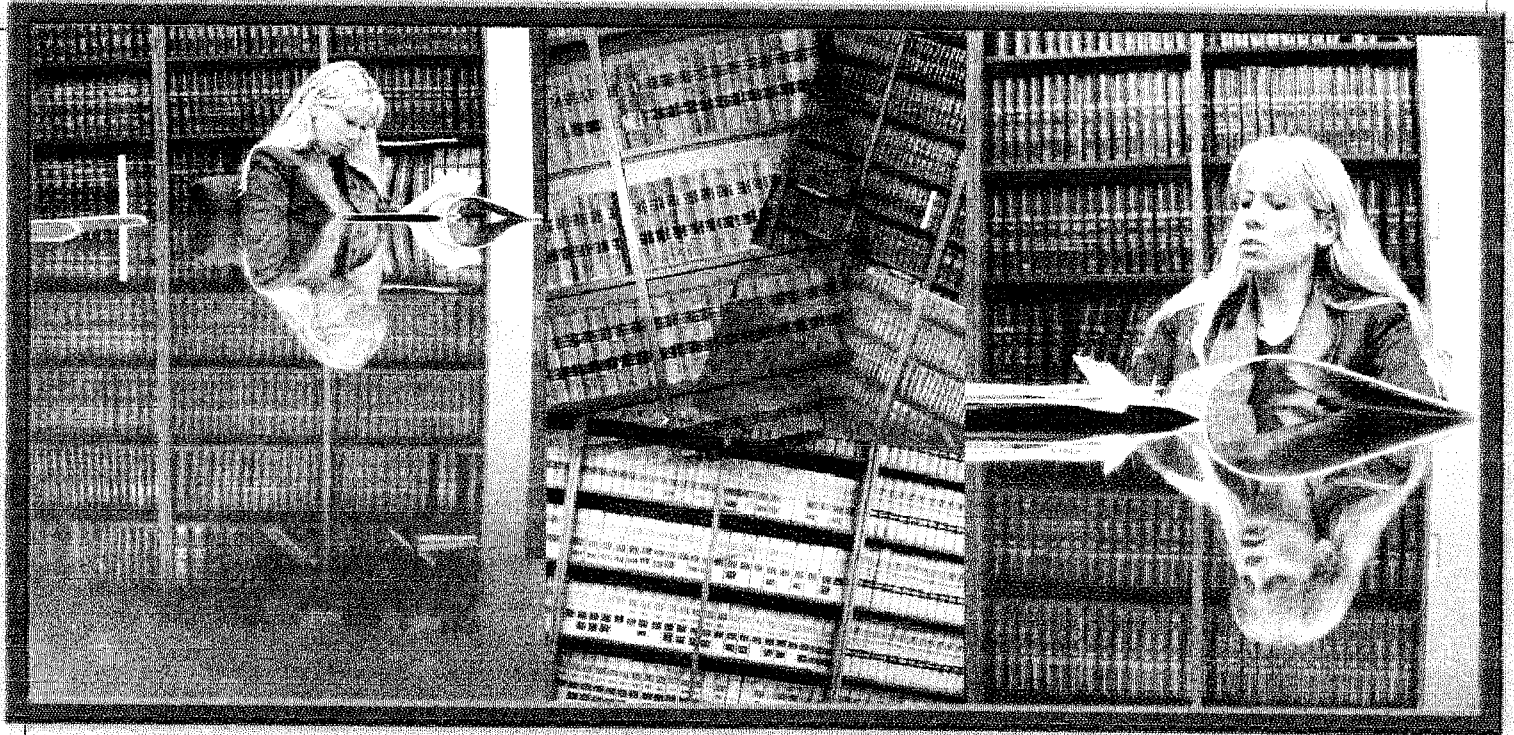
**SENTINEL:** *You work alone as an attorney—*

**Zajac:** "A solo practitioner."

**SENTINEL:** *Right. Obviously there's some independence involved in that—as an attorney, as a woman. Can you talk about that? Why didn't you just join a firm?*

**Zajac:** "Well, I've been on my own since 2000, but when I first graduated from law school, first I worked for a Judge in Hennepin County, here—Judge Aldrich—who I've appeared in

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front of—nice Judge. I always have to tell the other attorney, of course. But they usually—I've never had an attorney have a problem with that. And then I did work for a small firm out in Plymouth—and we're on friendly terms—Landers & Olson.

