



Small town lawyers who beat the blues

*There is truly “life outside the big city.”
Six attorneys tell their stories.*

GERALDINE LEWIS

Neophyte attorneys are facing up to 2200 billable hours in major firms. Although the compensation may seem enticing (average \$160K annually) the trade-offs are enormous. And we're not talking about just the top-flight law firms in the major cities. Working for a firm in the Bay area can mean long commutes and more than an eight-hour day. Is this the price of being an attorney? Some attorneys have found their way out of the rat race, choosing lifestyle over the big bucks. They work hard, but they still have a life.

David Mason lives in Alturas, the county seat of Modoc County, in the northeast corner of the state. His father was career Army so the family moved constantly. He graduated from Western State Law School in Fullerton and took his first job in Jackson. He moved to Calaveras County to become a deputy district attorney and in 1988 moved to Alturas where he was an assistant district attorney for eight years. He started his private practice 12 years ago.

His practice is a mix of family law, probate, wills and trusts and real estate issues. He does some criminal defense and is also appointed by the court on criminal and juvenile matters. It took him a couple

of years to establish a stable practice. He enjoys the freedom to pick and choose the cases he wants and set his own hours. He works from a home office and with today's technology does not need a staff.

He has lived in Alturas for more than 20 years, and yes, he pretty much knows everybody. There is only one judge now. The retired judge is a good friend and was the only public defender for many years while David was the only D.A. There are six private attorneys and David points out that even the newest kid on the block, a retired attorney who decided to open up a private practice after finding he missed working, has a busy practice.

He points out that in a small town, “You carry your reputation around with you.” Potential clients know about you before they ever knock on your door, so being honest and conscientious is a necessity.

Linda Schaap just relocated to Redding, California, where she handles medical malpractice cases as an associate at Kenny, Snowdon and Norine. Born in San Francisco, her family moved to Guerneville when she was a teenager. She became a nurse and then attended Santa Rosa Law School. She decided to pursue a legal career and now specializes in medical malpractice defense. She enjoys the

collegiality of the attorneys she deals with and finds the judges are friendlier in a small town setting. The affordability factor drew her to Redding. She wanted horse property. But it is the people she works with and the community she lives in that make her feel her choice was the right one.

Michelle Verderosa is the only female attorney in private practice in Susanville. She relocated from Long Island, New York, to Sonoma as a horse trainer. She transitioned to law and became an assistant D.A. in Sonoma. When a job opportunity presented itself she moved to Susanville in 1996. She became a sole practitioner in 2000 and does primarily family law and some criminal defense work. She enjoys the congenial atmosphere among the attorneys and cites the affordability factor (horse property) as an important one in her relocation decision. She characterizes Susanville as a fairly litigious community so she can pick and choose her cases. Susanville is home to two state penitentiaries and one federal prison. There is no anonymity in a small town, and she knows that. But sometimes she wishes she could just go grocery shopping and not run into a client.

David Dibble knew he wanted to get out of San Francisco in 1992. He left a Bay area law firm, specializing in per-



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sonal injury, to relocate to Eureka where he was a sole practitioner until 2005, when he joined with another attorney to establish the law firm of Zwerdling, Dibble LLP. He finds the work just as challenging but with fewer frustrations. He doesn't miss the commute, the rent and the expenses of a large staff. He continues to specialize in personal injury. He enjoys the legal community in Humboldt County, which is a stable one, so attorneys get to know each other well. His major frustration is with legislative changes and judicial decisions that have impacted the rights of his clients.

Peggy Headley hails originally from Kansas City, Missouri, and now calls the Lake Tahoe area home. She was a research attorney for the Sixth District Court of Appeals for 15 years when she decided it was "time to get into the arena and be an advocate." She works from her home office and the views can't be beat. She loves the newfound freedom and autonomy she has enjoyed since going on her own in 2003. While most of her caseload are criminal cases to which the court has appointed her,



Headley

she hopes to develop a civil appeals practice as well. She joined the local bar association and is a member of the board and enjoys the camaraderie this provides her. She is an early riser, and likes

getting her work done so she can enjoy the outdoors in the afternoons.

Katherine "Kit" Elliot is a criminal defense attorney in Ukiah. She graduated from Santa Barbara College of Law and migrated to Visalia, where she spent 10 years as a prosecutor. In her last year in Visalia she had 15 felony jury trials. When a job opened up in Ukiah, she and her husband decided to relocate. As a prosecutor she made less money but found the difference in the workload made it worth it. Five years ago she went on her own. She finds the workload less stressful. Most of her cases are drug-related, and the judges and prosecutors opt for rehabilitation over punishment. She enjoys the freedom of being on her own and most of all, the community she now calls home.

While all agree the practice of law can be stressful given the emotions of clients, these attorneys made informed choices about their life style and none were disappointed in the results. On the contrary, they all describe themselves as very satisfied with their choices. They understood what small town life would be like and knew the trade-offs. Their advice to other attorneys about relocating to a small town –

PLAN – it will take time to build up your practice

INVESTIGATE the community. Learn as much as you can before you make the move.

CONNECT with other attorneys to counter the isolation.

Small town practices aren't for everyone. But as John Mellencamp says (and many would agree), "I can breathe in a small town."

Geraldine Lewis lives and works in the heart of the Redwoods, Willits, CA. She is an attorney, online mediator and freelance writer. She has just put the finishing touches on her second novel.