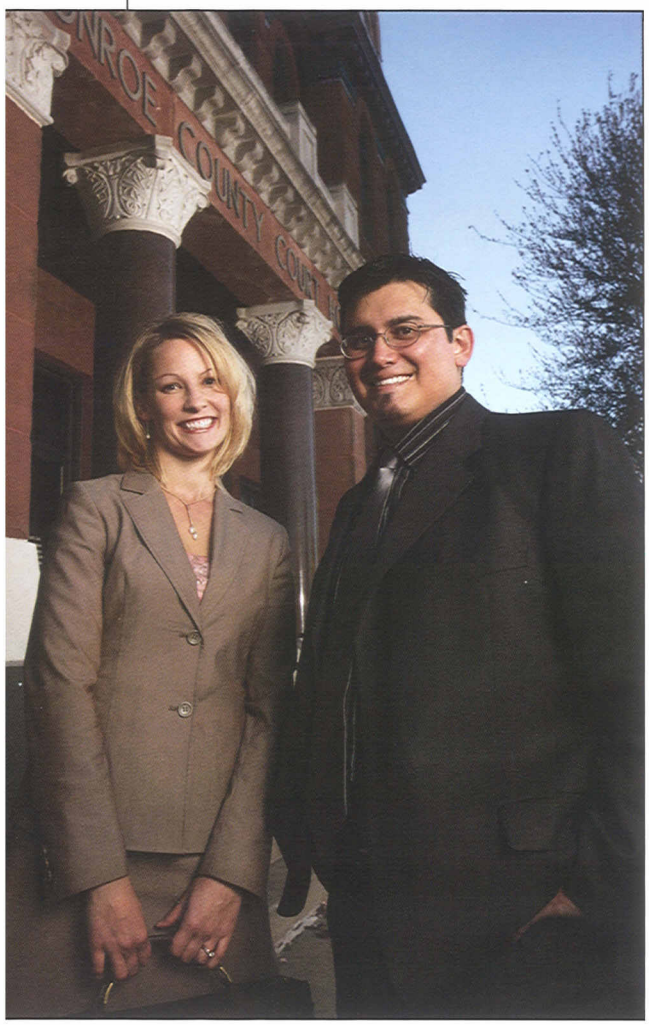
The Practice Is Challenging, The Lifestyle Is Great

Young Law School alumni tell the story of why they choose to practice in smaller cities.



C&N PHOTOGRAPHY

Class of 2005 alumni Candice Tlustosch and Ricardo Estrada are two of many young attorneys who are enthusiastic about practicing law in smaller communities.

A new initiative is under way at the Law School to help students learn more about the advantages of practicing law in Wisconsin's small and mid-size communities. Dean Ken Davis, the Office of Career Services, and the Lawyering Skills Program are three key players in launching this multi-phase project to acquaint future lawyers with a career option they may have overlooked.

- In June 2006, Dean Davis launched the Wisconsin Hiring Initiative by inviting attorneys from all parts of the state to come to Madison for a roundtable discussion on the challenges of hiring young attorneys and getting the word out about the advantages of small-community practice.

- In November 2006, the Law School's Office of Career Services hosted a panel discussion by four recent graduates who practice in small and mid-size firms in smaller cities. More than 50 students attended and the feedback was terrific. (See Assistant Dean Jane Heymann's column in this section, page 19.)

- In fall 2006, Professor Ralph Cagle, director of the Lawyering Skills Program, inaugurated a summer clerkship program to place five law students in selected firms in small-to-mid-size Wisconsin communities. (See page 17.)

Cagle is delighted that the topic of small-community practice and its multiple advantages has moved into the spotlight. "My personal feeling is that there are some marvelous opportunities out there," he says. "I have this conversation more than a dozen times a year."

To learn more about what is attracting young alumni to smaller communities, the *Gargoyle* interviewed several recent graduates who have chosen to practice in firms outside Madison and Milwaukee. Stereotypes disappear as we get a glimpse of the variety among smaller firms and the numerous professional and personal advantages of living and practicing in small and mid-size communities.

