



JDinteractive:

Heading to law school was the next step for Kathryn Morris ... just not in Oregon.



Law Student Kathryn Morris

The nation's first American Bar Association-accredited online law degree could shorten the distance from the Beaver State to Dineen Hall.

Syracuse University College of Law founded the nation's first fully interactive online JD program earlier this year and welcomed 32 future alumni through its doors. Morris was among them.

She and her husband Corey live in the Willamette Valley wine country, about an hour south of Portland; approximately 2,830.8 miles from the Carrier Dome.

None of Oregon's three law schools appealed to Morris who, after 10 years as a bank compliance officer, finally took the law school plunge.

"I started Googling 'online law school' and quickly discovered that there was a new program that would fit my needs," she said. "This program is quite literally the only way that a legal education is approachable given my professional and family life."

Morris, 32, will continue working full time plus teach at a compliance school, as she manages an average of nine

credits a semester during the year-round, 10-semester course of study she aims to complete in three years and three months.

The JDi program requires students attend two annual on-campus residencies. Otherwise courses for the far-flung class of 2022 happen in real-time thanks to the Internet. From the comfort of their own home - whether that's in Oregon (or 19 other states), Germany, Tanzania, or Japan - students take part in live class discussions.

Living a distance from campus doesn't mean SU is far away for its online students.

SUCOL built the program schedule to ensure ample opportunity for students and staff to connect. Students feel little, if any, disadvantage not being on campus, Morris said. SUCOL even implemented a shipping system from the law school's library assuring any resource needed is delivered.

"The professors have been so open and welcoming, and I truly feel supported in this journey so far," Morris said.

While it's a first-of-its-kind program in-the-moment classroom occasions happen in a throwback fashion.

“We use the ZOOM platform, which puts us on camera in Brady Bunch style,” Morris said of the online forum that allows professors and students to hear and see every answered question, arched eyebrow, and raised hand.

“It’s great because the professor can see the looks on our faces,” she said. “Having been on campus and being able to make connections with students and professors when you get on the webcam you know everyone.”

Morris praises SUCOL’s choice to host an on-campus residency followed by the onset of digitally delivered courses. Such innovation will keep the program sustainable as it evolves, she said. The in-person meeting coupled with immediate coursework “was really smart on the part of the college of law.”

During the January visit, any reservations Morris may have had about being a non-traditional student were assuaged. The diverse backgrounds of her classmates impressed and inspired her.

“The average age is 35,” she said. “I started to realize the amount of life experience contained within the 32 people is going to greatly enhance the education we’re about to receive.”

The JDInteractive Class of 2022 consists of:

- Fifteen military and military-affiliated students;
- The program welcomes those with established careers in medicine, real estate, private business, border patrol, environmental engineering, and non-profit leadership;
- In addition to military service members, the class includes caregivers, community advocates, mentors, a choir director, and a volunteer football coach; and
- Forty-one percent are first-generation college students.

Only a month or so into her law school education, Morris already has a study buddy and takes part in student



groupchats. The ease and convenience of the WhatsApp app means brainstorms brew at a time that works for all concerned.

Associate Dean for Online Education Nina A. Kohn is also the David M. Levy Professor of law and is Morris’ Torts professor.

“The program is off to a strong start,” Kohn wrote in an email. “It is remarkable how little difference there is between teaching here in Dineen Hall and teaching in my virtual classroom online. In both, I use the Socratic Method to engage my students in legal analysis in real time. In both classrooms, I can see all my students at the same time, and they can see me and all their classmates as well. The dynamics of the two classrooms, and the conversations we have in them, are remarkably similar.”

In the time between now and her SUCOL graduation, Morris will figure out where and how she’ll apply her new legal knowledge. She’s happy in the world of banking and finance, but is leaving open other possibilities.

“Having worked with my banks to protect consumers, I have a unique perspective on how banks can be regulated to maintain

strong consumer protections while continuing to do robust and profitable business,” she said. “However, I have always been interested in politics and policy and could see myself changing career trajectories as well.”

Until she figures it out she remains enterprising.

She and a few of her classmates are considering forming a student organization with an advocacy mission promoting access for online students to on-campus groups and activities – and beyond!

“We want to take what SUCOL has done by innovating legal education and what that looks like now and see how we can take that innovation into the lawyer community at large, once we graduate, and leverage that technology,” she said.