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ALSO INSIDE

Lawyers GONE RURAL

A focus on the practice of law in small-town Washington / **pp. 27-45**

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COVER STORY

In the following pages, read the stories of lawyers who currently live and work in rural areas, brush up on some statutes you should be familiar with if you are planning to practice in a small town, and learn more about the WSBA's STAR Committee, which is working to help the practice of law in rural communities grow and thrive.

Lawyers GONE RURAL

WHAT'S INSIDE

LAWYERS GONE RURAL

FAR-FLUNG Places

A WSBA Travel Series on Rural Legal Practice

BY COLIN RIGLEY

You've never heard a joke about how *few* lawyers there are because it would be demonstrably false. In America, there are 1.3 million of them, enough to collectively rival our most populous cities. And according to the job platform Indeed, "lawyer" is among the most common jobs in America.

So you couldn't be criticized for thinking there are too many lawyers. However—and it's a big however—it depends on who you're talking to and where they live.

The city of Seattle, for example, is lousy with lawyers. In Seattle, there are roughly three active-license lawyers for every 200 residents. In Garfield County, on the other hand, there are three. Not three per capita. Not three percent of the population. Literally three.

The WSBA is often criticized, and often with good reason, for being too Seattle-centric at the expense of the rest of the state. The counterpoint to that criticism is that most of the lawyers in Washington call the Seattle area home. Nearly half, 45 percent, of the active legal professionals listed on the WSBA's legal directory are registered in King County. Seattle alone is home to approximately 11,500 WSBA members; in other words, about one-third (32 percent) of legal professionals are located within a single city in a state of about 7.7 million people.

If you need a lawyer and live in King County or nearby, that's great news. But if you're among the 70 percent of the state (about 5.5 million people) who do not live there, your legal troubles are probably more complicated by the difficulty of finding someone to represent you.

L.R. "Rusty" McGuire is a lawyer in a small town about an hour outside Spokane. In March, McGuire wrote "Why Young Attorneys Fear Working in Rural Areas and Why They Shouldn't," for NWSidebar, sharing his perspective as a longtime rural attorney witnessing the dwindling of the profession in rural areas.

"We struggle to hire and retain lawyers in rural areas for several reasons," McGuire wrote. One of those reasons is a lack of employment opportunities for spouses, he said. "The rural areas are then left with no attorney assistance."

Similarly, in a July NWSidebar post, Arian Noma, who serves as the Moderate Means Program (MMP) staff attorney for Gonzaga Law School, wrote about the urgent need for legal providers in underserved rural parts of the state.

"As lawyers, we must do better in recruiting for all of Washington, so the MMP program can deliver services equitably to all residents, regardless of where they live," Noma wrote.

It's no secret, therefore, that in parts of Washington there aren't enough lawyers to meet the legal needs of all the local residents. A burgeoning movement at the WSBA, however, seeks to change that.

In 2019, a group of WSBA volunteers and staff began what was then called the Rural Practice Project (RPP) to analyze the state of legal services available in rural Washington, as well as other jurisdictions in the country, better understand the problems, and identify potential paths forward that the WSBA could take to address access-to-justice gaps in these communities. In 2021, upon the RPP group's recommendation and with a unanimous vote and approved budget from the WSBA Board of Governors, the Small Town and Rural Practice (STAR) Committee was formed to build upon the work of the RPP as a long-term, multi-faceted endeavor of the WSBA.

"We've been running at full speed ever since," explained STAR Committee Chair, and WSBA President-Elect, Hunter Abell.

One challenge is simply defining what it means to be a rural area. The RPP originally defined rural based on counties with populations of less than 50,000 residents. The STAR Committee, however, defines rural as counties with populations with less than 30,000 residents. As of this writing, the committee was scheduled to revisit the definition and possibly refine it further.

The Committee has also adopted a three-phase strategic plan to provide com-

SIDEBAR

Got something to say about rural living and/or law practice?

Meetings of the WSBA Small Town and Rural Practice (STAR) Committee are open to the public and your participation is highly encouraged. Meetings are held on the fourth Wednesday of the month at noon. To learn more, visit the STAR Committee page on **www.wsba.org**.

