

Business Magazine *Tendenze*

The law office is wedged on the twentieth floor of a big, ash-gray colored building at 33 N. La Salle Street, the street of the best lawyers in Chicago. When the brass elevator doors open, the name of law firm Romanucci & Blandin stands out on the ice colored wall. Right away a smiling secretary in a dark suit enters the access code.

Nestled in the grainy semidarkness of his office, Antonio Romanucci studies the papers of his latest case, the suspicious death of a fifteen year old girl hit by a car while walking on a country road in Kenosha County in Wisconsin. The Chicago attorney seeks to demonstrate not only that there are inaccuracies in the police investigation, but that they actually represent an attempt to cover up the truth: the local sheriff is a relative of the menace of the road.

"To achieve adequate compensation for the family it will take months, perhaps years," explains Romanucci petting a turtle-shaped table ornament. "Only patience and constancy lead to full justice, if you want to be a hare, you won't go very far."

Romanucci is just one of 34,357 lawyers registered with the Chicago Bar Association in Chicago.

Not to mention the 1,110 non-practicing partners and the 1,182 retired attorneys, according to the data of the Bar Association. The community of lawyers of the city is a veritable city within a city. Home to four of the largest law firms in America - Baker & McKenzie (3,300 lawyers), DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary (3,159), Sidley Austin Brown & Wood (1,584) and Mayer Brown Rowe & Maw (1,292) - Chicago also hosts a myriad of small and medium-sized law firms, such as the refined and serious law firm of Romanucci. The city is an urban tapestry of lawyer's door signs; there are experts in administrative law and criminal law, there are lawyers specializing in suing insurance companies, there are divorce lawyers, government or business law lawyers.

With its winding boulevards dotted with cement skyscrapers of faded concrete, its past linked to the Al Capone mob and the untouchables, the

gloomy atmosphere lightened only by some jazz clarinet and swirls of snow, Chicago seems to emerge from the pages of a legal thriller by John Grisham.

Besides the presence of several businesses that need legal services, the concentration of lawyers is due to the appeal of the law schools of the city, among which the law schools of the University of Chicago and of Northwestern University stand out. Every year hundreds of aspiring civil and criminal lawyers move to the capital of Illinois to attend these first rate schools in a city where rents are more affordable than New York or San Francisco. Then, once they have graduated, they remain. The Bar exam in America varies from state to state and the preparation that students receive at the Universities of Chicago is designed for the Illinois Bar exam. So, many choose to take the exam in this state, thickening the army of lawyers in Chicago.

Standing out in this overcrowding of attorneys is extremely difficult. Tamara Holder, originally from Colorado, is one of those out-of-state students who after graduating from the John Marshall Law School in Chicago has opened a law firm in the city. Slim and with will of granite, the thirty year old Holder begins her day at seven with a personal trainer at the gym. At eight she zigzags with her SUV in the tangled Chicago traffic, railing against the motorists who slow down. At nine she's in her Spartan office on La Salle Street to prepare the defense of a homemaker whose house was foreclosed. At lunch time she finds herself in the black ghetto on the Chicago's South Side to visit the Leo Catholic High School, an excellent school in which unknown persons had stolen computers a few days earlier. In the afternoon she quickly climbs the courthouse steps where she delivers a plea at an arraignment. And at ten o'clock in the evening she is still standing: she talks with a colleague while sipping a Margarita at the Marcadito bar on the North Side, the center of Chicago nightlife.

Frenzy, crimes and robes. These are the elements that make up the great metropolis of the Midwest that has always seduced Hollywood, and recur in the various crime movies filmed here, from "The Untouchables" (1987) to "The Fugitive" (1993) through "Mission: Impossible" (1996). Chicago

charms for its architecture, for its skyline that reflects on Lake Michigan shaken by the roar of the legendary "L train", the elevated train.

Like the elevated train that continuously slaloms between the concrete towers, the city of lawyers keeps running. And the ride ends promptly at Gibson's, the most famous restaurant. At its dimly lit tables meets the legal; world of Chicago: successful lawyers like Romanucci, young and ambitious ones like Holder, senior judges and enterprising prosecutors. If you listen you hear talk of defendants, judgments and settlements. From here, Chicago, seems a huge courtroom.