

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

UMaine law school grads to help fill the state's growing need for lawyers



Troy R. Bennett | BDN

Jessica Currier (left) and Allison Ouellet are returning to their home counties in Maine after graduating from the University of Maine School of Law. *Buy Photo*

By Judy Harrison, BDN Staff

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PORTLAND, Maine — Taylor Kilgore decided she could better advocate for the clients she worked with as an adult mental health case manager if she had a law degree.

Allison Ouellet had never stepped foot in a courtroom until she went to law school while her classmate, Jessica Currier, grew up watching her dad head off to court on most mornings.

Although they chose the law for different reasons, all three women will begin their careers following Saturday's graduation from the [University of Maine School of Law](#) in rural Maine where young lawyers are desperately needed to replace an aging bar.

There are about 3,700 lawyers living and practicing in Maine, with more than 1,000 over the age of 60, Peter Pitegoff, dean of Maine Law, said recently. In the state's five most rural counties, more than half the attorneys are over 60, he said.

Pitegoff said it is too early to tell if Kilgore, Ouellet and Currier's taking jobs at small firms outside the state's major legal centers represents a trend or not, but it does demonstrate a "growing commitment to rural Maine" on the part of recent Maine Law graduates.

It also is a sign of the economic times, according to Clint Boothby, whose firm Boothby Perry LLC, with offices in Norway and Turner, has hired Kilgore, 28, of Auburn.

"There's been a slow-down for attorneys everywhere because of the times," Boothby said Friday. "Firms in metropolitan areas are not hiring at the rate they were [prior to 2008]. That has made graduates look around at rural areas, but people with a connection to those areas are more eager to look there."

Ouellet, 32, grew up in Addison and will work for attorney Jeffrey Lovit of Milbridge. Currier, 26, will join her father, Richard Currier, at Currier & Trask in Presque Isle.

The Maine Department of Labor projected that there would be a total of 74 openings for lawyers each year between 2010 and 2020. Of those, 54 would be replacement openings and 20 would be new positions. The average hourly wage in 2011 was listed at \$49.04 compared to the [national hourly wage of \\$54.21 per hour](#). The figures do not include self-employed attorneys.

This year, there are 97 graduates — 45 men and 52 women — of the UMaine School of Law, many of them are vying for those 74 openings. Fifty-eight of them are from Maine and 39 from out of state.

"We couldn't be more proud of our graduates this year," Pitegoff said earlier this month. "They are facing the challenges of the job market with determination, resourcefulness and optimism for the future."

Hiring in the legal field has not picked up as fast as legal educators had hoped, he said.

Of the 87 students who graduated from Maine Law in 2012, 17 or 19.5 percent had not found a job as of February 2013, according to statistics gathered each year by the American Bar Association. That is nearly twice the national average of 10.6 percent.

"One unique factor for us is that many of our graduates love Maine," Pitegoff said. "Understandably, they want to stay here. For those who are determined to stay, they recognize that it may take a year or more to find the position they are looking for."

There are opportunities in rural Maine but most law school graduates who want to practice in those areas have roots there, Richard Currier said Friday.

"I have roots Down East," Ouellet said. "I also think I have a better chance of making a difference Down East than I would in Portland where I would be one of many, many attorneys. The quality of life is also more appealing for me."

Lovit said that it is difficult to recruit law school graduates to underserved rural areas.

"It's not only unattractive to them socially, but it's also unattractive to them financially for a variety of economic reasons," he said Friday. "The traditional base for rural practice, which has always been probate and land transfers, is being eroded [due to changing demographics]. It is in my opinion, less and less financially attractive to set up a practice in rural areas."

Students graduate with far more student debt today than they did when he graduated in the mid-1970s, Lovit said.

Jessica Currier said in deciding to return to Aroostook County, she considered the lower cost of living in a rural part of the state compared to Central or Southern Maine.

"In my opinion there are not as many opportunities to get a job in the Portland area as there are in rural areas," she said Thursday in an email. "Many of my friends don't yet have job offers for after graduation. With that said, there are many rural areas that need more attorneys, but they don't do a good job of enticing or recruiting recent graduates to those areas. Most of the people that I know who have moved, or are planning on moving, to rural communities either grew up in that area or have friends or family in that area."

The University of Maine School of Law will award 97 J.D. degrees and two post-professional degrees at 10 a.m. Saturday at Merrill Auditorium in Portland. Mara Liasson, an award-winning correspondent for National Public Radio will be the keynote speaker. The L. Kinvin Wroth Award will be presented to John A. Woodcock Jr., chief judge of Maine's U.S. District Court.

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