

Who Carries It Forward?

More law students are looking beyond the allure of Big Law and considering a career that offers growth, purpose, and real courtroom experience. For many new lawyers, the best opportunities aren't in the tallest buildings—they're where responsibility, advocacy, and meaning converge.

Choosing the Right Path

Shanin Specter

Across law schools, plaintiff law associations are sprouting. Many students want to avoid the grind of Big Law and pursue work that feels genuinely meaningful.

But pursuing meaningful work often comes with financial questions. Faced with mountains of debt, law students wonder whether they can pay their bills as young associates at plaintiff firms.

Data about income at such firms is sparse. "I think I'd like the work," many law students say, "But can I afford it?"

This question is understandable when starting salaries at Big Law often top \$200,000.¹ Although that figure is enticing, roughly 80% of associates leave those firms within five years.² The pay is tempting, but the work often isn't. Much of the work—research, document review, memo writing—teaches few transferable, marketable skills. When associates

eventually leave, their next job often hinges on aptitude rather than accumulated know-how. That generous starting salary can become a Faustian bargain: short-term gain at the expense of long-term growth.

High starting salaries don't reflect a new lawyer's actual worth. Big Law pays top dollar to win a talent race, but a hefty paycheck doesn't guarantee a meaningful experience.

The Plaintiff Path

Plaintiff firms offer a different trajectory. They're typically smaller and less hierarchical, so new lawyers often take depositions and appear in court early in their careers. They build essential skills quickly while finding the work rewarding.

Unlike defense firms, plaintiff practices don't take assignments handed down from insurers or in-house counsel. They choose their cases and their clients—real people who've been harmed and who appreciate the help. Gratitude and hugs are common. Add to that the absence of time sheets and busywork, and the job feels purposeful.

Some cases even allow lawyers to negotiate safety improvements as part of settlements—a win for clients, communities, and the profession. And unlike the steady exodus from Big Law, in my experience,

relatively few plaintiff lawyers leave the profession while many defense lawyers eventually switch sides. In my 41 years of practicing law, I've seen only three lawyers leave plaintiff law for defense law.

Negotiation and Flexibility


Starting salaries at plaintiff firms are often lower, but their overall pay structures differ. Big Law raises typically follow rigid steps tied to class year, not talent. Plaintiff firms, by contrast, tend to pay for performance. Opportunities to shine and earn come early, and compensation isn't fixed. Strong candidates can often negotiate competitive offers. And if a firm won't offer a fair salary up front, that's a red flag for the future.

Increasingly, plaintiff firms understand they must be flexible to attract top talent—sometimes even matching Big Law salaries for exceptional recruits. And when pay does lag, the skills plaintiff lawyers develop often make lateral moves easier. In many cases, talented plaintiff lawyers have more mobility than their Big Law peers.

Armed with these less-publicized realities, many top students are choosing to look more seriously at the plaintiff bar—and plaintiff firms are now winning talent wars with Big Law.

The Bottom Line

Law students must test the market, negotiate confidently, and weigh more than a starting salary. Plaintiff firms can offer early responsibility, skill development, and long-term professional growth. With responsibility comes risk, but also the chance for real success—something worth protecting. Without the freedom to fail, lawyers rarely gain the freedom to excel.

True prestige lies in professional satisfaction, not in the size of the employer. Plaintiff work offers a strong path to a rewarding and meaningful career. 



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NOTES

1. See Danielle A. Taylor & Oksana Poulis, \$225,000 Entry-Level Salaries Not Yet the Standard at Large Firms, NALP Bulletin, at 9 (June 2025), tinyurl.com/39yvafne.
2. Shanin Specter, *What Practitioners Can Do for Law Students and What Law Schools Can Do for Practitioners*, 75 UC L. J. 1449, 1473 (2024), tinyurl.com/yc6vmcca.

Planting the Seeds

Lisa Qian

Last summer, about 15 of my law school classmates joined me at AAJ's Annual Convention in San Francisco, along with many of my fellow board members from the National Plaintiffs' Law Association (NPLA).

Later, nearly 80 law students from across the country gathered at a reception hosted by attorneys Shanin Specter and Spencer Pahlke—two of the strongest advocates for law students within the plaintiff bar.

Everywhere we went, attorneys stopped us to say, "I wish something like this had existed when I was in law school." Not long ago, law students were a rare sight at AAJ conventions. Now, our presence was evident. Many lawyers asked the same question: What had changed on law school campuses?

A Movement Takes Root

Nathan Werksman founded the country's first Plaintiffs' Law Association (PLA) at Stanford in 2017. Nathan insists it was a "totally self-interested endeavor" because it gave him an excuse to reach out to potential employers. "Not in my wildest dreams would it live beyond me," he said.

But the timing was fortuitous. Nathan and his classmates were 1Ls during a period of major political change, and many students who had envisioned careers in the federal government began rethinking their plans. If not public enforcement, why not private enforcement?

Soon, PLAs sprouted at other schools. Students collaborated across campuses—why reinvent the wheel when you could learn from one another? That collaboration led to the founding of the NPLA, created to support PLAs nationwide and connect students with the broader plaintiff bar.

The NPLA's founding members all realized the same thing: Once law students understand the case for a career as a plaintiff attorney, the field sells itself. Meaningful work, richer learning opportunities, no billable hours, and better compensation than typical public-interest jobs—once students see those benefits, they don't need convincing.

Finding a Community

By the time I arrived at Stanford in 2023, already knowing that I wanted to be a plaintiff attorney, I was no longer an anomaly. I received a scholarship from AAJ to attend the 2024 Annual Convention in Nashville.

It's no exaggeration when I say it was life changing. I met my heroes. I found mentors. Most of all, I was struck by the kindness and generosity of plaintiff attorneys—a community where people genuinely like and support each other and where senior lawyers go out of their way to help newer ones.

When I returned to Stanford for my 2L year, I was determined to pay it forward by introducing more students to plaintiff law. I emailed every attorney I knew, asking them to come speak to my peers and share their stories.

Last year, the Stanford PLA hosted 15 events, featuring speakers such as AAJ Past President Lori Andrus on AAJ's fight against tort "reform," Josh Koskoff on representing Sandy Hook families, and faculty advisor Shanin Specter with Nathan Werksman discussing the business side of plaintiff law.

The effort paid off: The current Stanford PLA board includes 10% of the class of 2027—and even more students regularly attend our events. This past October, more than 120 students packed a room to hear trial attorneys discuss litigation against Uber and Roblox.

In just a few years, PLAs have evolved from nonexistent to thriving on university campuses nationwide. The result is a new generation of law students who see plaintiff work not as niche, but as a vibrant, values-driven career path. ■



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