

Big Sky, Big Stress

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When the sun rises at the end of that all-nighter, what big-city lawyer hasn't fantasized about the simple life of a shingle and a Gone Fishin' sign?

For some, that idyllic place has a name: Montana. Lawyers seek out its borderless blue sky and gurgling freshwater streams for a healthier take on life.

Or so you'd think.

But when three lawyers in Great Falls, the state's second-largest city, committed suicide within seven months, members of the Cascade County Bar Association realized that their lawyers were not immune to stress, not even in Big Sky Country.

The three suicides rattled the close-knit community of 260 lawyers. The same suicide rate would translate to a lawyer death toll of 864 in New York City. And with an average firm of eight lawyers and a client base heavy on family-owned businesses and agricultural interests, Great Falls is not used to New York analogies, even in the abstract.

"Compared to an urban practice, it is certainly more measured," says bar association president W. Bjarne Johnson of Church, Harris, Johnson & Williams. "I think most of us are here by choice We have worked elsewhere and said, 'No thanks, I prefer the independence I have here.' "

By all accounts, the suicide victims fit that description. Each certainly could have opted for the corner office on the fiftieth floor. All had thriving practices with elite clients like banks, businesses, insurance companies -- including the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway at one time. One was even a former Great Falls mayor.

"None of these guys were 'lawyers at risk' -- there [were] no alcohol, drugs, or family problems. They were straight-up good lawyers at good firms," says Johnson, who can only speculate on what drove the men to take their own lives. Adds Johnson: "If there were any warning signs, all of us missed them."

In June, within one month of the third suicide, Johnson invited local clinical psychologist William Taylor to speak at the monthly meeting. What's followed has been an association-wide dialogue on the hazards of stress and depression.

Taylor is a nationally known specialist in traumatic stress and stress reaction; recently he conducted training sessions to prepare Red Cross volunteers to help Texas flood victims. "Stress is undercover out here -- it's not as out in the open as it would be in, say, St. Louis or Baltimore," Taylor says. "That's why people are shocked. This stuff just doesn't happen to us."

A handful of lawyers formed a committee to start a program that reaches out to at-risk colleagues. Despite the myth of greener grass, committee member Mick Taleff warns that stress

rarely discriminates between firm sizes or cities. "We still have the same billing problems, client development problems, and fee generation issues," he says. "You think you can do so much [for yourself] because you do so much for other people."

The committee is currently reviewing lawyer assistance programs across the country. To identify those in need, Taleff says the bar association program may ask courts, family, and office staff to report any behavior that could mask emotional trouble or signal a cry for help.

But those crusading to raise the collective consciousness may face resistance, says Bill Bronson of Smith, Walsh, Clarke & Gregoire, who practiced with one of the three men. "There's been a lot more discussion: Are we putting too much pressure on ourselves? Is the business becoming too dog-eat-dog? But depending on who you talk to, everyone thinks it's the other guy's problem."

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