Kathryn M. (Scott) Blom '03
McCarty Law LLP
Kaukana and Appleton

Katie Blom '03 entered law school with a goal in mind: practicing with McCarty Law in her hometown of Kaukana, midway between Green Bay and Appleton. As a first-year law student, she sent her résumé to the firm, and clerked for the firm after her first and second summers in law school.

"When most people come out of law school, they want a big city," Blom says. "People don't give consideration to coming up to the Fox Valley. You often find that the people who come here to work are *from* here — we *know* the benefits."

Advantages include a lower cost of living (which offsets lower salaries), and a wealth of outdoor opportunities, Blom says. "There are a lot of lakes and state parks, and Door County is only an hour and a half away. We're not far from larger cities either: Milwaukee is two hours away, and it's only four hours to Chicago. We have wilderness to the north, and major cities to the south."

Blom adds that the Fox Cities area itself has a lot to offer, including Broadway shows, unique restaurants, nightlife, and sporting events.

Blom, whose practice focuses on business transactions, sees multiple professional benefits as well. "The number-one benefit of practicing in a small community is being able to take ownership of a project and see it from start to finish early in your career," she says. "I also enjoy the complexity of the projects I am involved in at this point in my practice."

She has received excellent mentoring at her firm, Blom says. "When you are hired, it is with the objective that you will become a partner, so the partners have a vested interest in your growth. It is common for a partner to sit down with you and work on a project for half an hour or an hour. That's pretty neat."

Blom is married and has a baby daughter, another reason she is pleased about practicing in a small community. "I think it's more conducive to family life," she says. "If you say you're going to leave early to see your daughter's play or your son's game, it's quite acceptable."

Blom comments that people may mistakenly equate a small-community practice with small clients. "It is really not true — and especially in our practice. People may not be aware of the large companies we have around here. Our clients range from mom-and-pop businesses to large corporations. It gives you a really interesting practice."

Jeremy Welch '01
Ruder Ware
Wausau

Jeremy Welch '01, who earned his undergraduate degree in accounting, had two priorities in planning his law career: he wanted to practice in a small city and to focus on business and commercial law.

The firm of Ruder Ware in Wausau was a perfect fit for him. "We're a business law firm with a sophisticated practice," Welch says. "We have larger clients, and I do a lot of commercial finance work as well as mergers and acquisitions."

Welch adds, "One of the stereotypes about firms in small communities is that they have less sophisticated attorneys, but I have not felt that to be true. I work with very interesting attorneys, both at my own firm and from other firms."

He elaborates, "The stereotype is that if you go to a small town, the work is simpler. But my work is sophisticated and challenging." Ruder Ware employs 45 attorneys: 30 in its Wausau office and 15 in Eau Claire. "We're the eleventh largest firm in the state," Welch says, "and the biggest outside Madison and Milwaukee."

Welch is enthusiastic about the life that he and his wife and family are able to lead in a smaller community. Outdoor life includes boating, hiking, and skiing; the city has an active arts community; and the public schools are excellent. "We have made so many friends since we've arrived here," he says. "When we moved here, we didn't know anyone."

Welch also volunteers in the community. "It's strongly encouraged — everyone at the firm does it," Welch says. "Here in Wausau, there probably isn't one nonprofit board that we don't have an attorney on. The firm's attitude is to give back to the community that gave to us."

One of the benefits of working and living in a small community, Welch says, is that your clients are also your neighbors. "They come to you not only when they need a lawyer, but also for advice on business issues," he says. "You really become partners with your clients."

Candice C. M. Tlustosch '05

Arndt, Buswell & Thorn S.C.

Sparta

Candice Tlustosch '05 joined the firm of Arndt, Buswell & Thorn in Sparta, Wisconsin, directly out of law school. Partner Ellen Thorn '84 had come to campus to interview and, as Tlustosch recalls, "When Ellen described the practice, it sounded right for me: the right amount of independence and client selection, the perfect level of autonomy."

Tlustosch had been drawn to study law as she observed her grandparents, owners of a family farm in Montana, dealing with legal matters. "I came to law school thinking I wanted to do estate planning, and ABT hired me for business and tax law, but I can do any area of law."

A year and a half later, Tlustosch knows she made the right choice. "I absolutely love my job. I love being an attorney in a small town. I often feel that I'm too busy — much busier than I expected — but I love what I do and I love the people I work with."

