

Practicing Law

Rural externships give Washburn students a preview of their careers

BY ERIN MATHEWS

Not many Northwest Kansas attorneys are getting picked up in a limo at the airport to appear on television and tell the world that their celebrity client didn't do it.

That's probably because most of them stay too busy standing up for someone who really needs their help and being a key part of their communities.

Logan attorney Brien Stockman said it took him a long time to realize that the most rewarding opportunities of his career were waiting for him in a small town in Northwest Kansas, near where he grew up. He wants to help today's law students figure out sooner, rather than later in their careers, that Northwest Kansas

Casey and Hayden Ballard look forward to living in Hoxie. [Courtesy photo]

is the place for them.

"What is interesting to me is this generation of law students is not nearly as concerned with their stuff, their accumulation of wealth, as when I was starting out," he said. "They're actually looking for a more meaningful experience where they get to help people and make a difference in this world. The small-town, rural law office is actually tailor-made to offer that way of life for most of them. They just don't know it."

The need for attorneys is reaching a critical stage in many Northwest Kansas communities, Stockman said.

"When you start having to go far and wide to get attorneys, it's a problem," he said. "It's a

financial hardship on rural municipalities and counties to pay travel time for lawyers to come to them. Many people needing basic legal services simply forego getting those services, like basic estate planning, rather than traveling to a bigger city where they are not comfortable dealing with an

attorney they don't know.

"Lawyers are just as important to the vitality of these small rural towns as doctors. There is just so much need, and not enough lawyers to go around."

Stockman, who is also a Dane G. Hansen Foundation Trustee, is excited about a rural externship program proposed to the Foundation by representatives from Washburn University School of Law. Implemented in 2017, the program provides six hours of credit and pays externs a \$5,000 stipend to cover living expenses

Interested in applying for a rural law externship? Contact Shawn Leisinger, Washburn University School of Law at shawn.leisinger@washburn.edu or call (785) 670-2464.

Ballard, who plans to move to Hoxie in May as an associate with Eland & Pratt. "There are a lot of opportunities here. We really like Kansas. It definitely grows on you."

Currently, Ballard is completing an online master's program in agricultural law while working part-time remotely for the Hoxie law

"They put me on some tough cases that I learned a lot from, and they trusted me from the beginning to do a good job." — HAYDEN BALLARD

and travel, while giving them opportunities to spend the summer getting experience in a rural law practice.

An increasing number of these students are deciding to return to the Foundation's 26-county Northwest Kansas service area to practice.

Kansas 'definitely grows on you

"Originally, the plan for me and my wife was, we were going to come out to Kansas and get our degrees and move back to Utah or Arizona, but the externship really made me want to stay in Kansas," said Hayden

firm. If he is needed in Hoxie, he drives from Inman, where he and his wife, Casey, are living while she is practice teaching. Casey Ballard also hopes to find a teaching position at a school in the Hoxie area.

Hayden Ballard, who grew up in a small town in northern Arizona, said that for him, the externship provided a pathway to become part of a general practice that handles a lot of agricultural and real estate issues. Ken Eland and Joe Pratt were great teachers and mentors, he said.

"I loved the externship," he





Tim Demel, who joined the Beloit law practice of Jerry Harrison in August, enjoys the variety of work he and Harrison do. [Photo by Erin Mathews]

said. “They really just threw me into the thick of things from the get-go. It was kind of one of those experiences where they throw you into the deep end of the pool and say, ‘Swim.’ You’ll learn to swim real quick.

“They put me on some tough cases that I learned a lot from, and they trusted me from the beginning to do a good job. They bent over backwards to make me feel at home, and apparently it worked because I’m going back.”

Giving rural law a try

Shawn Leisinger, externship director for Washburn, said before the program was implemented, a lot of students who wanted to work in rural law had difficulties getting experience because practicing attorneys were nervous about bringing students out, and they couldn’t afford to pay them. The externship program has changed that. Last summer 38 Northwest Kansas law offices requested externs.