IN 2021, THE SMALL TOWN AND RURAL PRACTICE COMMITTEE WAS FORMED TO BUILD UPON THE WORK OF THE RURAL PRACTICE PROJECT.

munity education and outreach, pipeline and placement programs, and serve as a resource for job opportunities pursuant to the committee's charter. Committee members have made plans to host a rural job fair designed to encourage more law students to settle in rural areas after graduation. It's also exploring economic strategies like a rural fellowship program for new lawyers and potential loan forgiveness for law students who choose to practice in underserved rural communities.

"There is undoubtedly an economic component to practicing in rural areas," Abell said. "What we're trying to get across to folks is you can have a very satisfying career and a satisfying personal life by living out in these rural areas."

According to Abell, Washington is helping lead the way in a wider effort toward bringing more legal services to rural areas. A survey of bar associations found that about 30 bars in the U.S. hadn't done anything to reach out to rural areas, Abell said.

In line with these goals, WSBA staff has also been reaching out to rural areas to highlight the many varied aspects of practicing law throughout all of Washington. In coordination with members of the STAR Committee, we reached out to rural practitioners throughout the state and asked to meet with them in their communities, spend a day learning about their legal practices and their daily lives, and share their stories. We ultimately landed on three law practices, each distinct in its own way and each geographically unique from the others, representing a widespread view of rural Washington from briny western shores to meandering eastern plains. BN

LAWYERS GONE RURAL

South Bend

A FAMILY OF LAWYERS IN OYSTER COUNTRY

BY COLIN RIGLEY

It's a brisk Tuesday morning in South Bend and the main case on the morning docket at Pacific County North District Court is a charge against four defendants for selling shellfish without a label. A few moments before, the state opted to drop charges on another case described as an assault "involving raw eggs." Throughout the morning there are a few other cases to tie up, like a name change, quashing warrants, and possible probation violations.

The Pacific County Courthouse sits atop a hill that offers wide views of the Willapa River, which bleeds into Willapa Bay and then out into the Pacific Ocean, where it crashes against the shores of Long Beach, Klipsan, and other parts of south county

DETAILS

Pacific County

Population:
23,365

County seat:
South Bend

Largest city:
Raymond

> The region around Willapa Bay provides one quarter of the annual oyster harvest in the U.S.

AT LEFT: Pictured (left to right) are Tom, Will, Joel, Jon, Betsy, and Edward Penoyar, and Emily Rambo.

The self-proclaimed "world's largest oyster," and Penoyar Law Offices, both located in downtown South Bend.

WSBA photos

that folks in South Bend simply refer to as "the beach."

Willapa is oyster country. Down the hill from the courthouse is the Chester Tavern, an unassuming dive bar that *The New York Times* said "may [have] the best fried oysters in the country."[1] A little farther up Highway 101, which serves as the main thoroughfare through downtown South Bend, is an oyster half-shell, speckled with greenish yellow moss, that measures about the size of a car hood and is the self-proclaimed "world's largest oyster." It's the type of roadside attraction that gets away with such bold claims despite being, in actuality, a cement sculpture in disrepair.

Back in court, as if to prove that this is indeed a small community courtroom, one person explains that the court is mistaken in thinking he hadn't reported enough community service hours—and he can easily prove it because the person he reports to shares a last name with the judge overseeing his case this morning: Betsy Penoyar.

You could argue that in South Bend, indeed across north Pacific County, the Penoyar family *is* the legal profession. If you go looking for an active member of the Bar in private practice in Pacific County, you have a 40 percent chance of ending up with Betsy or another member of the Penoyar family.

"Up here there's just us at this point," Betsy tells me later. We're sitting in the court's jury deliberation room and Betsy has changed out of her judicial robe. She's sitting in one of the oversized leather chairs with her feet pulled up, cross-legged. A light drizzle is beginning to turn to a heavy rain snaking down the south-facing windows. She goes on to say, lightheartedly, that "we get nobody to fight against." But on a more serious note, "We do need more people."