"And I just decided that it would be a good time, while I wasn't married and had no children, to try to do things on my own. Because I saw that the Spanish population was increasing. And I've always had—my dad instilled in me a bit of an entrepreneurial spirit, so I thought I should try this and see if I can have a greater flexibility—probably have to work more, but essentially maybe I can do more business on my own. And for the first year or two I struggled, but after that, honestly, no regrets. All-round greater flexibility. [And there is] more money, too, being on my own as opposed to if I had stayed with a firm."

**SENTINEL:** *About your car—the orange Nissan SUV. With your advertising on the back and the "abogada" ["attorney" in Spanish] license plate. You've got kind of an independent, aggressive vehicle.[she laughs] When people think of attorneys they think more of a gray Lexus. Is that the entrepreneurial spirit popping up there, too?*

**Zajac** "Well, there are a very limited number of orange Nissan Xterras out there—it's limited. So I like that it represents—it's a unique, orange, vibrant, happy color. Different—but in a good way. And I have a Labrador—I work evenings a lot and she comes in here quite a bit and so she has her own space in back."

**SENTINEL:** *What's her name?*

**Zajac** "Honey May—because she was born in the month of May. And she appears in my marketing materials and if you look at my website, as well. And so she has her own little

section back there—and plenty of room for babies, as well. So it's just an all-round family vehicle."

**SENTINEL:** *What's a perk, or the fun part, of being a lawyer?*

**Zajac** "The fun part is just meeting all different kinds of people. It's never boring—there's always something new, some new issue, some new problem—it's definitely not boring."

**SENTINEL:** *Is there a certain type of work you specialize in?*

**Zajac** "I do family law and criminal defense. And then I get people coming in here with all sorts of issues and then I just try to refer them to somebody that *can* help them. Whether it's an accident or—I get a lot of people asking me about immigration issues and then I refer them to other attorneys."

**SENTINEL:** *Are there any cases that you'd like to talk about—interesting, or noteworthy?*

**Zajac** "I had a five-day trial this year. It was, more than anything, a *parenting time* case, where my client was incarcerated. I didn't have anything to do with her criminal case at all—I just was helping her out on the family law. But the *guardian ad litem* on the case only wanted her to see her child four or five times a year—that was it. And she'd been a mom—basically a stay-at-home mother. But we eventually worked it out where starting this year she'll be able to see her child once a month and eventually, every-other week. And that case involved a five-day trial—it's highly unusual to have that long a trial for a family law case."

**SENTINEL:** *Is there anything you'd like to bring up?*

**Zajac** "Well, just that I work a lot with the Spanish-speaking population here in the Twin Cities—and not just here in the Twin Cities area, but I many times go to court in Glencoe,

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where there's a large Spanish-speaking population. I mean, there's actually a Latino population in many places where people might not think—Dakota County has a large Spanish-speaking population.

"But just that I do criminal defense, but I also make sure that on the plea bargain end, for the most part, that people don't plead guilty to something that might hurt them immigration-wise."

**SENTINEL:** *So there's a whole extra level of consideration.*

**Zajac** "Exactly. Somebody that doesn't work with immigrant populations might just say, 'Oh—plead guilty to this because you're not going to get any jail time.' But then they find out years later when they try to fix their papers or whatnot, that, 'Oh—you pled guilty to that back then...' And that sort of thing. So I always have to look at that—I'm not an immigration attorney, but I've learned quite a bit through having to make sure that they don't hurt themselves immigration-wise with their criminal defense issue."

"And just that about 50% of my clientele speaks Spanish—and I have my retainer agreements and everything in Spanish. I've done jury trials where people only speak Spanish."

**SENTINEL:** *What would you tell a young woman who was considering becoming an attorney—advice or guidance—*

*maybe something she doesn't realize but should.*

**Zajac** "I guess my advice would be that I would say that there are a lot of attorneys out there, and so of course, it's a profession but it's also a business. And be able to distinguish yourself from everybody else so that it can be a life-long career."

