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# Law Graduate Who Sued Her School Loses at Trial

By ELIZABETH OLSON    MARCH 24, 2016

A jury in San Diego on Thursday rejected claims by a law graduate, Anna Alaburda, that the Thomas Jefferson School of Law enticed her to enroll by using misleading graduate employment figures.

In the first — and perhaps last — such case to reach the courtroom, Ms. Alaburda, 37, argued that the school reported a higher percentage of its graduates landed jobs after graduation than was actually the case, and that she relied on the bogus data to choose to attend the school.

After amassing more than \$150,000 in debt to graduate in 2008, she has been unable to find a full-time, salaried job as a lawyer, she says.

A jury voted nine to three to reject her claims.

Still, unlike more than a dozen other disgruntled lawyers who have tried but failed to bring their former law schools to trial for counting their graduates' post-degree jobs such as waitresses and bartenders as full-time legal employment, Ms. Alaburda survived attempts over the past five years to sink her case.

Thomas Jefferson stood by its employment figures. Its lawyer, Michael Sullivan, argued that earning a law degree was not a guarantee of a well-paying job.

"I'm not here to tell you a law degree is a guarantee of career success, is a guarantee of riches," Mr. Sullivan told the jury. "It's not. No degree is."

At trial in San Diego Superior Court this month, Ms. Alaburda said she chose Thomas Jefferson after consulting popular law school guides, including the 2004 edition of best graduate schools by U.S. News & World Report. The San Diego school's listing said that just over 80 percent of its graduates were employed nine months after they graduated.

"I knew it wasn't as competitive as first- or second-tier law schools, but it still had pretty decent statistics and was A.B.A. accredited," she told the jury.

"So I thought it was a pretty decent school to apply to."

Other law school graduates, citing six-figure debt and misleading employment data, have tried to hold law schools around the country accountable. About 15 such lawsuits were derailed before they reached a jury.

Ms. Alaburda, who invoked California state fraud protections, was the first to get her case before a jury even though a judge earlier rejected her effort to certify her claim as a class-action lawsuit, with potentially high-dollar damage awards. Ms. Alaburda, who has worked in a series of part-time legal support jobs, asked for \$125,000 for lost wages and reimbursement of tuition and fees.

Entry-level legal jobs began shrinking after the 2008 economic slowdown, and law graduates were left saddled with six-figure debt loads and limited job prospects. Since then, the American Bar Association has been taking steps to require law schools to be more open about postgraduate job placement.

While the 200-plus accredited law schools must now publish a more detailed breakdown of their employment data, including whether jobs are full time or part time, critics said the jury's decision lets schools off the hook.

"At the time, law schools systematically deceived students with misleading

statistics, with the blessing of the American Bar Association,” said Kyle McEntee, executive director of Law School Transparency, a nonprofit that campaigns to hold law schools accountable.

The jury was asked to decide whether the school intentionally misrepresented the employment statistics or was simply negligent.

Brian A. Procel, Ms. Alaburda’s lawyer, said the school did not reveal that its employment figures included such work as a pool cleaner, waitress or sales clerk, and that they were based on a small sample of graduates.

Thomas Jefferson employees maintained that they did not understand the importance of the employment data, and that the school was a nonprofit institution offering opportunities to students who might not have other options to attend law school.

Mr. Procel said those assertions were contradicted by correspondence indicating that law school employees knew that the graduate employment figures affected the law school’s national ranking — which, in turn, helped burnish the school’s credibility and draw more students to enroll.

Judges in Illinois, Michigan and New York, where similar cases were filed, have generally concluded that law students opted for legal education at their own peril and were sophisticated enough to have known that employment as a lawyer was not guaranteed.

A lawsuit against Golden Gate University School of Law in San Francisco was settled last year, with five graduates being awarded about \$8,000 each.

Thomas Guernsey, the dean of Thomas Jefferson, said, “Today’s decision by the jury further validates our unwavering commitment to providing our students with the knowledge, skills and tools necessary to excel as law students, pass the bar exam and succeed in their professional careers.”

Mr. Procel said he hoped the case would help ensure that future students “have access to better information when deciding to attend college or graduate school.”

**Ms. Alaburda declined to comment.**

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