“It’s a good way for these firms to get them in there and try them out,” he said.

The maximum number of students who can be placed through the program is 20. He

said that each year the interest among students has grown as former externs have shared their experiences.

“The first year, we had 11 participants; last year, there were 15, and in 2019 there were 16,” he said. “This year I have a pretty strong sense we may hit 20 without a problem.”

He said those who participate often develop a strong desire to practice rural law. By November, Leisinger said four former externs had graduated, passed the bar and begun working in Northwest Kansas.

‘I like it a lot, a lot’

One of those was Tim Demel. In the summer of 2018, Demel did an externship with a Hays law firm. Since August, he has been working in Beloit as an associate of attorney Jerry Harrison.

“I like it a lot. I do. A lot, a lot,” Demel said. “This style of life and the setup is what I wanted to do.”

Demel, who grew up in Clafin, said his rural externship left him with no doubt that he wanted to do general practice in central or western Kansas. He said people in Beloit have

been “super welcoming,” and he has enjoyed attending high school sporting events. He joined the Lions Club and a downtown bowling league.

He said Harrison, like a lot of attorneys in the area, was

“We do just about everything. I have pending cases with real estate contracts. I have child-in-need-of-care cases. I have divorce cases. I have criminal cases...” —TIM DEMEL

actively looking for someone to practice with him for a couple of years before he retires.

“He wants to have the confidence to say to his clients, ‘This is a person I’ve helped train and teach. I trust him, and I think you’d be in good hands if you choose to want to stay in my office,’” Demel said.

In the meantime, Demel is getting a crash course in a variety of casework. He likes the variety.

“We do just about everything,” he said. “I have pending cases with real estate contracts. I have child-in-need-of-care cases. I have divorce

cases. I have criminal cases. I have estate planning. I have probate. We have a Social Security benefits appeal. We have a foreclosure. We’ve done an eviction.”

He said if he’d gone to a big corporate office, he’d no doubt be “sitting in a cubicle writing briefs seven days a week and being forced to work and bill insane amounts of hours.”

“I stay plenty busy where I’m at,” he said. “There are times when I’ll put in quite a few hours in a week, but

it’s a lot more hands-on, and you actually get to interact more with clients and go into court more.”

The last general practice

Leisinger said rural law is one of the last areas of general legal practice that exists.

“Most of the students that are going to large firms are going to specialize in one area of law, and they’ll get very good at it,” he said. “The things that rural lawyers do, run from impromptu meetings at the local coffee shop to providing services for the local school

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district to being counsel for a bank to providing counsel to a hospital to serving on Kiwanis and Rotary and softball leagues, to serving in political office.

“Externs get that full exposure to the 24/7 thing of what it is to be an attorney in these communities.”

Stockman said that for young lawyers who go to larger firms, it can be five or six years before they spend much time directly interacting with clients.

“In a bigger firm, it’s going to be a seven- or eight-year slog until you make partner, and then you’re really just a junior partner,” he said. “It’s a long, slow climb. In Northwest Kansas, there are quite a few older practitioners wanting to turn over their practice to an eager young attorney as soon as they are capable. Your name can be on the window in a year!”

That means Northwest Kansas attorneys will receive partner-level earnings sooner.

“They may not have the billable rates that big-city attorneys charge, but their cost of living will be lower, they will keep more of what they earn, and they’ll just find the work more meaningful,” Stockman said. “I used to work in a high-rise office building in North Carolina and had clients I never saw. That’s not very rewarding.”

Finding quality of life

Leisinger said students are looking for a place where they can have quality of life, with reasonable hours and an affordable cost of living. He said as more attorneys move to Northwest Kansas, it is “a place where you could have a family and not be working 60 or 70 hours a week.”



MELISSA MILLER

In August, Melissa Miller, a former extern with Sharon Springs attorney Etta Walker, became an associate attorney with Sherman, Hoffman & Hoffman in Ellsworth.