> **"MOST OF THE KIDS GOING TO LAW SCHOOL COME FROM THE CITY OR SUBURBS; TOWNS LIKE THIS ARE JUST SOMETHING YOU DRIVE THROUGH GOING TO THE BEACH."**
>
> **Will Penoyar,**
> *lawyer in Pacific County*

Pacific County needs more people, specifically lawyers, because there aren't enough Penoyars to meet the legal needs of the county's approximately 23,000 residents. There are several lawyers in south Pacific County, but that's an hour away from the county seat of South Bend.

"Most of the kids going to law school come from the city or suburbs; towns like this are just something you drive through going to the beach," the eldest Penoyar son, Will, tells me as we're chatting back at the Penoyar Law Offices.

Despite being the son of two lawyers (Betsy and husband, Joel) Will didn't plan to become a lawyer—but the calling eventually caught up with him. After completing his undergrad at the University of Washington, Will decided to attend law school at the University of Georgia, then returned to his hometown of South Bend. He started as a contract lawyer with the Washington State Office of Public Defense and quickly gained a wealth of experience, found a steady stream of clients, and was able to pull in a regular monthly income. After about five years, he switched practice areas and joined

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ABOVE: The Pacific County Courthouse sits atop a hill that offers wide views of the Willapa River.
AT RIGHT: A duck pond and covered footbridge that lies to the east of the courthouse parking lot.

A Family of Lawyers in Oyster Country

CONTINUED >

the family business at Penoyar Law Offices, where he has mostly worked in property law—which tapped into his childhood love of maps and put his undergraduate degree in cartography to use.

Including Will, Betsy and Joel are parents to three lawyers and two doctors. The youngest son, Ed, also works at Penoyar Law; their daughter, Emily, mainly practices in Olympia. In fact, Ed and Emily went to law school at Betsy's and Joel's alma mater: the University of Oregon.

Betsy chalks up the slew of well-educated, successful kids to their upbringing in South Bend. She describes them as "nice, rural kids" who got far more attention and help in a small community school than she imagines they would have received in a large urban school. Likewise, she and Joel couldn't have devoted the same time to raising their kids if they were constantly chasing billable hours at a large firm.

"I just can't imagine raising kids any other way," Betsy says. "It's nice to pretty much always be available."

Pacific County is one of the least-populated counties in the state. Despite this, the Penoyars have more work than they can handle. They find themselves referring clients to lawyers in adjoining counties, where there's a better chance of finding someone with enough time to take new cases. According to Joel, there used to be more lawyers in the area—not many, just two or three—but, combined with the expanding population, the loss of those few lawyers means there simply are not enough legal minds in the area to take on the caseload.

For the Penoyars, like many other rural attorneys, specializing in a specific area of law is not sustainable. When a potential client walks through the door with a legal problem, they know that there are few, if any, other options for that person in terms of lawyers to help. Will, for example, says he would like to specialize in something—to hyperfocus on a branch of law—but the nature of the business and the community requires broad knowledge and adaptability.

"You kind of end up being the clearinghouse for everything," Will says. "Because we're the only game in town, people will call us a lot."

It probably wouldn't take much to beef up Pacific County's legal community to meet public demand. Betsy thinks as few as two or three new lawyers could mean the difference between residents finding legal help locally and having to travel out of the county. In fact, one of the reasons Betsy joined the WSBA Small Town and Rural Practice (STAR) Committee[2] was to attract new blood to the area.

"I thought if only we can just convince a few, even a half-dozen, law school grads to move to a rural community," she says. "If they could understand how great the life is here in small towns."

Because, at the moment, new lawyers aren't tripping over each other to work in South Bend or other small towns. Betsy and Joel will eventually retire. Fortunately, as a family of lawyers, they're able to pass on their knowledge to their children, who can continue serving the firm's clients. It avoids the brain drain that worries many rural lawyers who see long-time attorneys retiring with no one to take their place. Still, losing two private practice lawyers in Pacific County equates to a 15 percent drop in the available supply.

"I think most people, especially younger people, just really need or want to be in cities," says Ed, who grew up in South Bend and moved back home to practice law. "Honestly, just the prospect of being bored probably keeps a lot of young people from coming out to rural places."

