Prestigious Clerkships Launch Graduates’ Legal Careers

A GROWING NUMBER of recent graduates are securing prestigious judicial clerkships in large part due to the expertise of the Career Services Office (CSO) and the law school’s professional guidance through the highly competitive application process.

“Despite a difficult job market, the total number of Washington University law graduates securing clerkships is on the rise,” notes Rachel Braaf Koehler, JD ’99, judicial clerkship advisor and a former clerk for Judge Stephen N. Limbaugh, Jr., while he was serving on the Missouri Supreme Court. “The number of clerkships has increased by more than 40 percent in recent years.”

Justin Lepp, JD ’12, who will be clerking this fall for Judge Eric Clay on the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Detroit, Michigan, says he is grateful for Koehler’s assistance. “Rachel consistently demonstrated a great deal of expertise with every aspect of the clerkship application process,” Lepp says. “She had excellent advice regarding which individual judges would work out best for me, and was always enthusiastic and supportive during what can be a very challenging process. I can happily say that were it not for her efforts, I would not have been able to secure my clerkship with Judge Clay.”

A former Appellate Clinic student, Lepp also distinguished himself on his application as a member of the winning team in the ABA National Appellate Advocacy Competition, the largest and most competitive competition in the country. He and teammates, Nick Rosinia, JD ’12, and Mikela Sutrina, JD ’12, surpassed 209 teams from 118 law schools to garner the win.

Recent Graduate Jason Batts Lured by Benefits of Small-Town Practice

CLINTON, KENTUCKY, has one signal light and is so tiny that people usually ask what county you live in, not what town. With its population of 1,300 and location about 60 miles southwest of Paducah, Clinton was, however, big enough for Jason Batts, JD ’10, to launch a solo practice. And by practicing in a small town, he’s heading a trend.

The Wall Street Journal recently reported that several Midwestern law schools are advising graduates to “look beyond the lure of high-paying, big-city law firms and consider launching careers in rural towns.” Washington University is among those heralding this change and is working hard to assist students in considering a full range of professional opportunities. Among its many career services offerings, the law school has specific programming to prepare and support students interested in small-firm or solo practice.
Additionally, Lepp had the unprecedented opportunity while in law school to argue an amicus brief before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces.

In recent years, Washington University graduates have been awarded clerkships with U.S. Courts of Appeals judges for the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Eleventh Circuits, as well as with U.S. District Court judges in numerous locations, including California, the District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Oregon, Puerto Rico, and West Virginia. Recent graduates also have clerked for justices with several state Supreme Courts and with judges on a variety of other federal and state courts. In 2011, some 32 graduates secured clerkships.

“The increasing number of clerkships obtained by Washington University law students is proof positive of the growing reputation of this law school and its student body,” says Associate Professor Adam Badawi, the faculty judicial clerkship advisor. “That our students are able to garner so many positions in the midst of an exceptionally competitive hiring environment shows that judges are aware of the high caliber of our students and seek to hire them.”

Alan Simpson, JD ‘12, has accepted a two-year clerkship with U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Arthur I. Harris in Cleveland, Ohio. He says he appreciates the advice of Badawi and Koehler, as well as the insights he gained from the externships and related course work he took in law school.

“Applying for a postgraduate clerkship is a daunting enterprise,” Simpson notes. “The guidance, encouragement, and support I received from Rachel Koehler and Professor Badawi substantially improved the overall quality of my applications. They helped me identify specialized clerkship opportunities that were well-suited to my interests and helped me formulate a thorough application plan.”

Simpson says that through detailed reference materials, group meetings, emails, and one-on-one discussions, he was able to avoid common application pitfalls. Additionally, his externship after his second year of law school with U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Jerry W. Venters in Kansas City; externship with the Department of Justice’s U.S. Trustee Program through the Congressional & Administrative Law Program; and the bankruptcy course he took with Daniel Keating, the Tyrrell Williams Professor of Law, were ideal preparation.

“The course gave me the breadth of knowledge I needed to be able to speak intelligently about current topics in bankruptcy law and discuss recent opinions, and the externships allowed me to further develop my knowledge in that area,” he says. “This gave me a decided advantage over other clerkship applicants.”

Calling All Law Clerks

The Career Services Office is reaching out to all current and former law clerks for inclusion in an alumni outreach project, which includes updating the office’s clerkship directory and plans for a clerkship celebration event. To become involved, please send your name, class year, contact information, and your judge’s name to: careerservices@wulaw.wustl.edu.

Batts says he did not need a tailored program to know that he wanted to practice in Hickman County, Kentucky—where Clinton is located and where he grew up. He believes that a rural or small-town practice offers many advantages.

One perk is less stress. Batts, a former editor-in-chief of the Washington University Law Review, lives eight miles from his office in a house surrounded by fields and woods. He drives to work in less than 10 minutes. “If there’s a traffic jam,” he says, “it’s simply because you got caught behind a slow tractor.”

Another benefit is available jobs. “With the last economic downturn,” Batts says, “how students get jobs has changed dramatically. Traditionally a lot of law schools encouraged students to go to larger law firms or law firms in urban areas. And because of that, open legal practice areas in small towns or rural areas across the country were often overlooked by graduates.”

Small-town practices also can be lucrative. “I know several solo attorneys who have been practicing three to five years and are making $140,000 to $200,000 a year,” Batts says. “That’s one thing I think law schools could do a better job of informing their students about. If you are willing to work hard, you can build a good practice. Other attorneys choose to work three days a week, and they’re perfectly okay making $50,000 a year.”

Batts adds that solo practitioners are their own boss and face minimal boredom. “You never know what kind of case a client will bring to you,” he says.

Batts, who underwent basic training this past summer for the Judge Advocate General’s (JAG) Corps in the U.S. Army Reserves, didn’t become a solo practitioner immediately after graduation from law school. He worked 18 months for another attorney before going into solo practice. He recalls his satisfaction after completing the first case in his own practice.

“I did a real estate closing for a farming client,” he says. “After I completed the work, the client said ‘Should I just make this check out to Jason Batts?’ I kind of chuckled and thought for a second and said, ‘Yeah, I guess you do make that check out to me.’”

—Gary Libman