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Benefits at Small Law Firm are Big for Workers

By Denise Perreault, PBN Staff Writer



When Matthew C. Reeber hears from the friends he went to law school with at Tulane University Law School in New Orleans, “I feel very fortunate,” he said, to be working at the Providence law firm

of Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West LLC (PLDW).

Compared to the horror stories he hears from former classmates working at larger firms in other parts of the country, his experience at PLDW has been positive due mostly, he said, to the firm’s partners and the respectful way they treat their employees.

A Newport native, Reeber is in his second year at PLDW, where he works on the criminal law team under the supervision of partner William P. Devereaux.

Devereaux, he said, “is very patient,” as are all the partners. “There’s no yelling, there’s no belittling here,” Reeber said. “The partners have an immense amount of patience with young attorneys. They are very respectful, and they create the environment that makes this a great place to work.”

Reeber is not the only employee who feels fortunate to work at PLDW. The law firm, located in the American Locomotive Works development off Valley Street, took first place among small companies (15-49 employees)

in the Providence Business News’ Best Places To Work competition this year, based in large part on employees’ responses to detailed surveys about their workplace.

The firm was started three years ago with just four attorneys, according to Gary R. Pannone, managing partner, and today has 25 attorneys in offices in Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts, with a total of 40 employees company-wide. “Generally speaking, the partners here are very generous with what we provide to our staff,” Pannone said. “We do the best we can to treat them the best we can.”

Farah Escamilla, an administrative assistant at PLDW who was born in Nicaragua, came to Rhode Island about three years ago with a friend and ambitious plans to work on musical projects together because, she said, “music is my passion.”

The plans fell through and she needed to find work. She applied at PLDW, where she said she had the “most comfortable” interview she’s ever had. She prayed every night that she’d get the job and her prayers were answered eight months ago. “I must say, it’s been an awesome experience,” she said of her time there. “We all have respect for each other. We’re all a team.”

Escamilla said she clearly can see opportunities for advancement in the legal profession thanks to PLDW – “they inspired me,” she said – and recently she went back to school at the Community College of Rhode

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Island, where she is taking evening classes to become a paralegal. At PLDW, she is eligible to receive tuition reimbursement, just one of the perks Pannone and his partners take pride in.

“When we started this firm, we made a commitment to provide the most favorable benefits package we could,” Pannone said. “We survey all the law firms in Rhode Island to make certain we are competitive and we’re finding in most cases that we are more than competitive. You’re always in competition for the best employees you can find.”

Among the benefits that PLDW offers employees are bonus and incentive payments, health insurance coverage with minimal copayments (5 percent of the cost for staff, 15 percent for attorneys), employee evaluations on a regular basis, an in-house gym, a 401k retirement plan (without matching funds), as well as coffee, tea, juice, milk, soft drinks and breakfast items like muffins and doughnuts for free all the time.

At PLDW, domestic partners are considered equal to a spouse “for every benefit possible,” said David C. Sweet, director of administration. Attorneys and administrative staff are allowed to work from home when necessary, but not on a regular basis. At the supervisor’s discretion, employees are eligible to be paid for time spent on community projects outside of the office. The firm currently is working to create two more enhancements for employees: a mentor program teaming young associates with seasoned lawyers, and a wellness program to encourage healthy habits such as use of the in-house gym.

Of course, when it comes to employee satisfaction, salaries are the foundation. “It all starts with the way you compensate people,” said Pannone, “from the partner level on down.” He said partners at PLDW are all paid “at the same level,” so one is no more important than another, and partners are compensated “significantly in the top tier, comparable to any partner in any top-level firm.”

Sweet pointed out that, while PLDW may not be able to match all the salaries paid by larger firms, benefits generally are better, a factor that can matter a great deal to young attorneys. In addition, Sweet said, an attorney just one or two years out of law school can gain valuable litigation experience not possible at larger firms, where associates often must wait several years for challenging courtroom assignments.

Perhaps because word is spreading about PLDW’s enviable workplace, the three-year-old firm is growing, contrary to the trend at other law firms where attorneys for the first time in recent memory are being laid off.

In February, Pannone said, “we added a partner with a municipal law practice (Teno A. West) and with him came a group that supported his practice, so in one fell swoop we added five new lawyers.” Plans are in the works to expand the office space at ALCO to accommodate even more personnel, he added, and the firm is in the process of opening an office in Florida. A key factor in the firm’s growth, Pannone believes, is the quality of the staff. “It’s who you bring into the tent that matters, and then you empower them,” he said.