For Will, one of the main advantages of South Bend is that it's a stellar environment to raise kids. In South Bend he has a

PACIFIC COUNTY IS ONE OF THE LEAST-POPULATED COUNTIES IN THE STATE. DESPITE THIS, THE PENOYARS HAVE MORE WORK THAN THEY CAN HANDLE.

SIDEBAR

Free Career Center listings for law jobs in rural areas

In an effort to increase awareness among WSBA members about employment opportunities in rural parts of the state, the WSBA is offering free 30-day postings on its Career Center of jobs for legal professionals in rural areas, defined for purposes of the free postings as: "any job not in Thurston, Clark, Pierce, King, Snohomish, Spokane, and Whatcom counties, WITH the proviso that if the job is in a town of 5,000 or less within said county, it may also be posted for free." To determine eligibility for a free posting, please contact memberbenefits@wsba.org with "RURAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY" in the subject line.

community; he has a quality of life that he doesn't think he can find in a larger city. When you look at the state of the country these days, it can seem hopelessly polarized—that's not the case for Will and others in South Bend, he says. "It's hard to demonize people and hate people … if you can just talk to them as human beings there's a lot more calm and nuance."

Plus, lawyers can still make plenty of money, even in a small town. The billable rates aren't quite as high, but that's easily balanced by the plentiful amount of work and the relatively low cost of living.

Additionally, explains Joel, "Here you make a big difference."

"There's more of a motivation than being a mechanical billing machine," Ed adds.

Both Will and Ed say they regularly run into their clients when they're out and about in town. They take calls after hours and on weekends—not because they're forced to, but because that's what people do when they're looking out for their community. BN

NOTES

1. www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/travel/30bites.html.
2. www.wsba.org/connect-serve/committees-boards-other-groups/small-town-and-rural-committee.

LAWYERS GONE RURAL

Ryan Ortuno and Kim Boggs.

Dayton

BACK BY DINNER: FINDING WORK–LIFE BALANCE IN A RURAL LAW FIRM

BY COLIN RIGLEY

If you ignore the weekly migraines, the debt, the stupidly high cost of living, and the fact that he barely saw his family, you could say that Ryan Ortuno had it all.

In many ways—or at least in the ways you learn in law school, Ortuno explained—he had found success. Except the reality, that most of his clients were insurance reps and business execs, fell short of the idealistic image Ortuno had of being a lawyer who helps real people.

Ortuno was heading toward the partner track at a major firm in Los Angeles, and the job allowed him to purchase a home in Southern California with his wife and three kids. He had to take out three loans to cover living expenses and repay law school tuition, though, which necessitated so many working hours that he barely saw his kids.

"If I was lucky, I'd maybe give the oldest one a bath and read a book to the second one," he said of his typical workdays.

In law school, Ortuno remembers being trained to strive for a specific type of success: Go to a major city, get a job at a large

DETAILS

Columbia County

Population: **3,952**

County seat and largest city: **Dayton**

> The county is part of the Palouse Prairie, a major agricultural area, primarily producing wheat and legumes, on the Columbia Plateau in southeastern Washington.

As a long-standing piece of the Dayton community, Boggs Ortuno PLLC also functions as a title company with records dating back many decades.

Downtown Dayton.

firm, make partner, partake in the luxuries that come with such a lifestyle. In that sense, he'd achieved the law school goal.

"Until you and your wife are going, 'What the heck are we doing? This is silly,'" he said.

So they did something else. Ortuno and his family said goodbye to their Orange County home and the frantic lifestyle of a big-firm lawyer. In 2017, they packed up and headed to his wife's old hometown of Dayton, Washington, a city of about 2,500 people in Columbia County, burrowed in the southeastern corner of the state about 30 minutes from Walla Walla.

It wasn't the image of success that had been painted for Ortuno in school, but it turned out to be exactly the right decision to experience a different type of success.

"The good thing here ... most of the time when I'm completely underwater, I enjoy what I do," Ortuno said while sitting on the edge of a desk in his downtown Dayton office. "And I could not say that about my previous legal life."

