

# Recent law school grads not immune from tough job market

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**Jim Poulin/The Business Journal**

- Christine Forakis, left, of Forakis Law Firm PLC, hired Phoenix School of Law student Judy Zimet for an externship arranged by the school. Zimet, who will graduate in December, says she is aware of how tough the job market is for graduating attorneys and is trying to take advantage of the job-placement programs her school offers. **Suzanne Trujillo** has an undergraduate degree in international studies from the University of Oregon and a law degree from the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at [Arizona State University](#).

Still, to make ends meet, she has three part-time jobs — one of which involves picking up dog poop as part of her duties managing the apartment complex where she lives in Portland. She hopes the full-time job she landed last month working in the housing administration department at a Portland nonprofit organization will help get her off food stamps.

“There are days when I think: Why did I go to law school?” said Trujillo, 26, who moved back to her home state after graduating law school last May. “I have all this debt, and I’m not even practicing law.”

She passed the Oregon bar exam last fall and is clerking part time at two Portland law firms while writing disability housing policy for the nonprofit where she works. She dreams of practicing law in the nonprofit development or Indian affairs sectors, but she knows it may be awhile before she’s a full-fledged attorney.

## **Familiar story**

Trujillo’s story may sound sadly familiar to anyone who’s graduated law school in the past three years. Instead of having their pick of plentiful, lucrative jobs and immediately attacking their student-loan debt, new grads are quickly learning the legal sector is not immune from pink slips, hiring freezes and program cutbacks.

The recession has taken a bite out of the legal job market, just as it’s eaten into most other industries.

“I think a lot of people going to law school think: In three years I’ll have a degree, a good education and a whole host of jobs to choose from because of my education,” said Trujillo, who racked up about \$50,000 in debt going to law school.

According to a 2009 survey by **Nellie Mae** (a [Sallie Mae](#) student loan company), law grads leave school \$48,500 in debt, on average. For some, the figure can stretch into the hundreds of thousands.

“They think: I won’t need to worry about all this debt, because I’ll have a great job right away. But that’s not really the way it works,” Trujillo said.

Nationwide, the unemployment rate for new law school grads was 11.7 percent for the class of 2009 — a 3.6 percent climb from two years prior, when the economy was still strong, according to the National Association for Law Placement.

Nearly a quarter of the ’09 grads with jobs had only temporary employment, and more than 20 percent who reported having jobs said they were looking for other opportunities.

In general, 2009 grads were more likely than previous classes to be working part time, working in a temporary job, working in a job that does not require a law degree, working as a solo practitioner or working but still looking for another job, the report said.

### **Brighter picture**

Locally, law school officials and law firm executives agree it’s tough out there. But they downplay the effect the economy has had on the local market, saying Phoenix — with its large population of small and midsize law firms — is faring better than major markets such as Los Angeles, New York and Washington.

“Most of the national stories about challenges in the legal job market focus on the 100 largest law firms in the country,” which hired aggressively during boom years and cut back severely when the economy crashed, said **Paul Schiff Berman**, dean of ASU’s College of Law. “The reality is, there are still legal jobs out there.”

Berman said in a survey of ASU’s class of 2009, 99 percent reportedly were employed nine months after graduation. Of that 99 percent,

90 percent were working in jobs that required or anticipated passage of the bar exam, and

8 percent were in jobs for which having a law degree was preferred. The remaining 1 percent were working in unrelated fields.

Phoenix School of Law reports similar employment success for its 2009 graduating class. Ninety-seven percent of those 59 grads reportedly had secured jobs within nine months of leaving school. Nearly half were working at law firms.

**Tim Berg**, managing partner at [Fennemore Craig PC](#) in Phoenix, said hiring is picking up at his law firm as the economy improves. The firm hired 12 lawyers in 2009 and 16 last year. He expects to hire at least that many this year.

The numbers are still off from 2008, when 23 new attorneys joined the firm, but at least things are moving in the right direction, Berg said.

Phoenix law firm [Lewis and Roca](#) LLP also is slowly rebuilding its summer associate program after slashing class sizes by half during the Great Recession. This summer, the firm has slots for eight summer associates — two more than it had last year, but still fewer than the 12 available a few years ago, said **Chris Jorgensen**, who heads the firm's hiring.

“The last couple summers, a lot of firms cut their summer programs altogether,” he said. “If they did hire, they deferred it one or two years. This year, only one or two firms that I know of are without summer programs.”

Associates who perform well during the summer receive job offers in the fall and are invited to start working at the firm full time after graduating and passing the bar exam.

As a side note, said Berg, the shrinking job market in other parts of the country has kept more top talent from leaving Arizona.

“We're seeing and hiring really great people,” he said. “We always have, but we're seeing a lot more of them.”

**Judy Zimet**, who will graduate from Phoenix School of Law in December, said she was well aware as she entered law school that the faltering economy might affect her job prospects. That's why she took full advantage of every job-placement assistance program — including networking events, seminars and externships — her school offers. She also is a member of the Phoenix Law Review, the school's journal.

Zimet works one day a week at Forakis Law Firm PLC, an estate planning firm in downtown Phoenix, through an externship arranged by the school. She said she has been asked to stay on after she graduates next December. She'll take the bar exam in February 2012.

“It's not all doom and gloom out there,” she said. “You need to look forward and think about the career you want before you start law school. If you do that, you'll be fine, really.”