



Living and Practicing Law in Denver

[Erica Winter]

For many of us, images of Denver usually include omnipresent snow and mile-high mountains. Those perceptions, and more, are dissected as we explore the capital of Colorado as a place to live, work, and play.

If you move to Denver and start practicing law here, you may find yourself doing things you did not expect. Like waking up very early, accepting the help of strangers without suspicion, or enjoying sunshine for 300 days out of a year.

You'll probably get used to it.

Practicing here.

Lawyers in Denver regularly get to the office at 7:30 in the morning. Yes, it's early, but most of them do not stay until 7:30 at night. Even associates we spoke with said that they leave the office by 6:00 or 6:30 and (wow!) go home and spend time with their families.

One associate we talked with, Melanie K. Komarowsky, said that she works from 7:30 to 4:30. She does not have children, and she is not part-time; that's just when the office closes. Komarowsky, a New England School of Law alumna, has been practicing immigration law for two years with Allott Immigration Law Firm.

"I loved Boston," says Komarowsky. "It is a wonderful city." A Colorado native, though, Komarowsky wanted to move back west. The difference between the East Coast and Denver? "Colorado just isn't as old school," she says. For example, most Denver firms do not require that you wear suits to the office, unless you have a court date or official outside business. And her law school friends working in Boston are often suited up and in the office from 8:00 to 7:00.

The Allott firm, whose attorneys are currently all women, has been handling immigration work for families and businesses in Denver for 30 years. The founding partner, Ann Allott, is both an attorney and an equestrian, so the firm handles visas for athletes participating in horse shows, as well as other athletes.

Komarowsky also works with clients coming to Colorado to do seasonal agricultural work and helps bring in professionals for permanent residency based on "extraordinary ability," a visa class for those who are experts in their professions and have opportunities to work in the U.S.

Komarowsky chose to go into immigration law because "international law is my passion," she says. Despite the fact that Denver is not a coastal or border city, there is a lot of immigration legal work to go around. Immigration lawyers in town meet on a monthly basis and are "a very close group," with not a lot of competition for business among them. According to her, there is room for more immigration attorneys in Denver.

As for being a woman in the legal profession, Komarowsky sees most specialties in Denver composed of half men and half women, possibly with more men in corporate law and more women in family law.

While Komarowsky has a dollar-earned requirement at her firm (instead of the typical associate's billed-hours requirement), Jim Johnson's firm has no associate quotas at all. There are no billed hours or dollars-billed requirements for associates at Otten,

Johnson, Robinson, Neff & Rangonetti, which has 50 attorneys, three offices, and is among the top ten largest home-grown firms in Denver.

Johnson, a real estate lawyer for three years who graduated in 2000 from the University of Denver College of Law, first came to the city as a civil engineer doing environmental cleanup at the now-closed Lowry Air Force Base.

Currently Johnson represents clients who want to acquire property and then build on it, subdivide and sell it, or some combination thereof. He also works on litigation, such as challenging municipal decisions against firm clients. Otten Johnson is a "soup to nuts" real estate firm, handling both the transactional and litigation sides of the specialty. Johnson enjoys this and says that he chose real estate law partly for the combination of transactional and litigation work.

Richard Harris's family law firm has an unusual associate requirement: all of its associates must carry at least one pro bono case at all times. This work is "an essential part of our mission to serve the community," Harris says.

The firm gets its pro bono cases from Metro Volunteer Lawyers, the Denver legal-aid society. The cases follow the same lines as the firm's paid cases: child-custody and child-support issues, domestic violence, and divorces. Harris, also an alumnus of the University of Denver College of Law, started his firm as a solo office 12 years ago and



expanded to include associates about five years ago.

H. Michael Steinberg was a prosecutor in Arapahoe County--one of Denver's neighboring counties--before hanging out his shingle as a solo criminal defense attorney in town. Denver is "a wonderful place to practice law," says Steinberg, an alumnus of the University of Oregon Law School and a lawyer for 20 years.

