

Demystifying Rural Practice: You Are Not Alone

Making the leap from big-city practice to small-town practice can be scary, and self-doubt might ensue. But give it a chance. You'll be surprised at how *not* alone you are.

Alone? Having no one else present? That doesn't match up with my day-to-day. The phone rings. Feet shuffle past my office, the front door chimes, and the ding of new emails is constant.

Entering the courthouse isn't uncomfortable or intimidating; it's a familiar old friend. After exchanging pleasantries with the security deputies, I know exactly where to find my courtroom, the names of the clerk and the court reporter, and how many family pictures the judge has in chambers. In the hallway, I pass a colleague from last week's contested hearing, and we casually chat about my kid's baseball team or upcoming vacation plans.

But this place – this courthouse – these people have not always been known to me. I did not grow up here.

Few Strangers Here, at Least Not for Long

Just a few years ago, I left the big city and opted for small-town living. Attending law school and practicing law in downtown Minneapolis was remarkable. I fell in love with the energy, the hustle and bustle all around me, and everything the city had to offer. I made great friends and connections. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my time there and it was very hard to say goodbye. But, with all that, I still felt "alone." The courthouse was a soaring tower in the sky. Faces weren't familiar to me. There were so many other attorneys, court staff, and judges that I could never keep track of. Every introduction in court was the first time, over and over. Don't get me wrong, practicing law in the big city came with its perks: the phone always rang, people were

plentiful in the office, and I never went without emails. But, being one lawyer in the big city felt small.

I didn't want to feel small anymore. Although it might seem ironic, being part of a small town doesn't make you feel small. So, I set my sights on moving out of the big city and back to my home state of Wisconsin. Without knowing anyone or rarely even visiting, we arrived in Baraboo. Never had I been to the courthouse, and never had I met the judges or local counsel.

I was starting over, in a new and unfamiliar place, after six years of big-city practice. Not only was I starting over, but I was starting over *here*. Small-town USA. Circus City, as Baraboo is known. A population of just over 12,000, and not knowing one person.

BY STEFANIE P. WAGNER

Although I am not from here and I didn't grow up here, I feel like I am here. I am part of this thriving place.



Stefanie P. Wagner, Hamline 2011, is a partner at Cross Jenks Mercer & Maffei LLP, Baraboo, and practices in all aspects of family law, including divorce, paternity, and child custody. She also serves as guardian ad litem for minor children in Columbia and Juneau counties and prosecutes CHIPS matters in Sauk and Adams counties. She is a member of the State Bar of Wisconsin's Greater Wisconsin Initiative Rural Workgroup and serves on the Baraboo Area Chamber of Commerce Board. Access the digital article at wisbar.org/wl. swagner@cjmlaw.com



Stefanie Wagner, her husband, and their two children enjoy exploring Wisconsin's state parks, including hiking at Natural Bridge State Park (pictured) near their home in Baraboo.

This was it, rural practice. I arrived. A panic of uncertainty took over. Is *this* where I wanted to be? Would I be satisfied practicing law *here*? Would I feel “alone”? More concerning, does the circus still have clowns? My childhood fears of clowns started to flare up.

Mentors Aplenty

Those fears quickly subsided. I first joined a prominent law firm in Mauston but opted for a shorter drive time by switching to an excellent firm in Baraboo. Both firms have fewer than 10 attorneys. In Mauston, the seat of

help each other as much as possible. Just as I had experienced in the big city, the more experienced attorneys mentor the newer attorneys and help develop their lawyering skills. But, in addition to internal mentorship, I noticed a very close-knit network of local attorneys.

Collegiality Reigns

Practicing in a small town also means practicing in a small legal community. Counsel who were adversaries in the courtroom were allies in the community. Not only did I see it, but I experienced the same comradery with oppos-

I couldn't believe it. Was this attorney being helpful, or worse, giving me bad advice? Turns out, her advice was not only correct, but made for a better courtroom experience for everyone. We keep in touch. We swap war stories about practicing family law, but she also shares her perspective of balancing a busy legal career with family and motherhood.

Every attorney I've met here embraced me into their bar association and practices. Being part of a small group of lawyers affords us the opportunity to really get to know each other and work together collegially. We often call each other for advice or to refer clients. We comfortably share ideas for improving our local bar. And we don't hesitate to grab a bite to eat or a drink after a long day in court. Networking is just a part of our daily lives. It is something that comes easily to us. Sure, we fight tooth and nail in the courtroom, but we are friends once out the door.

Although it might seem ironic, being part of a small town doesn't make you feel small.

Juneau County, there are no other law firms other than solo practitioners. Even still, the solos were incredibly welcoming. Baraboo, the Sauk County seat, has more law firms than Mauston, but none larger than 10 attorneys.

