

On the Road Again

Alumnus travels California coast to help underserved populations.

By Angela Lutz

At first glance, Stephen Stern's vintage Airstream trailer does not look like a law office. The shiny silver vehicle is classically cool, an eye-catching icon of the American west. Stern has remodeled the interior with lots of natural light and calming colors similar to a yoga studio, and there are no heavy wooden desks, dense books, or diplomas on the walls. Several times a week, **Stern, '98**, drives his breezy, approachable Mobile Law Center along the central California coast, delivering affordable legal advice to underserved communities.

An attorney with two decades of experience under his belt, Stern realized his true calling involved helping individuals who are too intimidated or overwhelmed to pursue legal counsel. His Mobile Law Center, which became the first of its kind in the nation (and perhaps the world) when it started operating in April 2017, has been an effective outreach mechanism to assist clients primarily with debt, bankruptcy, consumer protection, wills, and trusts. He continues to provide his long-time business clients with transactional and intellectual property support. It's his business clients who help subsidize the cost to others.

"After practicing law for about 18 years in Arizona and California, I came to the conclusion that there was a vast number of people who were either underserved or not being

served in the legal system because they were either intimidated by lawyers or the legal system, the cost, and the legal process," Stern said. "As a result, a lot of them got paralysis by analysis and did nothing and found themselves in even deeper problems."

Many of Stern's clients find out about his services via social media, where he announces his arrival a couple of days in advance. He makes regular stops in communities from Ventura to Cambria, which are about 125 miles apart – and when he's not on the road, he's teaching business and media law courses at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. He typically sees five clients per day, charging \$45 for a 20-minute consult. He's often able to provide some much-needed peace of mind to individuals who are being harassed by debt collectors, for instance, or attempting to draft a will.

"In 20 minutes, I can explain to them the legal background of the situation and their options to resolve their issues," Stern said. "If they want me to do it, I give them a flat fee so they're not guessing how many hours I'm working, because that's something of great concern to people who are on limited budgets."

Then there's that Airstream, which Stern spent eight months and considerable effort renovating to make it as welcoming as possible. In Stern's experience, he's come to realize many people find traditional law offices overly formal and a bit intimidating, so he has actively tried to fight these stereotypes with his mobile office.

"I'm trying to be more accessible and provide outreach, and I think people appreciate that I'm doing things much differently than nearly everybody in my profession," he said. "I'm able to provide legal services in a personal way that breaks through a lot of barriers and stereotypes that people have."

Stern credits his time at the Washburn University School of Law with helping him hone his inherently philanthropic nature. He enjoyed his time at the school, particularly the helpful nature of the students, faculty, and staff, and he believes this camaraderie helped him determine the course of his career.



Photo by Shannon McMillen



Stephen Stern, '98, sits in his mobile office, an inviting space for those who may feel intimidated by legal offices. Photo by Shannon McMillen

“The people I went to school with were very altruistic and genuine – they were salt-of-the-earth people,” he said. “Everybody was there to support everybody. It was a great environment, and I wanted to create that atmosphere when people came to see me.”

Most people have been supportive of Stern’s Mobile Law Center – one man took a picture, telling Stern he hoped his son, a law student, would pursue this type of practice following graduation. But others in the profession have been more resistant to change.

“In some people’s minds, it’s still a little unprofessional to meet a client in a coffee shop, let alone a mobile law office,” he said. “As people realize I’m thinking out of the box and I have a good reputation and provide good legal work for the clients, they think maybe they need to look at things a bit differently.”

In Stern’s eyes, a new approach to practicing law is essential, especially in an age of continuing technological advancements that allow everything from business meetings to medical care

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to happen remotely via videoconference. He believes his mobile model is the way of the future – and judging by the increasing number of requests Stern has gotten for consultations from lawyers interested in taking their own practices on the road, he just might be on to something.

“That’s rewarding because it tells me that this was a good idea,” he said. “It validates my belief of filling a big void in the legal system and makes me feel good to know I’m making a difference.”