Downtown Dayton oozes small-town charm. If you're coming from the west on Highway 12 you'll pass the fading illustration of the Jolly Green Giant, etched into the hillside as an homage to the now-defunct Green Giant cannery, which shut down in 2005. Keep driving until the highway transitions to Main Street and you'll see a hand-painted sign that reads, "I've got worms." Across the Touchet River, which bisects the city, you'll encounter a mélange of quintessential americana businesses like Dingle's Hardware and Suffield Furniture. Not far from the furniture store, sandwiched between a bakery and single-screen movie theater, is the office of Boggs Ortuno PLLC (formerly Nealey & Marinella).

ORTUNO SAID HE'S PAID OFF MORE LAW SCHOOL DEBT IN THE LAST TWO YEARS IN DAYTON THAN HE DID AFTER A DECADE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

On an unusually wet and windy spring morning, James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" was playing in the lobby as Ortuno emerged from his office wearing jeans and a blue-checkered shirt. One of the first things I learned about the firm is that they were involved in a lawsuit against the motel where I was staying. Given my experience checking into the place, I said I wasn't surprised, which Ortuno thought was funny as hell. The next thing I learned is that Ortuno likes to joke around. His experience before Dayton was plagued with stress and jockeying for an opportunity to rise through the ranks, but the Ortuno who now lives in Dayton has different, more grounded problems.

For example, when talking about the shortage of lawyers in rural areas like Dayton, he joked, "Every time a new person gets admitted to the bar around here [we] have a celebration."

If Ortuno has one regret, it's probably

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WSBA photos

The Columbia County Courthouse in Dayton, pictured top, and the combined Dayton City Hall and Fire Station.

Back By Dinner: Finding Work-Life Balance in a Rural Law Firm

CONTINUED >

the relative lack of food options compared to LA. Throughout my visit, Ortuno repeatedly talked about a restaurant that a former Portland chef opened, and how much he mourned its loss when the restaurant went belly up during the pandemic.

Food options aside, Ortuno has gained far more than he's lost. To borrow the cliché: Ortuno found balance—except neither Ortuno nor his law partner in Dayton, Kim Boggs, like that word.

"Balance is an overused word, but the idea is we're striving for balance," Boggs said.

Boggs' path to the law and Dayton began at the University of Puget Sound (now Seattle University) School of Law. Her parents lived in Dayton and during her 2L year she became a Rule-9 Licensed Intern with Nealey & Marinella. After graduating, she made an exceedingly brief stop in the Bay Area before realizing it wasn't for her. Boggs quickly returned to Dayton to work at the firm full-time. Back then, it also served as a title company and the prosecutor's office.

"For years this office was *the* law firm for Dayton," Ortuno said.

Originally Nealey & Marinella, then Marinella & Boggs, the firm became Boggs Ortuno PLLC when Ortuno became partner in 2021. Boggs knew Ortuno through her husband, who is friends with Ortuno's father-in-law. Ortuno joined the firm in 2017 as an associate and, together with Boggs, they continue the tradition the firm was built upon: serving as lawyers who become generational staples for local families. In addition to the title business, the firm focuses on estate planning, real property, land use, and business law. And they've had little trouble staying busy.

"There's way more work than you would think," Ortuno said. "I was surprised. I was nervous when I came here, but I trusted Kim."

In addition to being a partner with the firm and title company, Boggs also serves as a district court judge for Columbia County. On the morning I visited, Boggs grabbed her things to head to court. She yelled to one of the firm's staff on her way out to remind them not to lock her out because she didn't have her keys, walked outside and braced against wind ripping down Main Street, and made a quick jaunt across the street to the courthouse.

The entrance of the Columbia County Courthouse opens into twin spiraling staircases of dark oak. The inside of the courtroom where Boggs was presiding has galleries on either side and a ceiling that looms high overhead. There was a bust of Abraham Lincoln behind the bench and a large grandfather clock to the side of the room. I scribbled on my notepad, "very Atticus Finch."

There was just one hearing that day, which Boggs said was unusual, as there had been an uptick in cases recently. When I asked if it was hard juggling the firm's usual legal clients, plus the title business, and also a part-time judicial role, she said, "It requires a lot of help, and I have good help."

THE CASE FOR PRACTICING LAW IN DAYTON REQUIRES NUANCE, WHICH DOESN'T MAKE FOR A GOOD ELEVATOR PITCH.

In Dayton, good help really is hard to find.

