

From the pinnacle to the unknown

By Nina Dahlblom

Twelve years ago Saara stood at the pinnacle of her career, ready to leap into the unknown, her whole life single-handedly packed for the journey of her lifetime. Fear? Not a trace. Life beckoned, and she was unafraid to take her four young sons over the oceans to their future home country in America where her husband was already paving the way.

Now after 8 years of life in the USA as a stay-at-home mom, she was ready to jump back on the driver's seat to pick up her own career again.

Learn from the journey and changemaking life choices of modern Finnish immigrant women in this developing series.

Business Suits to the Comforts of Home

The exhilarating anticipation that accompanies an emigrant's leap into the unknown was felt by Saara when she left Finland in 2012, following her husband's job offer. Saara's husband Timo had secured an internal transfer within an international Finnish company to Silicon Valley.

As Timo embraced the exciting professional challenge, Saara bid farewell to her role as the CEO's assistant and head of the assistant team at a one of the leading large telecom companies in Finland. Fearlessly, Saara stepped away from the pinnacle of her career to become a stay-at-home mom in the technology hub of the world.

Saara's educational background includes a master's degree in social sciences from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland and additional training as an executive assistant. Reflecting on her career after the move, Saara admits she could no longer envision herself as anyone else's executive assistant after the seamless collaboration she had with the CEO of a publicly traded company.

Saara used to own the minute-by-minute schedule of the CEO and participate in executive team meetings in a world she affectionately refers to as the "business suit realm." She still speaks highly of her manager and thinks he was an exceptional leader.

"I was at the peak of my executive assistant career," she said.

In her new role, she would be the chief executive assistant of four boys and her husband.

"Our youngest son was 6 years old, and the oldest was 12," she explained. "For the last six months before the move, I was alone with our four little boys in Finland. My husband went ahead, and I handled every aspect of the relocation on my own."

In the new country, Saara became the family's sovereign head coordinator. After relocation, men typically leap into their new job opportunities and start working more or less immediately. Depending on the visa status, the wife may have to wait for a work permit for a few months. Not all visas allow the spouse to work at all. In the process, her own career took a back seat.

As the boys settled into language and school routines in California, Saara began renovating the family's home in San Jose. She ran half-marathons with Finnish women and diligently worked on handicrafts. The fruit trees in the Virtanen family's self-maintained backyard were prolific. Saara's fruits were so delicious that during apricot season, Finnish women would line up at Saara's door.

And Saara herself is exceptionally open-hearted, generous, and hospitable. When guests drop by, coffee is always brewed — sipped from Moomin mugs, of course. Next to the Mörkö, The Groke mug, there's always freshly baked pie or pulla "as if by chance." The indulgent moment

is accentuated by the host's positive chatter. Saara listens, radiating joy. Not dwelling on sorrows; her thought process is positive and solution-oriented.

And what about the essence of Finnishness and Americanism? Saara, forever Finnish at heart, acknowledges the benefits of dual citizenship. Her sons, clearly planning lives in the United States, reap the advantages. As for America itself, Saara appreciates its virtues.

"Every country has room for improvement," she pragmatically notes.

When the pandemic caught the local healthcare system off guard in 2020, Saara participated in a project sewing face masks with other Finnish women. Soon Marimekko masks crafted by Saara and other Finnish women were discovered all over the San Francisco Bay Area in health care facilities like in the neonatal intensive care hospital in San Jose. She still has a certificate of appreciation awarded by Marin County for "providing outstanding service and being a helpful community member during Covid-19 pandemic."

We gathered around the coffee table, reminiscing about the days when our local grocery store ran out of dry yeast and Saara left a glass jar of yeast outside her front door. Back then, venturing indoors felt like a risk. I gratefully accepted the jar

and left a roll of toilet paper in its place — another hard-to-find precious commodity during the pandemic. The Finnish practical support network in the San Francisco Bay Area proved invaluable, connecting neighbors and friends in times of need.

A New Spark Ignites

When Saara's eldest son left for college, she applied to some executive assistant positions in Silicon Valley out of curiosity. "My job applications didn't gain traction, so I gradually began exploring other options," she said.

Saara had discovered a passion for carpentry while tinkering around at home. Her hands were remarkably adept. When she showcased the results of her home renovations, her entire demeanor lit up — she was visibly enthusiastic and proud of her accomplishments. Her knack for craftsmanship also caught the eye of visitors at local Finnish Christmas market, where her beautifully crafted illuminated Christmas stars and other wooden creations became highly sought-after items.

"I thrive on both design and execution," she explained.

Driven by her newfound interest, Saara delved into educational opportunities related to construction. She envisioned

establishing a one-woman construction business, specializing in small-scale home improvements for private clients. Soon, Saara stumbled upon the building technology program at San Jose City College.

"I've never been afraid of life," declared Saara, recounting how, just two or three days after applying, she received an acceptance email.