Client contact is a key advantage of small-community practice, Tlustosch says. "From the first day of the job, you jump in and meet the real person behind the case."

She adds that any stereotype of an old-fashioned firm with very little work is completely off the mark. "I have no shortage of work here; I have been absolutely swamped since my third month. The opportunities for learning and growth are fantastic. After eighteen months, I feel like I have sampled everything."

Tlustosch enjoys the natural beauty of western Wisconsin as well. "It's a beautiful area. I get to travel because I rotate between several counties, and I see a lot of lovely scenery — and a lot of judicial styles." She adds that her husband, an avid sportsman, "absolutely loves living in this area."

Tlustosch's early insight into the amount of independence possible in small-community practice turned out to be exactly correct. "You get a fantastic level of autonomy. I make my own intake decisions; I am in control of my own caseload."

Joy Willis '03

Cross, Jenks, Mercer and Maffei

Baraboo

When Joy Willis '03 graduated from law school, she went straight to the firm of Cross Jenks in Baraboo. "I really wanted to go to a smaller community," she says. "I liked the idea of general practice: having a lot of different issues is really interesting."

In addition, she was quite taken with the picturesque town of Baraboo. "When I came downtown, I fell in love with it."

Willis says that she and the firm created an unusual set of job responsibilities to capitalize on her strong interest in writing. "It was a little bit different," she says. "I was hired to do a lot of the writing for the firm — to do many of their briefs. That was so clearly what I wanted to do."

This did not mean, however, that she never saw the inside of a courtroom. "I was in court within the first month and a half," she says. "They throw you in as soon as possible — while they hold your hand.

"I think that coming here was the best decision I could have made," Willis says. "The people here are fantastic."

Another great attraction, Willis says, was that "The firm wants you to be involved in the community — and they give you time off to do it. They do not expect you to work 70 hours a week."

Willis joined a dart league ("They tease me at the firm") and a volleyball league, and taught a class once a week at the Portage/Reedsburg campus of Madison Area Technical College. She taught both employment law and criminal law.

Ten Frequently Cited Advantages of Practice in Smaller Firms and Communities

- Close client contact
- Accelerated advancement
- Flexibility of scheduling
- Early opportunities for community leadership
- Lower cost of living
- Internet brings access to resources equal to that of larger firms
- Close relationships with other legal professionals
- Taking projects from beginning to end early in your career
- Opportunity for professional growth in multiple areas
- Easy access to outdoor recreation areas

"When you work in a small firm and you say, 'I have to be off by six tonight,' nobody objects," she says.

"From my experience working in a small-community firm," says Willis, "it is the same work you would be doing in a big city — especially here in the county seat — but it is somewhat more laid-back."

Shortly after Willis was interviewed for this article, she set off for a new professional adventure: clerking for three judges of the Sixth Judicial District Court in Silver City, New Mexico. "It's another small community," Willis says. "Probably the size of Baraboo, but add some mountains."

Ricardo Estrada '05
Fitzpatrick, Blackey & Associates
La Crosse

Ricardo Estrada '05 grew up in a large city —Milwaukee, but when it came time to decide where to practice, he chose Fitzpatrick, Blackey & Associates in La Crosse.

"At first my choice was to be in a smaller firm — I wasn't thinking of a smaller community," he says. "I had interned in a small firm in Milwaukee and liked the small-firm environment. But when I visited La Crosse, I was taken with what a good place it is to raise a family." Estrada and his wife have three young daughters.

"It was the right fit," Estrada reports. "I really enjoy working here."

Estrada cites multiple professional advantages to the combination of small firm plus small community.

"For litigation, it's a big advantage," he says. "There are five attorneys in my firm, and we just jump right in whenever something comes up. The work doesn't get handed off to someone else."

He also appreciates the ability to control his own

First Small-Community Clerkships Set

In summer 2007, a new clerkship opportunity will be inaugurated at the Law School: Five second-year law students have been matched up with firms in small to mid-size communities for summer clerkship experiences. The students will gain practical skills and experience while living and working in non-metropolitan Wisconsin communities.