"It's challenging running a business out here," Ortuno explained. Not challenging because of a lack of work. In fact, Boggs and Ortuno are awash in work, so much so that they have to turn some clients away. The problem is that there aren't enough lawyers in the area to handle the workload, so they can't refer out matters they can't handle. Additionally, it's difficult to find support staff. Boggs Ortuno PLLC recently lost its longtime paralegal, who was commuting about an hour each way from nearby Pasco. She was eventually lured to a job at an Amazon warehouse closer to her home.

"To lose that around here is like having your heart ripped out of you," Ortuno said.

Boggs and Ortuno explained that few new lawyers are willing to work in a small community like Dayton. "They're applying in Spokane, they're applying in Seattle, because that's what they're taught to do," Ortuno said.

The case for practicing law in Dayton requires nuance, which doesn't make for a good elevator pitch. Boggs and Ortuno can't offer more money than a large Seattle firm, but the cost of living in Dayton is significantly lower, and a lawyer can do quite well financially. They can't promise large, complex cases, but they can offer the

chance to engage with real people and gain practical experience taking depositions and performing other substantive legal work that junior associates almost never get to perform in large firms. Most of all, they can promise a balanced lifestyle where there is plenty of work but also the ability to leave the office while it's still light outside. And Ortuno said he's paid off more law school debt in the last two years in Dayton than he did after a decade in Southern California.

Working in a rural area also means being more than a lawyer, Ortuno and Boggs said. People in Dayton view their lawyer more like a family doctor. Lawyers become de facto grief counselors and confidants for clients, who need empathy as much as legal advice.

"What we're doing here is serving our community," Boggs said. "We're trying to make money serving our community, but we're not winning the lottery … . My actual job is also a service act."

As if to prove the point that it's a small community, in the late afternoon, a staff member poked her head into Boggs' office with a cryptic message.

"We got some new wall art," she said.

By wall art, she meant that one of the local realtors, with whom Boggs and Ortuno regularly work through their title business, had as a joke printed a few pictures of himself and taped them to the wall out front, among the framed pictures of Boggs and Ortuno and testimonials from happy clients. The law partners laughed about it and shared stories about working with the realtor—in both a professional capacity and personally.

Finding success as a lawyer is about making choices, Ortuno said. His was a choice between having a life with family and friends and chasing a version of success that did not allow for such a life.

In California, Ortuno "never even saw my kids." Now in Dayton, he coaches his kids' sports teams—one of his kids plays little league with the grandson of the local bailiff. Outside of work, he and Boggs were planning for a murder mystery dinner with a few friends. Sometimes they spend late nights catching up on work; sometimes they head home early.

In Los Angeles, Ortuno barely got to see his kids when they were awake, but on that day in Dayton he got to leave the office to pick them up from school—and the sun was still out. BN

LAWYERS GONE RURAL

Colville

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

BY COLIN RIGLEY

A few minutes after entering the offices of McGrane & Schuerman, PLLC, it occurs to me that Alison McGrane has barely sat down. Even on her first day back at work after a San Diego vacation with her husband, daughter, and son, she was scurrying from one end of the office to another, walking and talking, standing and talking, standing and reading, standing and signing.

Picture the high-velocity energy of a character in an Aaron Sorkin show.

Except that when you compare this image to that of a rural attorney stereotype, things don't square up. McGrane has been on the receiving end of these stereotypes. Lawyers from big cities are sometimes prone to treating their rural counterparts as less capable in the law, simpler, less complex—in other words, stupid. That type of assumption is, of course, stupid in itself, and despite the extreme ruralness of the place McGrane calls home, she and the rest of the team at McGrane & Schuerman are anything but stupid.

Colville (pronounced "call-vil") is about as rural as rural gets. It's not only the seat of one of the smallest counties in the state (a city of about 5,000 people among the broader Stevens County population of about 47,000), it's also one of the poorest. Its per capita income of about $22,000 is a little more than half (58 percent) the $38,000 per-capita income for residents of King County.

DETAILS

Stevens County

Population:
46,445

County seat and largest city:
Colville

> The county was named after the first governor of the Washington Territory, Isaac Stevens.

