

# STUDENT LAWYER

LAW STUDENT DIVISION • AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION



NOVEMBER 2014  
VOL. 43, NO. 3

## The Real World Awaits

LAW SCHOOLS REVAMP CURRICULA TO TRAIN A NEW BREED OF PRACTICE-READY GRADUATES



**DARLENE RICKER**  
EQUESTRIAN AUTHORS, LLC  
310.210.4004 • Lexington, Kentucky  
[www.equestrianauthors.com](http://www.equestrianauthors.com)



pg. 28

*The Goonies'*  
Actor on Life  
Lessons

P. 8

**Be Choosy  
with Courses**

P. 19

**Perks of  
Niches**

P. 28





# THE PERKS OF SPECIALIZING

WHETHER A LABOR OF LOVE OR SIMPLY A RESPONSE TO A NEED, NICHE PRACTICES OFFER MANY REWARDS.

Laura D'Angelo is smiling in the winners' circle at the Kentucky Derby as the news cameras roll. Paul Levine is walking along the Venice Beach, California, boardwalk in shorts and sandals, talking to someone about a new book. Mary Grieco is at a private fashion show in Manhattan, getting a peek at next season's designs.

They're all practicing law—and for the most part, having a great time at it.

Welcome to the world of today's niche law practice. For most lawyers who choose to concentrate in one area, their work is a labor of love; for others it is a response to a specific need that has burgeoned in the legal marketplace.

Sometimes it's both. One way or the other, niche practices are often highly lucrative, as well as rewarding in intangible ways.

Most new law school graduates will have to pay their dues to get a position in a niche area. Those who become successful niche lawyers usually spend their first few years becoming good lawyers, period, and developing knowledge about the particular niche.

It always helps to have a mentor, too. "Like anything, it comes down to who you know and who you network with,"

said Kerry Irwin, a fourth-year associate at Dinsmore & Shohl LLP in Lexington, Kentucky. She was delighted when her former law school professor, who taught electives in equine law, told her about an opening at her firm. "I was very lucky," said Irwin, who "knew from day one" at law school that she wanted to become an equine law attorney. This niche focuses on the practice of law that involves all types of horse-related activities, horse businesses, horse organizations, and horse facilities.

Choose an area of law where you won't burn out.



## SELECTING A NICHE—OR A NICHE WITHIN A NICHE

For the majority of law students, the career path decision starts with a more general question—typically whether to become a litigator or a transactional lawyer. But for some with specialized interests, the internal dialogue goes more like this:

I know I want to do entertainment law, but should I look for a job in the motion picture, television, or music industry? If music, which genre? Do I want to defend major record companies in lawsuits, or do I want to help struggling artists get and negotiate recording contracts? Would I enjoy handling merchandising, concert promotions, and tours, or would I rather help composers protect their copyrights? How comfortable would I feel if I had to go to prison to interview a performer who has had a major scrape with the law?

Practices have become more and more specialized—even to the point of subspecialties such as celebrity criminal defense—in recent years. For example, the “celebrity lawyer” who helped Michael Jackson acquire the \$47.5 million rights to the Beatles’ song catalog was not the same “celebrity lawyer” who represented the pop superstar against criminal allegations. (The former is John Branca; the latter Tom Mesereau.)

### Military Law

“A niche within a niche” is how Gary Myers refers to his practice as a military law attorney. Once a broad-based specialty, military law has evolved into subspecialties from civil matters before the Veterans Administration to criminal charges before the International Court of Justice. Although work of this nature cannot be categorized as fun, Myers said he finds it extremely gratifying to help men and women who are serving or have served their country. It is a driving passion for the former US Army judge advocate general, who is in his 47th year of practicing law.

Myers’ entrée to military law came through a highly publicized case of

international import that came his way during the Vietnam era: the 1968 My Lai massacre, in which US soldiers were charged with killing hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians. When he finished serving in the Army, he started his own boutique, which now has three lawyers.

“We practice from the United States to Korea to Iraq, Afghanistan . . .” said Myers, whose firm logs 300,000 to 400,000 air miles per year. One of his colleagues just finished a trial in Okinawa (a stretch of islands between mainland Japan and Taiwan). “We’re in constant motion. For me the lifestyle is wonderful. I enjoy not being tied to a desk and being around young people all over the world.”

While most military lawyers are sole practitioners, other specialty practices have developed in large firms. But senior partners sitting in 18th floor corner offices and sole practitioners whose desks may be their dining room tables have something very important in common: While they live, eat and breathe what they do, a niche practice tends to offer an inordinate amount of freedom.

### Literary Law

“My time is my own,” said Levine, a Los Angeles literary lawyer and agent. A sole practitioner, he spent his early years in practice as a staff attorney for major film studios and entertainment conglomerates. To distinguish himself from the 4,000 other entertainment lawyers in LA, Levine decided right away to concentrate on representing authors in book publishing deals.