Each of the eight attorneys in my firm has a different, yet often intersecting, practice area. I focus on family and juvenile law. Although my practice area is different than others, my law partners and I see to it that we collaborate and

ing counsel. My first family law case was in nearby Monroe County where I had never stepped into the courthouse. Several years my senior, the opposing counsel had a reputation to fear in the courtroom. But, that didn't stop her from making me feel welcomed. Before the hearing, she reached out to me to express her opinions as to how the judge ran the courtroom, what to expect when submitting evidence, and how to approach certain topics with the court.

More than Enough Work

Moving to Baraboo and starting to practice law here also brought with it the fear that I wouldn't find enough clients, bill enough hours, and earn a good enough living. But again, those concerns soon faded. It didn't take long to discover that there was more than enough work in family law, and the other attorneys in my office are in the same position. The phone rings, people enter my office, and emails fly in. My fears of not having a thriving law practice are unnecessary as I am busier than I ever have been. The constant stream of clients means the work never stops.

To my surprise, it is quite easy to enjoy a very comfortable living in rural practice. Partly because the cost of living here is lower than urban areas, and I don't need to sell anyone on the beauty of Devil's Lake. I also can attest that the clowns only roam around Circus World. Plus, practicing in a small town gives you options that I hadn't considered before. Some attorneys, like me, gravitate

Landex Research, Inc.

PROBATE RESEARCH



Missing and Unknown Heirs Located No Expense to the Estate

Domestic & International Service for:
Courts • Lawyers • Trust Officers • Administrators/Executors

1345 Wiley Road, Suite 121, Schaumburg, IL 60173
Telephone: 847-519-3600 Fax: 847-519-3636 Toll-free: 800-844-6778
www.landexresearch.com

toward one major practice area. There is more than enough work to keep me busy in my legal silo. Others take a “jack of all trades” approach to the law, and they find themselves equally busy. Rural practice affords you the opportunity to develop your own practice and choose your approach to the law because there is not the same competition as in urban areas. Simply put, fewer attorneys means more work for those who are here. As a result, we have a very successful firm. We may be a small firm, in a small legal community, in a small town, but practicing here without significant competition means you can have a big impact on your own financial success and your community.

Making a Difference

There is more to being a lawyer than keeping busy. A small town allows me to enjoy my work and feel like my practice is meaningful to myself and

my community. Being in the same courtroom over and over makes the court staff, opposing counsel, and the judges familiar. Certainly, I never know how the judge may rule on a case, but practicing before the same judges gives me a better sense of what arguments they may appreciate – or perhaps more importantly – the ones they won’t.

Being a part of this community gives me the opportunity to make a difference

Being a part of this community gives me the opportunity to make a difference in my clients’ lives.

in my clients’ lives. Living here and practicing here allows me to get to know my clients and their families. I see my clients dropping off their kids at the school they chose after successfully winning a custody battle in court. I see my clients at the grocery store, and they stop to say how much they appreciate my help. I see my clients not just as my clients, but

as my neighbors and members of this town. Whether it’s in the courtroom, my kid’s dance studio, or the chamber of commerce meeting, I am part of the community where I can help make a difference. My law practice is not just my career and livelihood, it’s my life.

Never have I felt “alone” here. Taking the leap to leave the big city, land in an unfamiliar landscape, and start my practice over was greatly aided by

the networking and support from the attorneys, mentors, and friends in my local legal community. Although I am not from here and I didn’t grow up here, I feel like I am here. I am part of this thriving place, and it is due, in large part, to the kindness and commonality we share together. **WL**

Strength & Guidance

Helping all legal professionals plan for their financial future.



The **ABA Retirement Funds Program** has the strength and experience to provide uniquely designed retirement plans to the legal community.

We can help you:

- **Maximize** the value of your plan,
- **Improve** employee retirement outcomes, and
- **Manage** plan expenses.

Our mission is to provide your employees with the tools they need to secure a healthy financial future and to help them save for today and tomorrow.



Built by **LAWYERS**,
Powered by **PROS**®

- \$6.4 billion in retirement assets
- 3,900 law firms and legal organizations
- 37,000 lawyers and legal professionals

A Member Benefit of



abaretirement.com



800.826.8901



joinus@abaretirement.com

The ABA Retirement Funds Program is available through the State Bar of Wisconsin as a member benefit. Please read the Program Annual Disclosure Document (April 2023) carefully before investing. This Disclosure Document contains important information about the Program and investment options. For email inquiries, contact us at: joinus@abaretirement.com. Registered representative of Voya Financial Partners, LLC (member SIPC). Voya Financial Partners is a member of the Voya family of companies (“Voya”). Voya, the ABA Retirement Funds, and the State Bar of Wisconsin are separate, unaffiliated entities, and not responsible for one another’s products and services. CN2823405_0425

