

Legal Opportunities Abound in Greater Wisconsin

Attorneys willing to broaden their career search beyond Wisconsin's cities can find lucrative work and an enviable work-life balance.

BY JEFF M. BROWN

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers quit their jobs seeking higher pay and better working conditions. Some labor economists dubbed it the “Great Resignation.”

Attorneys looking for a diverse practice and better work-life balance should consider something similar. Call it the “Great Relocation” – moving to rural areas, where the need for legal services presents intriguing opportunities.

‘Make Your Own Magic’

Practicing law in a rural county didn’t require much adjustment for Courtney Graff, a partner at Schmiege, Graff & Koch Law Firm in Medford.

Graff grew up in Phillips, a small town located in Price County, 60 miles from the shores of Lake Superior. Graff obtained her law degree from Ave Maria School of Law, in Naples, Fla. But she always intended to return to Wisconsin to practice law.

After a short stint with a firm in Wausau, in 2012 Graff took a job with a law firm in Medford, in Taylor County. Graff said she looked for her first legal job in greater Wisconsin because, given that she has a law degree from a small out-of-state law school, she figured the big firms in Milwaukee and Madison would not be interested in hiring her. She also had no desire to live in Milwaukee or Madison.

The bulk of Graff’s practice is devoted to municipal law and family law. Her firm handles the corporation counsel duties for Taylor County, which means advising the county board, representing the board in court, and handling tax foreclosures.

“It’s unique and changes a lot, which I appreciate,” Graff said.

Graff also handles adoptions and termination-of-parental-rights cases from outside Taylor County.

A popular misconception is that attorneys practicing in greater Wisconsin make less than their big-city counterparts. Graff said that’s not true for her.

“I’m earning over \$100,000 annually,” Graff said. “I work my butt off and I have an amazing support staff, and I take a lot of business courses.”

‘A Little Something Else’

Graff said that building a successful practice in greater Wisconsin requires a different skill set than it does in an urban setting.

“You’ve got to have a little something else beyond just passing the bar,” Graff said. “You have to be open to continually growing and paying attention to the business side of it.”

But a rural practice also has advantages. Even when Graff’s workload forces her to put in 50-hour weeks, the stress is manageable.

“I still feel like there’s time in front of me and I’m not getting home at nine o’clock at night just because the traffic’s terrible,” Graff said.

Some attorneys complain that there’s less to do in rural counties. But the way Graff sees it, small-town culture offers creative spirits a blank canvas.

“Medford’s population is 5,000 but we have a phenomenal children’s museum because several younger families who’d moved into town got

SUMMARY

Lawyers in greater Wisconsin extol the benefits of practicing law and living in small towns and rural communities. Clients in rural areas require the same types of legal services as do clients in larger metropolitan areas. Fewer lawyers in rural areas means less competition for legal work, but it also means clients’ legal needs often go unmet. There is ample opportunity for lawyers to gain experience in multiple practice areas and develop in-court skills – and in a shorter time – than might be gained by big-city lawyers.

Lawyers in small towns and rural areas can earn a good wage while enjoying a lower cost of living; build deep professional and personal relationships with other lawyers, judges, court staff, and clients; contribute to their communities; spend more time with their families; and pursue recreational activities outside the hustle and bustle of big-city life.

Three lawyers and a judge in greater Wisconsin and Upper Michigan share their experiences.

together and they dreamed it and did it, and raised enough money to hire a director,” Graff said.

The key to building a life outside the office in a small town is initiative, Graff said.

“I think people would be surprised,” Graff said. “If you’re interested in something, you can likely drum up enough interest and get a group together to get it done.”

City Kid

Tom Schumacher, a partner at Bakke Norman in New Richmond, grew up in Janesville and went to college at UW-Madison.

But he’s spent his 43 years as a practicing attorney in small towns – New Richmond, in St. Croix County, and Lodi, in Columbia County.

Schumacher, who handles business transactions and estate planning, said that practicing law in a small town doesn’t necessarily mean small-bore work.

“I’ve done between \$5 million and \$50 million deals with parties who are spread across the U.S. or not in the U.S. People from Madison and Milwaukee who believe that Wisconsin stops at the Dells are kind of surprised that that kind of work’s available up here,” Schumacher said.