Like many others at McGrane & Schuerman, Alison McGrane (pictured at left) is a Rotarian.

Stevens, Ferry, and Pend Oreille counties have a tri-county judicial district, which means judges bounce from one county to another, traversing hours along winding backcountry roads through the mountains of northeast Washington to ensure some level of court access for the sparsely populated region. The three counties also share health care, which has become particularly difficult to staff due to limited housing and the difficulty of drawing graduate-level professionals to rural areas, McGrane says.

One of the first things McGrane does after I arrive is to pull up a map in order to explain how judges—indeed, how just about everyone in the area—moves among the three counties to access or deliver needed goods and services. Actually, the first thing she does is clear one of the stacks of folders so she can get to her computer. McGrane's office is packed with boxes and folders. There are foot-tall stacks of manila folders that form the walls of a small fortress on the perimeter of her desk. Oil paintings of farmhouses sit unhung on the floor. It's not a messy office so much as a chaotically ordered space that seems to be designed with functionality and practicality in mind more than pure aesthetics. Besides, on this day, like many others, McGrane is barely in her office anyway.

After clearing a path to her computer, McGrane explains that Stevens and surrounding counties are made up of state land, federal land, tribal land, and Bureau of Land Management property—in Ferry County, less than 18 percent is private property. But transactions involving that private land in the three counties take up a fair amount of her time and the time of the firm's three other attorneys. As one of the only multi-attorney firms in the area, everyone in the office is busy.

"People are always like, 'Do you specialize?'" McGrane tells me. "And I'm like, 'Anything civil.'"

By late morning, McGrane is ready to meet with her first client: an older man wearing an orange baseball hat, tinted eyeglasses, and a white button-up shirt adorned with images of sailboats and palm trees. The man, who I'll call Hank, was back to go over changes with his estate since the last time he met with McGrane. He also seems to have settled a bit and slowed his pace of buying and selling properties, which McGrane appears relieved to hear. She hints at this prior to their meeting, using a small arsenal of aphorisms with Hank, with whom she had clearly developed a close relationship. For example:

- "You're not a spring chicken anymore."
- "I wouldn't want to see you in a guardianship if you lost your marbles."
- "You've been wheelin' and dealin' for years."

> **I TOLD MY PARENTS I WAS NEVER COMING BACK TO THIS LITTLE TOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. AND HERE I AM."**
>
> **Alison McGrane,**
> *lawyer in Stevens County*

Despite the ease and familiarity she exudes, it's safe to say that when McGrane was growing up in Colville, she never would have thought she'd be spending mornings this way.

"I told my parents I was never coming back to this little town in the middle of nowhere," McGrane says. "And here I am."

She got here—back in the middle of nowhere—by way of Southern California and college at the University of California, San Diego. Once McGrane had ventured out and got a taste of big city life, she realized it didn't suit her.

"I went to Southern California and I was like, 'Oh God, this is how people live?'" she remembers thinking. "Maybe home isn't so bad."

After undergrad, she completed law school in just two and a half years, getting a head start toward her legal career by attending an early summer start program "because I *really* wanted to be a lawyer." Her desire to get a J.D. was so strong that she finished college in San Diego on a Friday, walked in graduation on Saturday morning, then packed and made the 22-hour marathon drive back up to Spokane to start at Gonzaga University School of Law the following Monday. By age 25, McGrane had graduated cum laude and become a full-fledged lawyer.

Her path to the firm is one that she and the other lawyers who work there hope to replicate when hiring new staff: Hire locals and bring back people who grew up here.