About 70 percent of his time is spent working as a lawyer and the rest as an agent. His practice consists of reading book manuscripts, talking to major publishing houses, speaking at writers conferences, and teaching literary law.

“I have a 10-step ‘commute’ to work from the back door of my house to my

office,” a precious benefit in light of LA’s notorious traffic. On any given day, lunch may be a sandwich on the beach (a 15-minute walk from his office) or a meal with a client in a swank Westside restaurant.

### Equine Law

D’Angelo, an equine law partner at Dinsmore & Shohl, is equally grateful for the flexibility of her lifestyle. “You can’t beat it!” said D’Angelo, an avid equestrian since her youth.

She was recruited three years ago to head the firm’s equine and gaming practice. Her work is a combination of her passion for the sport and the needs of the equine industry, which has fluctuated over the years. When stallion syndications in the thoroughbred racing sector declined in 2008 and 2009, that aspect of her business portfolio slowed. But then in 2010, along came the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, held at the Kentucky Horse Park. That event spurred the expansion of the local sport horse (rather than racing) industry, and D’Angelo developed a still-thriving practice in, among other things, syndicating show jumpers.

“I love to go to the Horse Park and watch clients show their horses,” said D’Angelo, who sometimes finds herself competing against them in the same jumper classes. But it’s all in good fun, she said. “We all support each other and have a good time.” The firm considers her time at horse shows and racetracks a good investment in client development.

“I love to go to the Horse Park and watch clients show their horses,” said D’Angelo, who sometimes finds herself competing against them in the same jumper classes. But it’s all in good fun, she said. “We all support each other and have a good time.” The firm considers her time at horse shows and racetracks a good investment in client development.

D’Angelo said she appreciates the support that comes from a large firm like Dinsmore. The firm’s staffing and financial support gives her a distinct advantage over competitors, the majority of whom practice as solos or in small boutique firms. “If I want to sponsor a show jumping event or give branded saddle pads to my clients as gifts, the firm is fine with it.”

Music and the fashion industry are both very much a part of our culture. [My work] makes me feel very connected to the world.

Add to that the benefit of having a niche practice within a large firm, which has no need to refer an equine industry client out if he has a separate matter unrelated to horses, she said.

### Trademark Law

Most midsize and large-firm lawyers with niche practices agree on the benefits of being backed by a broader organization, including Grieco, whose practice focuses on intellectual property and fashion law. Grieco is a partner in the trademarks department of Olshan Frome Wolosky, a midsize Manhattan, New York–based firm. A decade ago, she was a partner in a Los Angeles music law boutique with an elite client base of rock ‘n’ roll stars and major record labels, where she similarly protected clients’ copyrights and trademarks to creative works. The transition was seamless, she said, because music and fashion overlap with increasing number of recording artists coming out with clothing lines. For example, her previous firm represented both the musical and merchandising interests of the Grateful Dead, whose front man, Jerry Garcia, designed a lucrative line of ties and other dress apparel.

Representing celebrities, be they on stage or at the easel designing clothing and accessories, is demanding but definitely has its fun side. “Music and the fashion industry are both very much a part of our culture,” said Grieco. “I can be working on something and see it on TV. [My work] makes me feel very connected to the world.”

### Celebrity Criminal Defense and Sports Law

The same goes for lawyers like Tom Mesereau and Joe Hanna, both of whom have high-profile niche practices. Mesereau was catapulted to fame through his criminal defense of celebrities including singer Michael Jackson, professional boxer Mike Tyson, and actor Robert Blake, who was accused of murdering his wife. Hanna chairs Goldberg Segalla’s sports and entertainment law practice group. He made headlines representing star athletes by focusing the spotlight on the pervasive problem of brain injuries in the National Foot-

## LIAISONS TO ABA ENTITIES

An opportunity for law students to get a head start on exploring niches of interest.

Each year the Law Student Division chair appoints law student liaisons to various ABA sections, divisions, and forum committees, many of which involve specialized practice areas. Those who have served as liaisons said the position pays invaluable dividends, particularly for students interested in pursuing a niche practice. Where else can a law student who dreams of navigating the legal frontiers of outer space work side-by-side with a practicing attorney who advised NASA on the space shuttle?

Nathan Johnson, the 2013–2014 student liaison to the ABA Forum on Air & Space Law, already knew he wanted to practice outer space law when he started law school. He saw law as an avenue by which he could help advance the US space program, which he considers “a national legacy that I’m proud of.”

“I couldn’t be a scientist or engineer, but I could be involved through my skills as an attorney,” Johnson said. So he set his sights on the sun, so to speak. As a first-year law student, he joined the Law Student Division and applied right away to be a liaison. “I really enjoyed it and highly recommend it. You don’t have electives in the first year of law school, so this is a good way to start learning about a niche area that interests you.”