Colorado is divided into 22 judicial districts, usually with more than one county in each district. Denver is both a city and a county, as well as the state capital. So it has city/county courts, state court and federal courts. Also, there are five counties surrounding Denver. As a defense attorney, Steinberg travels to all of these jurisdictions; the variety is "exciting to be a part of," he says.

The density of courts, plus the high number of federal agency regional offices here (including the EPA, Department of the Interior, CMS, and USDA), could account for a feeling that many of our sources noted - that there are a lot of lawyers in town.

Or maybe it's the weather and the mountains. Like many beautiful places, there are "way too many lawyers" in Denver, muses Steinberg. If you are thinking of coming to town, but don't have a position nailed down yet, you need to think of a niche you can fill in order to build up a practice, recommends Steinberg.

Specifically, we found that there are 7,493 lawyers actively practicing in Denver itself (with 20,453 active in the state altogether). With a current estimated city population of 570,901, this means that, in town, one in every 76 people in Denver is a practicing lawyer. That stretches out a bit when you include the total of 2 million-plus people living in the Denver area. But still, person for person, that's a lot of lawyers.

Hiring for attorney positions in Denver has been slow, and competition is tight, says Tim Henderson, Assistant Dean of Career Services at the University of Denver College of Law. There are two local law schools (his and the University of Colorado); plus, Denver is a popular place to live.

Those who do score jobs in Denver seem very happy to have them. All the people we talked with noted the collegial and professional atmosphere in the Denver Bar. Lawyers here have "a good sense of community," says Henderson.

Practicing in Denver is "terrific," says Ed Lederman, a divorce lawyer in solo practice for 13 years. He enjoys solo practice and does not feel at a disadvantage having no legal staff. "I can pack as much wallop on a dollar-for-dollar basis as a large firm," he says. With the advent of the Internet and the growing popularity of e-filing, there is a changing impact that smaller firms can make, even if they don't have as much legal staff on hand, Lederman says.

And in Denver, even in a specialty renowned for conflict and emotion, Lederman says the vast number of opposing attorneys he works with are collegial and professional. In fact, Denver lawyers across specialties--criminal defense, family law, immigration law, environmental law--told us that they see colleagues in their fields on regular and repeated bases and noted this as the main reason why there was little cutthroat behavior in the profession here.

This professional courtesy could also have something to do with the happiness generated by nearly constant sunshine, but we'll talk more about the weather later on.

A multi-company town.

In Denver, "oil and gas is exploding, so to speak," says H. Michael Steinberg. Others concur. There is a lot of oil and gas explora-

tion going on now in Colorado, and there are many lawyers to serve that industry in the area.

While oil and gas is hot now, most of the local hiring of new law school grads is not leaning that way, says Tim Henderson. Most of the hiring he's seen has been for civil litigation posts.

Also, after a five-year drought, water is a big issue in the state, says Steinberg. And Colorado has highly specialized water-rights laws. If you are interested in going into that field here, you would have to intern with a local firm to establish a practice in that specialty, says Steinberg.

Water-rights laws are peculiar in Colorado, as opposed to some other states, says Jim Johnson. In Colorado, buying the land does not give you the water rights to the river or stream that runs through that land, he says. There is a separate court system to adjudicate these issues--the Water Courts--and a few boutique firms handle most of the water work in Denver.

"There is lots of opportunity to work here," says Melanie Komarowsky. Growing legal areas include agriculture and land rights, immigration, sports, and corporate law--especially international corporate law, she says.

"Real estate firms in Denver need more help," says Johnson. One of Denver's abutting counties, Douglas county, is one of the five fastest-growing counties in the nation. There is a lot of real estate legal work going on in the Denver region, says Johnson.

As you might expect from all of its natural beauty and resources, there is a large environmental bar in Denver, says Kemper Will, a Georgetown Law alumnus who got his start in Washington, DC, 30 years ago as a lawyer with the EPA.



