

Get REAL:

New initiative connects students and established lawyers in rural areas

by Joe Wiebe

All of us have heard about the shortage of doctors in rural areas, but what about lawyers? In fact, with the baby boomer generation now reaching retirement age, demographics show that smaller communities are facing a shortage of lawyers and, as a result, reduced access to legal services.

“Outside of the urban areas, where there are fewer medium size and larger firms, the absence of younger lawyers is more prevalent,” cites a 2007 report from the Law Society of British Columbia Small Firm Task Force. “These numbers raise concerns about whether the sole and small firm bar is renewing itself, particularly in less populated parts of the province, and whether pressures and challenges make it more difficult to attract lawyers to sole and small firm practice.”

To address the significant shortfall in lawyers choosing to work outside of the province’s major urban centres, the Canadian Bar Association’s British Columbia (CBABC) branch, working with UBC Law and UVic Law, has established a new initiative called REAL (Rural Education and Access to Lawyers).

Supported by \$795,000 in funding from the Law Foundation of British

Columbia, REAL is a three-year program that connects second-year law students from UBC and UVic with summer employment opportunities in smaller communities around the province.

Michael Litchfield (’84), CBABC Regional Legal careers officer, manages the program. According to Litchfield, provincial demographics alone justify the initiative. While the median age of lawyers in British Columbia is 47 years old, the average age of a practitioner in small communities is fifty-something. “In some communities like Castlegar the average is actually 62,” he says.

The implication is that once these older lawyers decide to retire there will be few if any younger lawyers to replace them. Local residents will then suffer from a lack of access to legal services, and may have travel to a larger centre to seek legal advice or representation.

Litchfield points to a study of articling students in British Columbia from 2007 that indicates “74% of them wanted to practice in metro Vancouver.”

Why aren’t young lawyers seeking work in smaller centres? For many, it is a perception that working in a smaller community is both less exciting and less lucrative than in a larger urban firm.

Litchfield argues that these perceptions are actually myths. For instance, young lawyers who find employment in a major urban firm face a long climb up through the ranks before they can take on substantial work. Working for a smaller rural firm “presents great practice opportunities because from a business perspective there’s basically an open market there,” says Litchfield.

Young lawyers may be able to tackle more challenging and interesting work right away, or at least have the potential to do so much more quickly than in a more competitive urban setting.

“Young lawyers in a smaller community enjoy opportunities to appear in court much quicker,” explains Litchfield, “and opportunities to have greater client engagement.”

As for money, Litchfield acknowledges that although it is hard to beat the salaries offered by larger urban firms, “there are good economic opportunities in small regions.”

Michael Kew (’80), a lawyer in Trail, BC, hired a summer student thanks to funding from the REAL program.

“Certainly I’m not sure that the money’s as good as it is in the Lower Mainland,” Kew allows, “but I can tell you that the expense side of things certainly isn’t nearly as high either. I think that if young lawyers were open to it, they’d be surprised at the quality and breadth of practice.”

Other than a year spent articling in Victoria after graduation, Kew has spent his career working exclusively in the Kootenays. He is one of only 14 lawyers in the local bar. “At 54 I’m one of the younger lawyers in town... Unless we get some young blood in here, I don’t know what’s going to happen in the next five years.”

The student he hired, Ryan Sookorukoff, grew up in the Kootenays and intends to seek work there upon graduation. Prior to the creation of REAL, career counselors warned him it could be difficult to find a summer position at a smaller firm.

However, thanks to the creation of the REAL Initiative, UBC Law career services was able to help him make it happen—and in a one-lawyer firm no less.

“I’ve had a great experience so far,” Sookorukoff enthuses. “I’ve done research and drafted some pleadings and letters, getting exposure

to all sorts of different areas of law, which has been great.”

He has also been able to meet the majority of the local bar. “It was a great opportunity to make some inroads into the area.”

Sookorukoff is one of 11 students who obtained a summer job this year thanks

to the REAL Initiative. The map of BC is well-represented: participants were placed in Nanaimo, Campbell River, Powell River, Squamish, Smithers, Vanderhoof, Fort St. John, Kamloops, Vernon and Cranbrook.

Why does Sookorukoff want to live and work in the Kootenays? Other than his

family connections, he emphasizes the lifestyle. “It’s a beautiful area,” he says, “and I really like to do a lot of different kinds of outdoor activities and it’s a lot easier in a rural area. There’s a lot more space. You don’t have to deal with traffic. Or crowds.”

One of the reasons Kew hired Sookorukoff was his perspective. “A young person brings fresh energy to the practice,” says Kew. “I think that’s great.”

Sookorukoff hopes to return to Trail to article following graduation next year. Thanks to the REAL Initiative, he is well on his way. ●