The students are from hometowns ranging from Elm Grove to Milwaukee to South Bend, Indiana; all are headed for unfamiliar territory for their summer experience.

Funding for the clerkships was provided by a special legacy from the late Judge Edmund P. Arpin of Neenah, Wisconsin, a graduate of the Law School's Class of 1950, who made a generous unrestricted gift to the Law School to be used at the discretion of the dean.

To be eligible for the program, the selected students will take the spring semester Lawyering Skills Course before they begin their clerkships. In the fall when they return, they will take a one-credit follow-up seminar.

Day-to-day supervision and mentoring will be provided by the selected law firms and also by Lawyering Skills Professors Ralph Cagle and Gretchen Viney.

A total of 40 students applied to participate in the new program. Professor Cagle, Director of the Lawyering Skills Program, comments, "The fact that 40 students applied for these clerkships is evidence of a strong interest in exploring the advantages of practice in smaller communities."

Cagle adds, "Right now, this is a program in the testing phase, but all indications are that we have an excellent cross-section of our students interested in the advantages of practice in small and mid-size communities, plus several fine law firms that are very interested in our students. The next step is to do all we can to help these students be successful in their employment."

Five firms in smaller Wisconsin communities will employ UW law students as summer clerks in 2007:

Jennifer Dye —
LaRowe, Gerlach & Roy LLP,
Reedsburg

Nicole Marklein —
Cross, Jenks, Mercer and Maffei,
Baraboo

Maria Selsor —
Johns, Flaherty & Collins S.C.,
La Crosse

Todd Sobotka —
Roethe Krohn Pope LLP,
Edgerton

Adam Walsh —
Mubarak, Radcliffe & Berry S.C.,
Tomah

schedule. "Your boss is not making your schedule."

Estrada says it is a misconception that someone who moves to a smaller community is isolated there. "Actually, it's easier to meet other attorneys here than it would be if you were completely new in a big city," he says. "You see people just walking down the street; you get to know other attorneys and judges pretty well, and to build good relationships with them."

He adds, "You also deal with firms outside the area — all around Wisconsin — and, as in any other place, you get to put up the good fight with firms in Milwaukee."

Estrada also appreciates the mentorship opportunities in a smaller firm. "You can walk down the hall and talk to one of the attorneys. They are never too busy to answer a question or to guide you along to make the right decision."

The La Crosse area offers numerous natural attractions as well, Estrada says. "If you're an outdoor person, you have camping, bike trails, and beautiful scenery along the Mississippi. There are festivals, hunting, and fishing: everything is at your fingertips, not four or five hours away."

Jeremy Gill '99

Nash, Spindler, Grimstad & McCracken LLP

Manitowoc

Jeremy Gill '99 knew that he wanted to pursue litigation as the focus of his legal career after his clinical experiences at the UW Law School and externships with the Wisconsin Department of Justice and Wisconsin Court of Appeals. "It was clear to me that I wanted to stay in litigation work," Gill recalls, "and I was pretty selective in where I wanted to apply."

Gill had clerked for a larger city firm and decided that it was not a good fit. "So I directed my job search toward smaller communities."

The right job in the right community turned out to be at Nash, Spindler, Grimstad & McCracken in Manitowoc, where Gill practices in the areas of civil litigation, insurance defense, and professional liability litigation.

The work is often intense, Gill says, far from the stereotype of a laid-back small-town practice. "Litigation takes a lot of time," he says. "At times, you live, eat, and breathe the job. But the trade-off is having a little flexibility with your schedule." When he is not busy with work, he and his wife are occupied with their 19-month-old son.

Gill has no trouble acknowledging what his community does *not* have: "You don't have the same type of night life as a larger city, or a lot of access to sporting events," he says. "But there are other things to enjoy. Lake Michigan is a huge draw: our office is right across from the lake. There is cross-country skiing and a state park close by, and everyday recreation in a nice city (we have a new multi-million-dollar aquatic center planned for 2008). There are all kinds of programs for kids. This is a really good place to live and raise a family."

Gill cites professional advantages in a small community as well. "You have a closer relationship with the attorneys you work with," he says. "Working in a small community leads to a greater level of civility, because these are people you are going to be seeing a lot of."