Over the course of a year and a half, Saara studied various facets of the construction industry and learned extensively about fundamentals in construction technology and trade. Although Saara was in her 50s — the oldest among her peers — the age range of students was quite diverse.

As Saara neared the end of her studies, she participated in an orientation course that introduced her to various construction trades. Just before the onset of the Covid pandemic, Saara joined a professional union. As a result of the orientation course, she gained entry into the union's apprenticeship program.

From apprentice to construction leader

Continued on next page



FINNISH-AMERICAN SOCIETY OF THE MIDWEST
FINLANDIA FOUNDATION CHAPTER

Finnish American Society Of The Midwest
Brings You What's Happening In Chicagoland

fasmevent@gmail.com
www.fasm.us
[www.facebook.com FinnishAmericanSocietyMidwest](https://www.facebook.com/FinnishAmericanSocietyMidwest)

2024 FASM Upcoming Programs
at the Chicago Estonian House, 14700 Estonian Lane, Riverwoods, IL

Sunday, September 8 –
Scandinavian Day Festival, Vasa Park in Elgin, IL.
FASM will have a booth with Finnish food items and other merchandise. Steve Solkela, One Man Band, will be part of the entertainment this year.
<https://www.scandinaviandayil.com/>



Sunday, September 15 –
FASM Member Picnic and Annual Meeting
At the Chicago Estonian House.



Sunday, October 27, 1pm -
FASM Karelian Stew Lunch and a Program
by Dr. Marvin W. Makinen,
Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology,
The University of Chicago
Title: The Search for Raoul Wallenberg
Dr. Makinen has carried out research, as a member of three international commissions and as an independent researcher (www.raoulsfate.org) to uncover the fate of Raoul Wallenberg. His talk will cover the history of these efforts and provide an in-depth view of the hurdles to be overcome for its resolution. At the Chicago Estonian House.



Saturday, November 23 –
International Christmas Market
At the Chicago Estonian House,
FASM will have a table of Finnish food items and merchandise.



Sunday, December 1 –
Joulu, Entertainment: Muriel Anderson
Guitarist, Harp Guitarist, Composer, Educator.
At the Chicago Estonian House



FASM events partially sponsored by Finlandia Foundation National

2024 FASM Membership Due, \$25 per Member family.
Current FASM members were sent a Membership letter and form in the mail.
Membership letter and form can be found on the website: <http://www.fasm.us> under the Membership tab.

FASM Membership - new members are always welcome, go to: www.fasm.us "Membership Information" for Membership Letter and Form. Web: <https://www.fasm.us/> Email: fasmevent@gmail.com Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/FinnishAmericanSocietyMidwest>

Saara found her passion in male dominated carpentry. "I have to remind myself to eat and drink during the day," she said.

Photo by Matt Pranzo



Pinnacle

Continued from previous page

After completing her course, Saara got her first job opportunity in May 2020. Her supervisor welcomed her to the construction site with the words, “You have work until Friday.”

As Friday finally approached, the construction site buzzed with activity. Simultaneously, in a small office, three other novice carpenters engaged in an orientation discussion for the next week with the site manager. Saara, at 50 years old, and the sole woman in the room, had secured her first job in the construction industry right in the heart of California’s Silicon Valley.

Working in construction is physically demanding. Initially, Saara’s teenage sons were skeptical, but their gazes soon turned admiring when they learned about her tireless efforts on the job.

“If my husband hadn’t been supportive back then, I wouldn’t have made it. And honestly, I still wouldn’t,” she said.

The responsibility for household chores, family logistics, and grocery shopping fell squarely on her husband’s shoulders as Saara put in long hours at the construction site. Her daily commute takes two hours, and during work, she walks at least 10 miles each day. Many of Saara’s colleagues travel even further distances.

Days begin early, and evenings typically end with an early bedtime. Besides the physical labor, the continuous learning is incredibly rewarding, although it drains her energy. I won’t be asking Saara to go hiking on her day off for this interview. It becomes clear, she simply doesn’t need the extra workout.

Breaking barriers in construction

Saara’s eyes sparkled with determination as she stepped onto the construction realm. A few months into her new role, she realized she was the sole remaining apprentice from the initial group of four.

“Take that staircase opening, for instance,” Saara answered when I asked if she has received feedback from her team as being one of the rare women in the field. The six-story concrete parking structure was taking shape, and safety protocols

demand that the stairwell must be covered before pouring the steps.

“The plywood sheets alone were massive, not to mention the hefty beams supporting them,” she explained. “These weren’t mere two-by-fours; they were colossal, sturdy logs.”

And Saara’s supervisor couldn’t believe his ears when she explained that she had tackled the entire task solo.

“These moments,” Saara reflected, “remind me that Finnish women possess resilience, resourcefulness, independence, and problem-solving skills.” The admiration from her supervisor touched her soul. Listening to her I am convinced nothing stops this woman.

Bridging worlds and embracing realities

Saara thrives amidst the clang of hammers and the scent of freshly sawn wood. She cherishes every twist and turn of her unconventional path.

