

## CHARLOTTE BUSINESS JOURNAL

# Charlotte earns its J.D.

Inaugural class of law school starts Monday

**Charlotte Business Journal - August 25, 2006**

by [Julie Bird](#)

Paralegal Joy Chappell of Gastonia has wanted to go to law school for years, but with a husband and stepchild she was literally wedded to Charlotte -- the largest metropolitan area in the country without a law school.

That all changes Monday, when Chappell and 75 to 100 other students form the inaugural class of the [Charlotte School of Law](#). The school will operate for two years at a temporary campus at 1112 E. Morehead St., while a permanent facility is designed and built.

"It's going to be a high-quality and intense learning experience," says the school's dean, Eugene Clark.

As hard as the legal community worked to bring a law school to Charlotte, though, several lawyers say the jury is still out on the private, for-profit Charlotte School of Law. Questions will remain until the first full-time students graduate in three years, pass the bar exam and start practicing locally, they say.

Clark describes the school's focus as "student-centered," with success measured by how students are doing "rather than an emphasis on the output of faculty." CharlotteLaw, as the school is informally known, intends to produce practice-ready graduates with a commitment to community, he says.

Joy Chappell is ready. She has been a paralegal for 10 years, the last four at Hedrick Eatman Gardner & Kincheloe. She took the LSAT after graduating from Gardner-Webb University in 2001, but instead of going to law school, she earned an MBA through online study from Regis University in Colorado. She considered going to law school at N.C. Central University, but the move to Durham stood in the way.

So she jumped at the chance to apply to CharlotteLaw. She plans to attend night classes and hopes to graduate in about four years.

"The experience has been very positive," she says. "They're very energetic and excited in the school."

Clark says the school's parent company, InfiLaw Corp., was drawn to Charlotte for a variety of reasons: the size of the metro area and lack of competition; the relatively low number of lawyers (North Carolina ranks 48th in the nation for lawyers per capita; South Carolina 49th); and the region's growth prospects.

InfiLaw's original campus, Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville, opened 10 years ago. Its Phoenix School of Law opened about a year and a half ago. Florida Coastal has been accredited by the American Bar Association, but the Phoenix and Charlotte schools have not yet won that designation.

That didn't stop more than 1,000 would-be lawyers from applying for the 2006-07 academic year. The accreditation process will begin next year in Charlotte, and the school expects to have provisional accreditation by the time the first class graduates.

Clark says applicants should have a 3.2 grade point average and competitive LSAT scores, although allowances are made for those with particular promise. The average age of day students is 26, he says, while evening students are five years older.

"In Charlotte there will be a little bit of pent-up demand" of people bound to the area by jobs or family, Clark says. He says it's too early to set goals for long-term growth, but predicts applications and admissions will drop slightly in the second year and then stabilize.

Victoria Taylor Carter, assistant dean of admissions, says applicants have "run the gamut from traditional applicants right out of college to folks in their 70s."

She says about 70% of students will attend full-time. Many applicants are working in or close to the legal profession, she says -- paralegals such as Chappell, law enforcement officers, firefighters and others for whom law school is a "natural next step."

Full-time tuition is \$25,720 a year, on par with Campbell University and Wake Forest University, but about double the in-state tuition at UNC Chapel Hill and 10 times that at N.C. Central. Duke University's law school is the most expensive at \$37,985 per year.

"I think the Charlotte School of Law will be a worthwhile addition to the Charlotte legal community," says Robert Johnston, senior resident Mecklenburg County Superior Court judge. But, he adds, "I think anytime there's a new law school the initial graduates have some difficulty getting jobs because they're an unknown quantity."

John Lassiter, president of Carolina Legal Staffing in Charlotte, agrees. Charlotte's big banks and law firms compete for top graduates of leading law schools. "It will be hard for a brand-new law school that has no reputation to put its graduates in competition for those jobs," Lassiter says.

While U.S. News & World Report ranks law schools at Duke, Wake Forest and UNC Chapel Hill in the top tier, Florida Coastal is ranked in the fourth and bottom tier -- as are Campbell and N.C. Central.

On the other hand, Charlotte's burgeoning corporate environment provides plenty of other opportunities for lawyers, such as in real estate closings, criminal defense and public-sector work, Lassiter says.

"Maybe being located in Charlotte would offer some of (its students) something of an in," says Adam Foodman, managing partner at Foodman Hunter & Karres.

Mel Garofalo, managing partner at Hedrick Eatman Gardner and Kincheloe, says the students can counteract any reservations about the school by working part-time at local firms while attending classes.

Small and mid-sized firms "are not as programmed in their hiring" as some large firms that traditionally hire from top schools, he says, and will likely be open to hiring the school's graduates.

Clark says CharlotteLaw is eager to establish ties with area firms and help students get part-time "externships" with them. Law firms also will benefit from hosting students year-round instead of only in the summer, he says.

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