“We’ve had a diverse practice, with significant personal-injury litigation, significant criminal litigation, and significant commercial litigation,” Schumacher said. “We have had estate planning, trust administration, and business administration and sales, business



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administration and sales that I’ve been involved in. That’s all been available.”

And it is available at a good salary, Schumacher said.

“We are all well over six figures, with a lot lower cost of living,” Schumacher said. “There are a lot of solo practitioners who are now retiring but [I think] all those folks made significant incomes, because I generally know their lifestyles and who they are.”

More Collegial

In Schumacher’s experience, the practice of law in greater Wisconsin is more collegial and less adversarial than it is in a big city.

“Generally, everybody’s willing to help everybody else out,” Schumacher said.

And opportunities to help others are more plentiful.

“It’s enabled me to be on the school board and a bank board,” Schumacher said. “You get all of the same involvement that you could in the southern part of the state.”

Schumacher, who lives in Baldwin, said that greater Wisconsin is a great place to raise a family. His four sons attended a school with a student population of 500 – a size that allowed them to participate in more activities than they could have in a larger school.

And the pace of practice in New Richmond allowed Schumacher to coach his sons’ sports teams from elementary school through high school. It also allows him to regularly get away to the family cabin, located about one hour north of New Richmond.

“All of those things are lifestyle things that are probably more accessible up here, because I’d be paying more to live in Madison than I am in Baldwin,” Schumacher said.

When he’s not working, Schumacher takes advantage of New Richmond’s proximity to the Twin Cities.

“I can be at the airport in Minneapolis in 45 minutes, and it’s bigger than the airports in Milwaukee or Madison,”

Schumacher said.

Schumacher said that practicing in greater Wisconsin has given him a good life.

“I’m toward the end of my career, and I’m sitting here with no debt, my kids’ schooling is all paid for, and I have a nice place on a lake,” Schumacher said.

Home Sweet Home

Like Graff, Brandon Evans grew up in a small city (Marquette, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula) but attended law school in a larger city out of state – George Mason Law School in Washington, D.C.

After law school, Evans took a job with a law firm in Green Bay. He spent four years practicing environmental law as part of the 16-year cleanup of the Fox River begun by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in 2004.

In 2021, Evans moved back to Marquette for a position with Kendricks Boreau P.C. With eight full-time attorneys and four attorneys of counsel, the firm is the largest in the Upper Peninsula. Evans practices litigation and real estate.

“My real estate practice has really eclipsed my litigation practice since coming to the firm in 2021,” Evans said. “Now, I do everything from easements to land sales to selling timber on land.”

Evans’ location in the ore-rich Upper Peninsula has allowed him to develop a practice in analyzing mineral title options.

“It’s a very sophisticated title examination,” Evans said. “There aren’t many lawyers who do it, because all the hard-rock mineral exploration is in the Upper Peninsula whereas down state, it’s more oil and gas,” Evans said.

But Evans’ location still requires him to maintain a broad practice, which isn’t a bad thing.

“I’ll be on the phone with some big-firm lawyer down state discussing one of these mineral title opinions and they’ll say, ‘You’ve developed a real

niche,' and then I'll tell them that I also do evictions for a local housing commission," Evans said. "You've got to be involved in a lot more things. But it's also liberating because I don't fear running out of work."

Handling evictions, Evans said, helps him keep his trial skills sharp.

"It's enjoyable, and frankly, evictions have been my excuse for going to court," Evans said.

'You Probably Won't Want to Go Anyplace Else'

Evans said that his practice allows him more time for his children, ages 12 and 7.

"I think the culture at law firms in cities is different, and I'd get sucked into working more," Evans said.

Marquette has a population of 20,000 – a size Evans said makes it easier for his children to participate in sports and other activities, such as children's theater.

"It's a great place to raise a family," Evans said.

For attorneys considering practicing outside Madison or Milwaukee, Evans said, "the trick is getting started. I made a little bit less when I started [in Marquette] but within a few years I made it up. Once you figure out how to make a living in a small town, it's a wonderful place to live and you probably won't want to go anyplace else."

The Need is Great

After a childhood spent in Black River Falls, winters in Arizona seemed pretty good to Jackson County Circuit Court Judge Daniel Diehn.