“I remember taking a day off and eavesdropping on my husband’s virtual team meeting through the wall,” Saara said with a chuckle when discussing workplace culture differences. “I couldn’t help but notice that their conversations contained significantly fewer expletives than ours.”

The construction industry introduces her to people from diverse backgrounds. In her earlier days in Finland, Saara worked at Stakes, a research and development center specializing in studies related to social welfare and combating inequality. Now, here in California, she immerses herself in the grassroots realities of life.

Saara reflects on how working in construction has opened her eyes in unprecedented ways. “This journey through construction sites has exposed me to a whole new reality and a myriad of human destinies.”

She recounts meeting a woman whose husband passed away, leaving her with three children and an RV as their home. Then there’s the remarkably sympathetic man who, after serving 14 years for murder, now seeks a fresh direction for his life. Saara’s list of encounters and human stories is extensive.

“We’re all connected,” Saara emphasizes. “Ultimately, we’re just ordinary, valuable humans—sharing dreams, needs, and emotions.” For Saara, the privilege lies in meeting these extraordinary souls.

Leading by example

“Previously I worked at a large corporation’s administration indoors. But now,” she exclaims with enthusiasm, “my baby is in this parking structure.” The parking facility is part of a massive construction development project in South San Francisco’s San Bruno area.

“Rain or shine, with fingers numbed by the cold and fatigue setting in, I’ve done the same basic work I expect from my team. As a manager, I strive to be firm yet fair, always leading by example. I trust my team, and I show it. I only intervene when necessary.”

Saara draws her greatest leadership lessons from the very tasks she executes. “If someone comes straight out of college to be a manager,” Saara explained, “they won’t truly grasp the realities faced by these workers.”

Many of Saara’s colleagues don’t speak English fluently. Despite language barriers, ensuring that instructions are understood correctly remains paramount. Even when using an iPad, the latest blueprint version must be at hand — there’s no room for errors.

Saara’s motivation clearly stems from the constant learning opportunities in the field. The journey forward is profoundly inspiring. And technology plays an integral role.

Ambitious dreams

Saara remains with DPR Construction, where she now has a mentor guiding her career development within the company. “I have a career path to follow, and I receive support along the way,” she shared.

Last year, she served as a carpenter lead, overseeing subcontractors and actively participating in the work. This year, she’s a carpenter manager, supervising a team while still getting her hands dirty. Additionally, she’s undergoing training to become a superintendent, assisting the lead superintendent with various tasks.

When asked what her ultimate goal is, her direction was clear: To ascend to the role of a construction site manager. Her ambitious plan keeps her undeterred, even as she handles tasks that would daunt three people. Weekends? Still working. She remains an hourly laborer, knowing that as a manager she is the last to leave the site. And on her days off, if the situation demands, she rushes to assist on another construction site.

After charting her upward trajectory toward becoming a superintendent, overseeing the entire worksite she says next she envisions working on a project that utilizes full timber elements. “Perhaps my identity as a carpenter and my love for wood shine through,” she muses. “Wood construction inspires me more than concrete ever could.”

Saara, her eyes alight with enthusiasm, recounts her journey. For years, she was a homemaker, navigating life through the lens of her family’s needs. But as time wore on, a restlessness crept in - a yearning for purpose beyond the walls that seemed to close in. “I began questioning my role in this world,” she reflects. “I craved my own significance.” Now, with newfound passion, she revels in the joy of purposeful pursuits. “It’s exhilarating to be excited about what you do!” she exclaims.

Timo, observing his wife, wears a contented smile. Their eyes meet, exchanging a silent language of shared success, mutual respect, and perhaps a fresh infatuation with life. Timo, after 27 years with the same employer, perhaps inspired by his wife, decided to embrace a new, invigorating role at a leading global tech giant in Silicon Valley.

As our coffee chat draws to a close on Sunday, Saara heads off to Finnish choir practice in Palo Alto. Meanwhile, I slip on my shoes, Saara approaches with a basket of woolen socks. “Do you wear woolen socks?” she asks in Finnish. I nod in awe. She hands me pairs knitted from Finnish ‘7 Brothers’ yarn — gifts for both me and my husband. These socks are her post-work relaxation, crafted while unwinding in front of the TV after physically demanding days.

I jump into my car in the sun-drenched corner of San Jose’s East Foothills, where Saara and Timo, their youngest son and two cats reside against a backdrop of fruit-laden trees, eucalyptus, tall cypresses, and swaying palms. The recent rains have painted the hills a vibrant green, inviting gazes upward to the nearly cloudless blue sky. Here, two paragliders glide gracefully in the gentle spring breeze, carried forward by air currents trustfully toward their new adventures.

Editor’s note: *Nina Dahlblom is an accomplished sales and marketing professional, who loves writing and telling true inspiring stories. Nina lives in San Jose, California and is a community activist with a keen interest in immigrant narratives and women’s empowerment.*