When an opening came up in the Denver regional EPA office, Will jumped at the position, looking for life near the mountains, a slower pace, and a job closer to family. Will did legal work at that office for four years before going into private practice in his own firm, which then merged with his current firm, Burns, Figa & Will, in Englewood, CO, which borders Denver to the south.

There was a lot of mining in Colorado, and therefore a lot of Superfund environmental cleanup sites in the 1970s and 1980s, says Will. Most other areas of the country deal with air-quality issues. In Colorado, it's more a matter of groundwater and soil contamination, says Will.

As the Superfund cleanup sites were completed, the environmental work changed, says Will. Now he deals primarily with ensuring that property contaminated by industrial use--from gas tanks, or dry-cleaning chemicals--can be cleaned up and used for residential or other purposes.

One misconception people have about his work is that environmental law is either for or against one "side." "It's not positional," Will explains. "It's not one side or another. People ask me what side I'm on. I tell them I'm on the side of solving the problem."

It's helpful to have a technical background (such as engineering or chemistry) if you want to have success becoming an environmental attorney, says Will, who has a Master's Degree in Biology and Education. Also, starting off working in the government is a good way to learn the field and gain experience.

There are 15 or 20 very good environmental lawyers in Denver who practice in that specialty exclusively, says Will; the rest of the environmental legal work is divided pretty evenly among large firms and small- to mid-size firms.

Overall, in Denver, three of the largest lo-

cally grown firms are Holland & Hart; Holme, Roberts & Owen; and Davis, Graham & Stubbs. National firms in town include the DC firm Hogan & Hartson, with 75 or 80 attorneys in the Denver office, and Faegre & Benson, with more than 100 lawyers. Only two or three firms in town have more than 200 lawyers, says Will.

Living here.

Denver has two very strange things going on. Okay, probably more than two, but there are two things that almost everyone we spoke with noted about this town in one way or the other.

One of these strange things is Denver's weather and the other is its people. Strange, that is, if you are used to things being a certain way--the way that things are in many large U.S. cities--like people you don't know ignoring you or snow falling and sticking to the roads.

The weather is easier to explain, so we'll start with that.

The snow on the Rocky Mountains near the city does not melt until the Fourth of July. You could ski in June. There is a lot of snow up there. Denver, too, gets a lot of snow. But, since there are few bodies of water anywhere close to the city, the snow is very dry. (Chicago has "lake-effect" snow, so possibly we should just start calling this "no-lake-effect" snow.)

Also, storms do not just park over Denver for days at a time. Many of the people we talked with described this phenomenon. Having this kind of fast-moving dry snow means that there can be an overnight storm that dumps two feet of snow on the city, and by mid-morning the next day, it will be 60 degrees and sunny. The dry snow on the roads will be completely melted, but there will still be a foot of snow on the grass.

So those of you who are accustomed to Boston-, Chicago-, Minneapolis-, or similar-style

snow storms, or DC- and Atlanta-style ice storms, might think that Denver's weather is strange. Fantastic, but strange.

Denver is neither in the mountains (it is next to the mountains), nor is it in the desert. The climate is dry, as we mentioned, and it does not snow all the time. Everyone we spoke with also pointed out that it's not as cold in Denver as rumored. There are four seasons, with summers getting hot (with temperatures in the 90s, which is nothing to those of you in the Southwest).

And then there are the strange people.

Some of the attorneys we spoke with talked about the general attitude in Denver as being "open, Western," but were unable to elaborate much, saying that there is just a general lack of tension that you might find in other cities.

The "open, Western" feeling in Denver goes beyond that, actually, and we found the perfect story to explain it.

It all started at the DMV.

Melanie Komarowsky, a native of Colorado, and her husband, a Connecticut native, were at the Department of Motor Vehicles taking care of some car business one day. They got to the front of the line at the cashier's window and realized that they needed to pay in cash, since the DMV did not accept checks or credit cards. Komarowsky put her card away and started to rifle through her purse to find the cash, and then it happened.