He adds, "I also appreciate having the ability to work a case in the way that I think it should be pursued — with a client's blessing, of course. I have a lot of autonomy in my work."

Amy Eddy '00

Anderson, O'Brien, Bertz, Skrenes & Golla

Stevens Point

Amy Eddy '00 focused her attention on the Anderson Law Firm in Stevens Point early in her law school career. "Living in the community, I was already acquainted with the firm," she says. "I made contact with them about clerking during my first year as a law student."

She clerked there for her first two summers in law school, and during her third year she worked at the firm and commuted. After graduation, she became a full-time associate, and in 2005, she became a partner.

"I never really left!" she laughs, and then speaks thoughtfully about the advantages of small-community practice.

"One of the biggest things that comes to mind is that in a smaller community — which to me equals 'smaller firm' — you have a variety of your own clients, your own cases. I never thought I would be able to get involved in so many areas of law and with so many cases right out of law school. And you are potentially on a faster track to everything: handling cases, working with clients, and becoming partner."

It would be a mistake to assume that everyone who works in a small firm is a general practitioner, Eddy says. At the Anderson Law Firm, the associates and partners tend to specialize. She focuses her own practice on estate planning, probate, trust settlements, and elder law.

Other advantages Eddy cites

are a flexible schedule and a high quality of life. "It may be attractive to a new associate that we are a college town, with a green circle trail and nature conservancy, through our College of Natural Resources. My husband and I have two children, and this is a very good place to raise a family."

The firm's interaction with the community is another plus for Eddy. "Our motto is 'a community law firm' and we are highly involved in community leadership," she says. "All of our attorneys are involved in the community, and there are good opportunities for associates coming to town."

Eddy observes, "When you have the ability to be more involved with your clients and your community, I suspect this leads to more satisfaction with the law practice." ■

Panel of Recent Law Graduates Leads Lively Discussion on Small-City Practice

By Assistant Dean Jane Heymann
Director of Career Services

Helping students to identify career options, including those available outside of large metropolitan areas, is one of the jobs of the Office of Career Services. We are therefore very excited about the Law School's new initiative to draw our students' attention to opportunities to practice law in smaller firms and smaller communities.

As part of this initiative, the Office of Career Services hosted a panel discussion in November, at which four of our recent graduates spoke to an audience of more than 50 law students about their careers in small and mid-size law firms in cities outside of Madison and Milwaukee.

This program proved to be one of the most popular ones we've organized in recent years, based on both student attendance and feedback we received after the fact.

Program participants were:

- Amy Eddy (Class of 2000) of Anderson O'Brien in Stevens Point
- Christopher Toner (Class of 2002) of Ruder Ware's Wausau office
- Pam Macal (Class of 2003) from Weld Riley in Eau Claire
- Amanda Wieckowicz (Class of 2003) of LaRowe, Gerlach & Roy's Reedsburg office

Young lawyers in small and mid-size firms are offered more client contact and higher levels of responsibility.

One of the most striking points made by all four panelists was that, because they practice in small and mid-size cities, they have been offered opportunities to be actively involved in their communities and to assume leadership positions at a very early point in their careers. All of them, for example, are already serving on boards of directors of local businesses and civic organizations, and their firms encourage them to do so because of the client development potential of those sorts of activities. They are also routinely asked to make presentations to local organizations.

Each of the panelists believes that young lawyers in small and mid-size firms are offered substantially more client contact and higher levels of responsibility for client matters than their counterparts at larger firms. In short, the message from these young alums was that professional development opportunities come to a young lawyer in a smaller city at a very brisk pace.

Another topic of discussion was the fact that, when making hiring decisions, firms in smaller communities are very interested in whether a job applicant has family or other ties to the community or the region, because they want some assurance that a newly-hired lawyer won't "move on" in a year or two. In response to questions from the audience, the panelists discussed ways that a law student could demonstrate that sort of commitment to prospective law firm employers, even if he or she did not grow up in the area of the country where the firm is located.

The program offered students a wealth of other helpful insights about the "real world" of law practice outside of large cities. We predict that it will result in more students' expanding the scope of their job searches, now that they know more about the advantages offered by small and mid-size law firms in small and mid-size communities.