The program exposed him to not only the substantive aspects of outer space law but also to career opportunities few would have known about. While most people think of space exploration as the strict province of the federal government, Johnson discovered there are also opportunities for lawyers in the private sector. “In the past decade, he noted, developments in private space transportation have created a growing need for outer space law attorneys. Johnson was surprised to learn that SpaceX, a private space transport services company that recently announced plans to build the world’s first commercial rocket launch site in Texas, has a general counsel. “So that told me there are attorney positions there,” he said.

For a kid who grew up fascinated with “science fact and fiction,” Johnson is beyond excited about the opportunities ahead. “In the near future we’re going to see new legal situations,” he said. “How do we apply property rights in outer space? How do we deal with space traffic management?”

Johnson was introduced to these and other issues by networking as a student liaison with leading outer space law attorneys who are involved in the ABA. “Liaisons participate with the governing committee leadership, so you get to work one-on-one with practicing attorneys,” said Johnson, a 2014 graduate of George Washington University Law School who is pursuing an LL.M in space, cyber, and telecommunications law at the University of Nebraska College of Law. He also made industry contacts at the conferences he attended as a liaison and landed a summer internship with the FAA Office of Commercial Space Transportation, where he met an attorney who to this day is his mentor.

Liaisons serve for an academic year and must commit 10 hours monthly. Applications for the 2015–16 positions are accepted from November 2014 through February 15, 2015. For application forms and program details, visit: [http://americanbar.org/groups/law\\_students/about\\_us/leadership/leadership\\_opportunities/lai.html](http://americanbar.org/groups/law_students/about_us/leadership/leadership_opportunities/lai.html).



## NICHES GALORE

The ABA boasts dozens of committees, forums, and sections focusing on niche areas of law, including all of the ones discussed in this article:

### MILITARY LAW

Standing Committee on Armed Forces Law

➤ [https://americanbar.org/groups/committees/armed\\_forces\\_law.html](https://americanbar.org/groups/committees/armed_forces_law.html)

### ENTERTAINMENT LAW

Forum on Entertainment and Sports Industries

➤ [http://americanbar.org/groups/entertainment\\_sports.html](http://americanbar.org/groups/entertainment_sports.html)

### EQUINE LAW

GPSolo Agriculture Law Committee

➤ <http://apps.americanbar.org/dch/committee.cfm?com=GP206000>

### POLITICAL LAW

Standing Committee on Election Law

➤ [http://americanbar.org/groups/public\\_services/election\\_law.html](http://americanbar.org/groups/public_services/election_law.html)

### TRADEMARK LAW

Section of Intellectual Property Law

➤ [http://americanbar.org/groups/intellectual\\_property\\_law.html](http://americanbar.org/groups/intellectual_property_law.html)

### TRAVEL AND RESORTS TORTS

Section of Real Property, Trust and Estate Law—Hotels, Resorts, and Tourism Committee

➤ <http://apps.americanbar.org/dch/committee.cfm?com=RP272200>

ball League concussion litigation.

At the same time, some celebrity lawyers devote a certain amount of their practice to the needs of the poor and underrepresented. Hanna, for example, heads his firm's diversity task force and is very active in minority issues. Mesereau founded and runs the Mesereau Free Legal Clinic in Inglewood, California, a subsidiary of the Mesereau Community Legal Foundation, a nonprofit organization.

### Political Law

Another niche area spurred by a desire to practice law for the good of society is political law. Kenneth Gross heads the 17-attorney political law practice group in the Washington, D.C., office of giant Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP & Affiliates. He recalled that political law as a practice area "was being born when I was in law school." At that time, the Watergate hearings were taking place, which eventually resulted in post-election legislative reform. In his bipartisan practice, Gross has represented such political luminaries as Daniel Moynihan, Robert Dole, and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. While many of the issues he handles affect government and society in the broadest sense, such as lobbying and political action committees, it can also come down to practical considerations about gifts, gratuities, and conflicts of interest regarding a political figure—"Can I play golf with him? Can I take her to lunch?"

I enjoy not being tied to a desk and being around young people all over the world.

### Travel and Resort Torts

The issues are much heavier for lawyers such as Ira Leesfield of Leesfield & Partners in Florida, whose niche is "travel and resort torts"—a term he said he invented 15 years ago when he created the practice area. His cases arise from incidents in a resort, vacation, or recreational setting, such as cruise ships, boats, ATVs, jet skis,

theme parks, and airplane crashes and hijackings. Although many of his cases involve tragedies and his lifestyle is not necessarily glamorous, Leesfield said he feels good about helping people at what may be the lowest point of their lives. "I am inspired by courage," he said.

He urges law students who are weighing various niche practices to take that sentiment to heart. "You have to have another passion other than money. There are plenty of legal specialties out there. Choose an area of law where you won't burn out." ■

**DARLENE RICKER** (editor@equestrianauthors.com) is a former staff writer and editor for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Boston Globe*. She is CEO and editorial director of Equestrian Authors LLC, based in Lexington, Kentucky.

## TAKE ADVANTAGE OF LAW STUDENT DIVISION CAREER-DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

For more information, visit <http://ambar.org/lsdbenefits>