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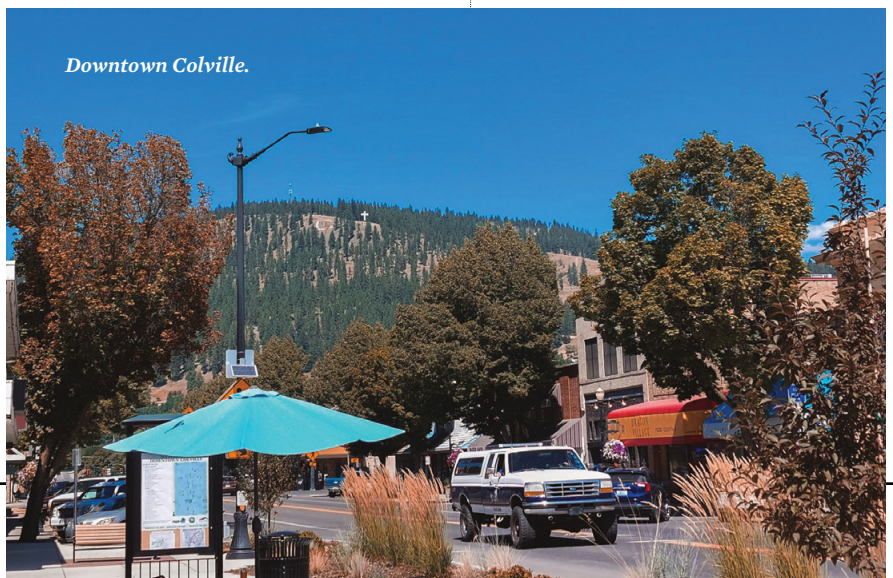

Downtown Colville.

WSBA photos

LAWYERS GONE RURAL

There's No Place Like Home

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One of the office staffers, Abby, also a local, tells me that McGrane frequently encourages her to go to law school and come back to work for the firm. Because eventually, as McGrane tells her, she's going to realize how much more she knows about the law than licensed lawyers, but she won't be able to do much about it without a law degree. Other staffers have been with the office for years, even decades; in fact, today a few people are out of the office attending the funeral of a former client.

The way McGrane talks to Abby is familiar in the way that long-time colleagues become almost family. And it is a family business. In 1978, McGrane's father, David, started driving west with her mother in search of a new home and a place to escape the brutal Midwest winters. They made it to Colville, where David talked his way into a job at the firm where he would eventually become a partner alongside Charles Schuerman (whom McGrane and others affectionately call "Charlie").

Charlie is like a second father to McGrane. People sometimes mistake her for Charlie's biological kid, and most of the time she just goes along with it. Now retired, Charlie still comes into the office regularly. He's known for stopping by with armfuls of food to give the staff a free lunch. Almost on cue, Charlie walks into the office with two shopping bags.

"I brought the extra buns and the extra chips from yesterday's Rotary thing," he announces and works his way toward the back of the office to unload his haul.

Although Charlie didn't expect to be interviewed, he happily shares his thoughts on working in a small-town firm. He has bright blue eyes and looks you in the eye when he speaks, and when he speaks it sounds like

HER PATH TO THE FIRM IS ONE THAT SHE HOPES TO REPLICATE WHEN HIRING NEW STAFF: HIRE LOCALS AND BRING BACK PEOPLE WHO GREW UP HERE.

Alison McGrane's office.

he already had a speech prepared. Charlie says a firm needs three things: strong skills, good staff, and good internal systems. This firm, he says, has those three things.

"It really is the family of the office," he says. "Your ability to be successful has a number of pieces in the practice of a small town."

Importantly, he continues, practicing law in a small town requires one to know how it's different than other places. As one example, litigation is rarely the answer.

"Even if you win, you lose... ," Charlie says. "You're going to fight your next-door neighbor."

McGrane echoes the sentiment.

"What dad and Charlie always used to tell me is sometimes you make more money on the clients you don't take," she says.

The firm is established enough to have the luxury of turning away the occasional client. Additionally, they're almost always drowning in work. A real estate boom from the previous year brought in almost more business than they could handle. From the teenager who swore she would leave Colville and never return, McGrane has now found a true home in her hometown.

"The fun part is now I can be useful to my friends' parents rather than [being] the 16-year-old who just eats all their food," she jokes.

Arguably *the* law firm for the community and the surrounding area, the attorneys in the firm—who after Dave and Charlie's retirement in 2020 include McGrane, Mike Waters, Logan Worley, and Krystal Tate—are more than lawyers. They're confidants, they're resources for information that isn't strictly related to the law because, McGrane says, "Either you know it, or you know who does." Nearly everyone in the office is a Rotarian, and they frequently get hugs and gift baskets from happy clients.

"We truly care about our clients and strive to be honorable individuals and good community members," McGrane says. BN

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