Miller, originally from Sedan, said the externship reaffirmed her desire to work in a rural area and become more involved

in the community.

“I want to feel more like I am helping people or connecting with my clients, and it definitely helps you to do that when you go to a smaller area,” she said. “I didn’t know that I would like practicing in a rural area as much as I did until I gave it a shot.”

She said that in Ellsworth, she does estate planning and is doing legal work for a bank. She does some municipal court work and city council advising for area communities. She has also joined the board of directors of a childcare center and become involved in a couple of other nonprofits and social groups.

“I really like Ellsworth,” she said. “I really like the firm. I really like the people.”

Learning from experience

Aaron Cunningham, a Hays native, returned to his hometown in August to become an assistant attorney for Ellis County. He handles traffic violations and prosecutes cases involving drugs and alcohol. He said he enjoys handling cases



AARON CUNNINGHAM

in Ellis County’s drug court.

“It gives you hope that the system can help people,” he said. “The success stories that have come out of that

have been really encouraging.”

Cunningham had been an extern in the county attorney’s office for two summers before he was hired.

“I feel like I have a tremendous advantage over other people who have done this job because I’ve been here a couple of summers,” he said. “I had a lot of experience, and kind of understood how everything works and some of the personality dynamics with the courts and other attorneys, and that’s been so helpful.”

Cunningham said he chose to come back to Ellis County over a job offer from outside of the area because people and organizations from Northwest Kansas had invested in him.

“I wanted to give back to the community that helped raise me,” he said. ■

HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

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Coming this spring!

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Welcome

to our winter issue of *Northwest Kansas Today*.

In this issue, you can learn about a successful partnership with the Washburn University School of Law that is helping fill a critical need for attorneys in our rural communities. It's a win-win proposition, with law students getting real experience and learning about the benefits of living and practicing law in our rural communities. Likewise, attorneys looking for the next generation to transition or grow their practices are getting an opportunity to work with these bright young minds.

Also in this issue, you can read about the Northwest Kansas Gives initiative, and the Foundation's efforts to work with local and regional community foundations to help educate and provide technical assistance to increase charitable giving through estate gifts. This is a long-term initiative that has the power to fundamentally transform Northwest Kansas. While gifts put into estate plans created today will often not be received for many years, they represent the seeds of growth for our future. Just as Mr. Hansen significantly altered the history of Northwest Kansas with his estate gift, even small gifts in your estate planning documents can give life to your hometown for many years to come. You can make a difference by simply changing the beneficiary on a life insurance policy or retirement account.

As both a Hansen Trustee and a practicing attorney, I can attest firsthand to the value of initiatives such as these. One is addressing a need we have today, and the other is creating resources for our future. Both deserve our attention now as the next ten years will witness the greatest transfer of wealth out of our area in the history of our state. Let's work together to keep some of it in Northwest Kansas.

Also showcased in this issue are some creative opportunities for young people through the Lovewell Institute, tiny houses in tiny Nicodemus, a unique new state park, remote work opportunities, the McCarty dairy and more. It's an exciting time to be living in the "middle of everywhere!"

If you missed our first two issues, you can access them on our website, at www.danehansenfoundation.org. And of course, we welcome your comments. Simply email us at NorthwestKansasToday@danehansenfoundation.org.

Sincerely,

Brien D. Stockman
Dane G. Hansen Foundation Trustee

Give a Gift to Kansas 26

Without spending a dime, every Kansas resident can donate \$2,082 to the State of Kansas, simply by completing the 2020 census form.

Four-Legged Fun 28

A new dog park and trail project in Goodland is attracting four-legged tourists and their owners.

Menagerie on the Move 30

Northwest Kansas students get to experience a trip to the zoo without leaving the classroom with Zoo to You and the Northwest Kansas Learns initiative.

Find more online!

Nicodemus Then

Tiny community in Northwest Kansas has a proud history



Zoo to You

Learn more about the animals that travel with Zoo to You online!