Diehn attended law school at Arizona State. He'd made some connections in the Phoenix area and considered staying in Arizona after law school. But despite the balmy winters, Diehn couldn't handle the traffic and the sprawl.

"I was torn between staying in the Phoenix area and coming back here," Judge Diehn said. "In the end, I decided that I was too much of a small-town

person and couldn't handle the size and congestion of a major metropolitan area."

Diehn moved back to Black River Falls, the county seat, and hung out his shingle. He had the good fortune to share office space with two older attorneys, who would toss him overflow work and lend an ear when Diehn needed. It was a perfect combination of independence and mentoring – one that helped Diehn thrive.

"We had a very robust legal community," Diehn said. "We were really lucky. Everybody was cordial and friendly. Pretty much any legal service that you could get in a metropolitan area you could get in Black River Falls, with the exception of some specialties."

Such an arrangement would be much harder for a new attorney to come by today, Diehn said.

"When I started my law practice here in Jackson County in 1996, there were 16 or 17 private-practice attorneys in the

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city of Black River Falls,” Judge Diehn. “Now, there are only four.”

While the number of attorneys has dwindled, the amount of work has not.

“They are overwhelmed,” Diehn said. “I know a couple of them who I’ve talked to over the years have wanted to bring in young lawyers to help take over the practice or cover new areas but have been unable to recruit anyone. They’ve gotten to the point where they’re not trying anymore because they haven’t seen any success.”

Write Your Own Ticket

Those unmet legal needs, Diehn said, offer opportunities for newer attorneys. During a recent airport layover, Diehn said, he chatted up a pre-law student sitting next to him.

“I said, ‘If you want to go into a small town anywhere in the U.S., you’d have no issues finding a lawyer to mentor you and start your practice doing almost whatever it is you wanted to do,’” Diehn said. “It’s just a great opportunity for young lawyers, if that’s the kind of life that they want.”

Diehn acknowledged that sole practitioners starting out in a small town

might have to work harder at first. But they’ll usually find a support network to help them, he said, as well as decent pay.

“You pretty quickly develop a reputation, if you’re willing to work at it a bit,” Judge Diehn said. “It doesn’t take too long to build your own practice. People are pretty friendly in a small town, they’ll help you. I think there are ways to be lucrative. The things that are present in a small town ... I think you’d miss out on those if you went to a big-city law firm.”

Additionally, Diehn said, newer attorneys practicing in a rural county gain valuable in-court experience that would take years to gain in a big-city firm.

“In the first week you’re practicing law in a community like Black River Falls, you’re going to be meeting with clients, you’re going to be having direct personal contact with court staff, you’re going to be going into hearings on your own, you’re going to start developing relationships with judges and other lawyers,” Diehn said.

“I regularly have lawyers in their first month in practice in front of me,” Judge Diehn said. “It doesn’t take too long, they’re just part of the gang. I’m not

sure you get that in bigger communities. Maybe you do, but it takes longer.”

‘Nobody’s Going to Be a Jerk’

Diehn identified another difference between small-town and big-city legal practice: fewer slings and arrows.

“When you work in a town with five or six other lawyers, nobody’s going to be a jerk to you because they’re going to need something from you next week or the following week, and I think it builds a special sort of camaraderie. If you treat people well, you’re going to get treated well. You become part of a community, rather than just part of an adversarial system.”

For attorneys passionate about the outdoors, living and working in greater Wisconsin can be a boon. For Diehn, a committed long-distance cyclist, that’s important.

“I can be in court at 4:30 and I can be on my bike and on a quiet country road by five o’clock every night of the week,” Diehn said. “The ability to do that in Milwaukee or Madison or even La Crosse is really limited.”

Diehn said the drop in the number of attorneys not only affects people in need of legal services, but it also makes his job harder.

“We’re really heavily relying on 10 or 12 attorneys,” Diehn said. “There are only so many cases they can take. And then it really bogs the system down. If you can’t find someone, you’re constantly rescheduling hearings and pushing statutory time limits.”

If there’s a Great Relocation – or even a minor one – Diehn said both clients and the attorneys who move to serve them will benefit.

“From my standpoint, the lifestyle benefits and the practice benefits of a small town can’t be beat,” Diehn said.

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