**SENTINEL:** *Like the SUV—distinguish yourself from everyone else.*

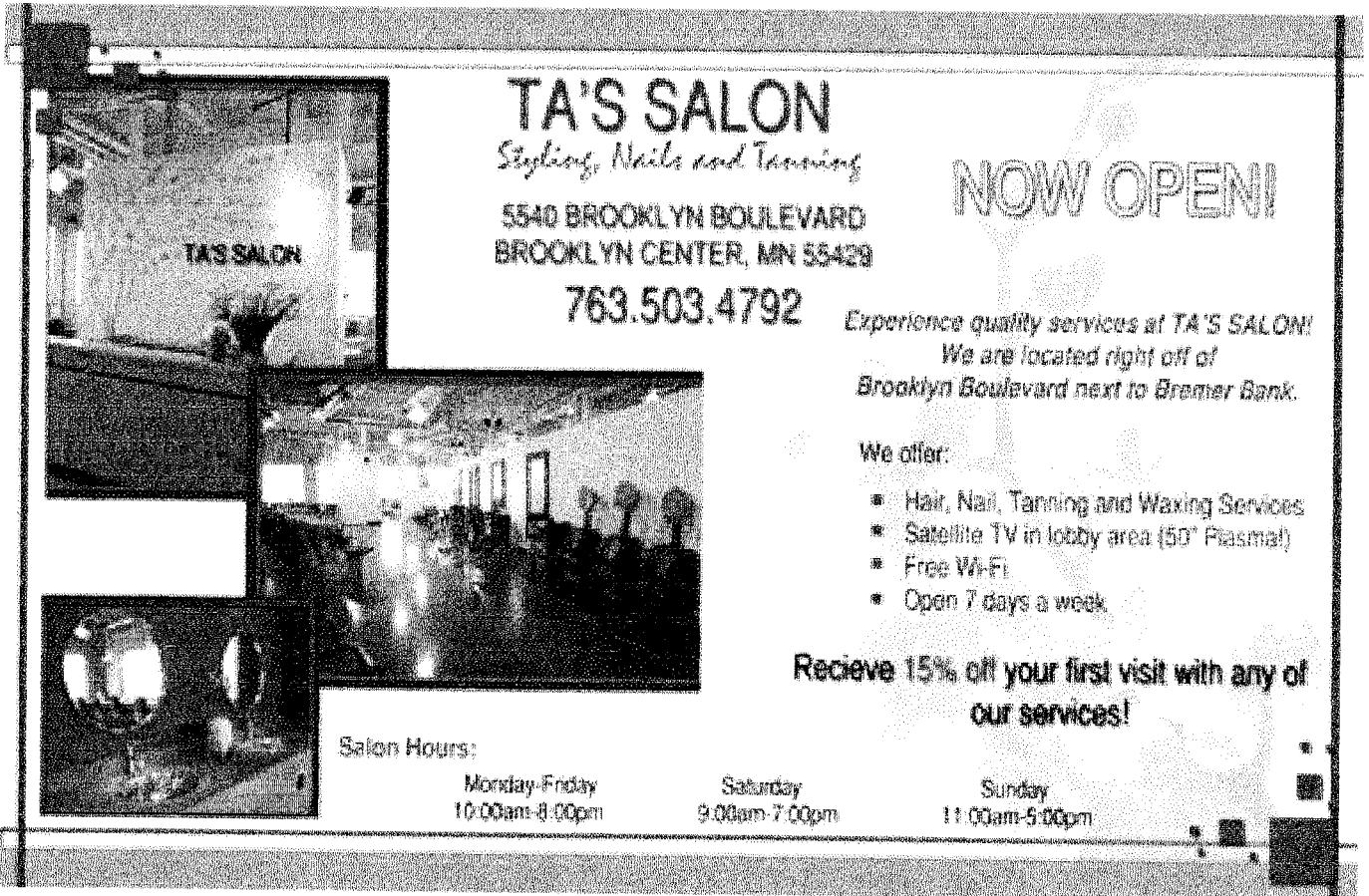
**Zajac** "Yeah—there you go."

**SENTINEL:** *What about the balance between your empathy, as a human being, and the distance you need in order to do the job? Are there classes in that?*

**Zajac** "There's a book called *Boundaries*, out there. I've had to read it a few times! [laughs]"

**SENTINEL:** *Is it specifically for attorneys?*

**Zajac** "No, it's just for life in general—all different areas of life. Just making sure that you have boundaries. I think especially in family law, because it is such an emotional area. And you could get yourself sucked into your client's issues so easily that you really have to make sure you have boundaries there. But at the same time—*care*. Not be cold. So it's—[laughs]—sometimes I feel like it's one extreme or the other. But I'm learning that. I'm not saying that I'm above that, that I have that down. No—of course not. But just be aware it's out there." ❖❖❖❖



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