

Incubators are taking off

Young lawyers get a major assist in starting their own shops, but they still have to grind after they leave the nest **BY MIKE STETZ**

Craig Relles has his own law office, which is aptly named the Law Office of Craig Relles. He has a website, phone, business cards, clients ...

He doubts all of that would have materialized as quickly as it did if not for the Pace Law School incubator. A 2012 graduate of the White Plains, N.Y. law school, Relles was among the first to take part in the Pace Community Law Practice, which gives recent law graduates hands-on training to become independent attorneys.

He worked for a year as a fellow at the incubator — providing legal services to the under-served with help from a practicing attorney. Then he spent another nine months building his own law practice and using the incubator's space as his office.

And then he left ... as a practicing attorney.

"It worked out perfectly," Relles said. "It's beneficial for the lawyer, and it's beneficial for the community."

Given such a success story, it's little wonder the number of incubators are growing quickly. The American Bar Association lists more than 30 such programs now operating throughout the nation. More are in the works. A few years ago, there were but a handful.

They're expanding because the legal market has tanked, and young lawyers see going solo as an option. Incubators offer the key training grads need to do so — ramping up young attorneys' lawyering and business skills. The incubators target the under-served — the poor and working poor — who can't afford traditional legal services.

Despite the growing numbers of incubators, it's hard to say just how successful they have been in launching thriving solo careers. Attorneys who have used them say the experience was incredibly helpful, but it still takes time and effort to get a practice established.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL FALCO

Wings for solos:

Craig Relles, a Pace Law School graduate, got his start as a solo practitioner through the school's incubator program.

They also caution: It's not for everybody.

Still, the advantages are many, they say. Relles, for one, noted the personal attention he and the other lawyers got from a seasoned attorney. The incubator also allowed him to cultivate a client base, so when he went out on his own, he had business.

"People learn to know who you are," said Relles, who specializes in immigration law.

It's hard to quantify if Relles' story is the norm because incubators are so new.

Indeed, one can trace their history back to 2007 when City University of New York Law School created the Incubator for Justice program.

The concept's roots are from 1998, when CUNY School of Law began a program to train and support lawyers who wanted to start their own practices to help the under-served. The difference is that the program was not under one roof. The Community Legal Resource Network sought to teach lawyers the skills needed

to run their own shops quickly and efficiently.

Fred Rooney headed the program. He was a natural fit since he had started his own private practice in Bethlehem, Pa., helping the disadvantaged and knew the ins and outs of starting a practice from scratch. The biggest thing he learned: It wasn't easy.

"When I went out on my own I didn't know what to do," he said.

It took time and effort, but he built a client base. The clients were poor, but willing to pay whatever they could, he said.

"They would come up with something."

The people came to trust him, and he got both repeat business and referrals. Over time, he was able to add four attorneys.

"Many lawyers were like me. They wanted to do social good but didn't know how to run a business," Rooney said.

When the incubator was established at CUNY School of Law, it began attracting young lawyers immediately, said Rooney,

who has since left the law school and is now the director of the International Justice Center for Post-Graduate Development at Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center. At the time, the economy was still good, but lawyers were drawn to the mission of helping those in need, he said.

When the economy went south, law schools began looking at the CUNY School of Law model as a way to help young lawyers get skills as well as bridge the justice gap in their communities. Bar associations have also started incubators.

“The concept is booming,” said Rooney, who’s helped many schools adopt the model. “2015 will be a banner year.”

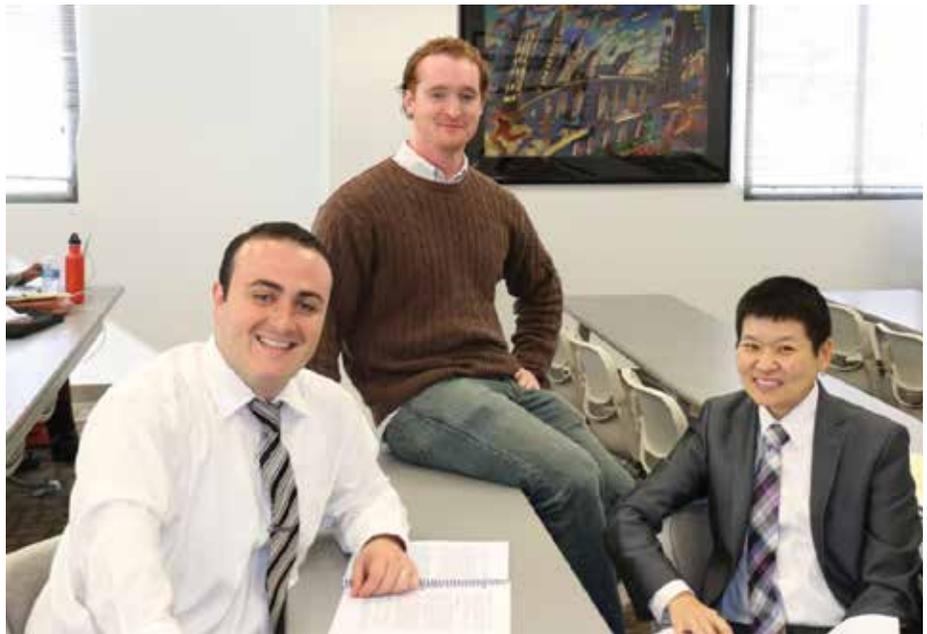
Loyola Law School, Los Angeles launched its incubator in January inside the offices of the law school’s Public Interest Law Center. Participants in the 18-month program will focus on a variety of practice areas to benefit under-served populations in LA’s low- to middle-income communities.

Most who have been through incubator programs praise them.

“It helped tremendously,” said Yogi Patel, who completed his 18-month incubator stint at CUNY in September 2012 and has since started his own practice in New York.

However, it was not easy. During the program, some months he made as little as \$200. Even after one finishes the program, it takes considerable effort to continue the momentum, he said.

“You always question yourself if this was



Loyola Law School in Los Angeles launched a solo-practice incubator program for recent graduates in January. Gurgen Mkrtychyan, Conlan Danieu and Eileen Ma are some of the graduates who are taking on low- and moderate-means clients.

the right move,” he said. “You have to roll up your sleeves and get to work.”

Bob Seibel, who runs the Access to Law Initiative incubator at California Western School of Law in San Diego, has tracked the attorneys who have been through the program, which has been running for almost three years.

Of the 21 who have completed the incubator, 13 have left to start their own practices or to be part of a small law firm; four got jobs with nonprofits or academia;

two joined other law firms; and one went into a family business. The last one moved out of state.

As to the strength of the private practices? That’s unknown. It depends on a number of variables, such as the financial goals of the lawyer and family obligations, Seibel said.

Some lawyers have stayed longer than the 18-month stint because they wanted to generate more cash flow, he said. Others left earlier for the opposite reason, he added.

“I actually feel pretty strongly that the most important issue is career satisfaction, not just money, and that has been our focus — to have lawyers with good balance and high enjoyment of life, personally and professionally,” Seibel said.

Robin Sassi, who completed the program, described her private practice as: “Growing!”

“And so am I!” she wrote in an email. “Being in an incubator has given me the opportunity to explore what type of law I want to practice without being stuck in a firm that only does one thing. Although it can be difficult being a solo, the rewards are there, especially in the form of flexibility in my schedule.”

Tammy Sumontha is just about to complete the program and move into her own office. She’s nervous and excited.

“My goal has been to do this,” she said. “I want to be my own boss.”

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