

Graduates Look to Skip Big Law, Go Straight to Plaintiffs' Firms

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Stanford University has seen a surge in law students seeking employment at plaintiff-side law firms.

Photographer: Chip Chipman/Bloomberg

Abbey Carbajal is the kind of candidate Big Law firms trip over themselves to hire.

The Brown University alum is set to graduate from Columbia Law later this month. Then she's off to a pair of prestigious clerkships, first in the Southern District of New York and then in the US Court of Appeals for the First Circuit.

That resume makes her a prime candidate for an associate job at a top firm, where salaries start at \$225,000 and armies of lawyers bill by the hour to defend major companies, banks, and asset managers. But Carbajal wants to work on the other side of the "v" and is helping build a pipeline for other graduates to land jobs with plaintiffs' firms.

"I want to be the ones fighting for justice, not the ones representing the largest and most powerful organizations in the world," Carbajal said. "And that seems to be something that's resonated with students across the country."

Carbajal, who launched Columbia's chapter of the student-run National Plaintiffs' Law Association, is part of a group of enterprising students who have been carving a path to plaintiffs' firms straight out of top law schools. Some see trial work as the best way to

weather the incoming disruption caused by generative artificial intelligence, while others ditched Big Law amid President Donald Trump's attacks on law firms last year.

The effort is influencing the recruiting strategy at some top trial firms, from securities litigation shops to those focused on personal injury cases, which don't hire anywhere near the number of graduates as defense-side firms. Their success-based fee model makes it harder to recoup the investment in lawyers with few practical skills who don't generate revenue by hourly billing. But a group of top plaintiffs' lawyers who've partnered with the NPLA say many firms are now big enough to justify hiring new graduates.

"It's worth it," said Shanin Specter, a cofounder of the 60-plus lawyer Kline & Specter, based in Philadelphia. "But it has been a lot to swallow for a lot of plaintiffs' firms to bite the bullet and pay a couple hundred thousand dollars a year to a new lawyer."

Job Fair

The NPLA educates law students on their career options at plaintiff-side firms. The group has grown from chapters at 10 law schools to more than 60 in the past three years, including 13 of the "top 14" schools. Its nationwide job fair in June looks to pair more than 1,000 students with 60-plus plaintiffs' firms—up from 200 students and 40 firms in 2023, the organization's first year.

Local chapters have been around longer, but the national group was founded in 2023. Last year, it kicked into gear during the Trump administration attacks on Big Law firms, including circulating an amicus brief signed by more than 1,200 students protesting the actions. NPLA also helped about 10 students who accepted summer positions at firms that struck deals with Trump find other jobs.

"The course of some folks' lives changed as a result of that and their courage to leave offers at these fancy firms for the opportunity to work for a plaintiffs' firm," said Spencer Pahlke, a shareholder at the San Francisco-based plaintiffs' firm Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger.

Julia Gokhberg applied to Stanford Law School after seeing a PLA chapter listed on its website. She realized the group was defunct when she arrived on campus in 2020. Gokhberg said she felt duped when she later attended a mandatory career services meeting in which first-year students were told about their career options, but plaintiffs' firms were never mentioned.

"I was in this meeting sort of fuming," Gokhberg said. "It's not that I want everyone going into plaintiffs' law, but I was just mad they weren't presenting it as an option."

Gokhberg and two other students appointed themselves to the board of the Stanford PLA and got to work. They developed a list of plaintiffs' firms in the Bay Area, invited them to speak during lunches at the school, and then they hosted an event: "Debunking the Myth of the Ambulance Chaser." She started reaching out to plaintiffs' firms, asking to interview for summer positions.

She connected with Pahlke through an email platform he created for students to sign up for discrete plaintiff-side work. The NPLA got its start when he brought Gokhberg and 13 other students to his offices to brainstorm how PLA chapters across the country could better work together.

Gokhberg now works at Reid, Collins & Tsai, one of the firms she cold-emailed asking for a summer position during law school. The firm, which represents plaintiffs in complex business disputes, now hires four or five summer associates each year and has been hiring more graduates straight out of law school.

"That's a byproduct of Julia opening our eyes to the possibility," said firm senior founding partner Bill Reid.

Jan Rotich, a second-year student at University of Pennsylvania Law School, has also worked for Reid. Rotich has already developed connections across the plaintiffs' bar: She's been mentored by Eric Gibbs at Gibbs Mura and worked for Michael Hausfeld, founder of one of the largest plaintiff-side firms, Hausfeld LLP. "They don't want students who expect opportunities to be handed to them on a silver platter," Rotich said. "You're getting paid based on the results you get. So plaintiffs' firms want students who are go-getters and hard workers."

Reid thinks the onset of AI at Big Law firms will lead to a crisis for law students. Plaintiff-side work may provide some shelter from the fallout. He advises students to get the type of experience AI can't replicate: Standing up and arguing in court.

"It's essential that they get on their feet and get experience," he said. "I'm very worried that this conveyor belt will break down because of AI."

Getting the Message

Some law schools' career services offices are getting the message and partnering with the groups.

Stanford has promoted its PLA chapter by advertising its events on the school's website and writing about its work in school publications. Georgetown Law School's career services team has seen its PLA chapter grow to 329 students from nine two years ago, said Jessie Strauser, Assistant Director, Office of Public Interest and Community Service.

"We are increasingly doing a better job getting plaintiffs' firms and public interest legal work in the private sector in front of students earlier on in their career," Strauser said.

Even with the growing interest, plaintiff-side firms are not going to temper Big Law's recruiting appetite, which has only grown in recent years. The country's largest law firms in 2024 hired more than 7,100 students for the first time, up from fewer than 5,000 graduates in 2019, according to the National Association for Law Placement.

There is no data on how many graduates were hired by plaintiffs' firms last year. Even the biggest firms might only hire one or two law graduates each year. And many of their summer associate positions are not designed to be pathways for long-term employment.

Some of the firms match Big Law's associate salary scale but most pay less than that. Still, plaintiffs' firms often provide bonuses to lawyers who work on successful cases. NPLA is launching a pay survey asking firms to provide data on their compensation practices.

Specter, the Philadelphia-based trial lawyer, has been helping students learn about his side of the bar on campuses from Penn to Stanford, where he teaches.

He tells students that going to Big Law is not risk-free. About 83% of associates leave their firms within five years of being hired, according to data from the National Association of Law Placement.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to a Big Law firm because you’re risk averse,” he said. “It is just the opposite. You must be risk preferential. The starting salary is not enough to go if you know in advance that you’ll be gone within five years.”