The man standing behind Komarowsky in line inched up so she could see him. He was taking out his wallet and opening it up simultaneously as he asked Komarowsky and her husband, "How much do you need?"

The offer was not a sarcastic attempt to get the line moving or some sort of scam; nor did the man ask that she write him a check for the amount, says Komarowsky. It was a genuine



offer, and it stuck in her mind as the perfect way to describe “open, Western” to those who had not been to Denver.

Turns out, Komarowsky had the cash after all, paid the fees, and she and her husband went on their way. Still, her East Coast-raised husband was so flabbergasted by the episode that he still tells the story.

If you are coming from another part of the country, Komarowsky says, “it’s a very big switch getting used to the people here.” For many, that might be a welcome switch to make.

Money, in short.

Denver salaries are lower than in New York or San Francisco, and housing prices are rising. The overall cost of living is lower than in those larger cities, however. If you have a position at one of the large national firms with offices in Denver, your pay will be commensurate with colleagues in DC and Los Angeles, but so will your hours. Local firms and smaller offices both expect hard work, of course, but there is less sweat and more family time, which many attorneys here see as a fair and desirable exchange.

He just hired his seventh associate...

...so we think Richard Harris is well qualified to give you a window into what employers in Denver are looking for in a new attorney. What was he looking for?

“I’m fairly traditional,” says Harris. Specifically, in his search for his new associates, he wanted:

Strong academics. Harris looked at law school grades and writing samples.

Clinical experience. Harris says he heard some candidates say that they always wanted to do family law, but they had no experience. He looks for “demonstrated experience,” such as a law school clinic or internship.

Harris also looks for people with “lots of energy and good written and oral communication.” Family law is very much about litigation; lawyers in this specialty are in court as much as criminal lawyers, says Harris. To do this specialty, you need to be able to communicate effectively.

Locals are not required. Harris recruits nationally, although he also hires from the two local law schools in Denver.

More Denver advice.

1. For those still in law school thinking of a career in Denver, Tim Henderson recommends that you get as much hands-on experience in your preferred specialty as you can. Do clinics and internships. Plus, you need to not look at both the visible and invisible job markets. Look at advertised positions (like the hundreds of jobs in Denver on LawCrossing right now), but also work on making connections in the area that could lead to jobs that might not even be open yet. Connect with alumni from your law school, get involved with the bar and other professional organizations, tell people what your interests and goals are. “Network and get out there,” recommends Henderson.

2. Kemper Will agrees, saying the basic rule in Denver is people won’t hire you unless they know of you. Anyone who wants to develop a practice in town needs to be active on bar association committees, write articles, give speeches, and be active in the community in general, he says. Local law grads have an advantage, since they can intern and clerk locally; a lot of hires are made that way.

3. If you are considering a mid-career move to the mountains, Henderson says, remember that you need a legitimate reason for wanting to come to Denver. No firm is going to hire you so that you can get more sun. Firms in Denver will ask why you want to be here, because some have been burned in the past by job-seekers who want to come to get their feet wet and live lives of leisure and skiing for

a few years and then move on, he says. While you don’t have to be born and raised in Denver to get a job here, you need a reason to job hunt here above and beyond enjoying outdoor lifestyles, warns Henderson.

4. That open, Western attitude in Denver means that if you are looking for a job here and come from a big-name law school, make sure to “check your attitude,” recommends Melanie Komarowsky. You do not have to be a native to get a job here, agrees Komarowsky, but you should demonstrate that you will fit into the community.

5. Once you’re here, “don’t step on any toes,” says Jim Johnson. Even though there are a lot of lawyers, it doesn’t always feel that way. You will see people again and again in your practice, so make sure you keep a good reputation. Some of the smaller, older firms in the towns on the “West Slope” (Aspen, Vail, Grand Junction) still do business on a handshake, says Johnson.