An unexpected pregnancy might stop most law school applicants from pursuing their dream of a legal career. Grace Santos simply decided to switch her Stetson application from full-time to part-time. Santos is one of 69 students who came from all walks of life to join Stetson's inaugural part-time class this fall. Most work full-time jobs, all have met the same high admissions standards as full-time students, and all have accepted the challenge of taking law school courses three to four nights a week. But these students also reflect a rich variety of lifestyles, experiences and dreams.

Dozens of professions are represented in the part-time class, including education, medicine, journalism, engineering, business and aviation, to name a few. Minorities represent about one-fourth of the class, and 54 percent are female. The students' ages range from 22 to 49, with a median age of 33.

However, from the diversity of the part-time class comes a unique sense of camaraderie as students perform the delicate task of balancing work, family and school. “I enjoy my fellow students, because though I have a crazy schedule, there are others who do, too,” said Brian Cummings, 35. A marketing administrator and single father, Cummings’ interest in the law first developed during his years as a legal news reporter in Chicago.

Santos, who gave birth to daughter Ciara only two weeks before Stetson’s orientation, also has benefited from her classmates’ life experiences. “I didn’t realize how much older the other students would be, and when they found out about my new baby, they were eager to not only give advice for class, but also parenting advice,” said Santos, who works for Tampa Housing Authority. Santos, 23, hopes to become an international lawyer to protect human rights in southeast Asia.

Many students chose to enter the part-time program to develop their career without taking time away from it. “Somebody has to pay the bills,” said John Evans, an R.N. case manager for Cigna Health Care of Florida. Evans, 37, expects that knowledge gained from his years of nursing and insurance experience will be a strong asset for a legal career.

For Dr. Frederick Soto, 48, the choice to attend law school evolved when he began “fishing around for a different career” by completing master’s degrees in business administration and public health. “During those programs, I had courses in law pertaining to business and health care, which seemed to affect more of my practice with HMOs, insurance companies, laws and regulations,” described Soto. The Sarasota optometrist, whose 18-year-old daughter is beginning college this semester, plans to apply his legal education to the health care field.

For Dr. Nancy BeSoor, a history and government teacher at Riverview High School, the part-time program represents a second chance at a dream she was “frightened away” from 20 years ago. Before pursuing her Ph.D. in education, BeSoor was accepted in 1981 to a large law school in Illinois, but was intimidated by orientation. Years later, an encounter with Stetson alumna Deborah Werner ’83 changed her impression. “I always heard that law was this really mean profession, but her experience at Stetson had not been that cutting, hard-driving atmosphere,” said BeSoor, 45.
She has not been let down by her own Stetson experience: “The professors are really respectful to us.”

Frances Shefter, 32, chose to attend law school after a nine-year career in teaching and educational administration. “My first choice for law school was Stetson,” said Shefter, who is one of a few students who intend to take advantage of an option to shift to the full-time program after completing the first two years of part-time classes.

Regardless of the reasons that led each student to Stetson, all will face a challenging and rewarding road to enter the legal profession.

“These individuals will be working very hard over the next four years to earn a law degree,” said Jan Majewski, assistant dean of part-time studies and continuing legal education. “We are proud that the Stetson part-time program is giving these students the opportunity to pursue this dream.”

The dream of a new Stetson campus and law center in downtown Tampa is one step closer to being realized.

The Tampa City Council recently approved an agreement for Stetson University College of Law to purchase seven acres of land adjacent to Interstate 275 from the City of Tampa for the new campus.

“We are excited about this agreement, which now clears the way for us to proceed on our new Tampa Law Center and Campus,” said Dean Gary Vause. “We are also enthusiastic about our partnerships with the City of Tampa and the business and legal communities.”

Stetson is currently finalizing an agreement with the Florida Second District Court of Appeal to house the court on the new campus. The Hillsborough County Bar Association also will locate its headquarters at the same location.

Construction for a 75,300-square-foot campus building will commence soon after closing on the property. The first floor will house classrooms, a courtroom and a library; the second, proposed chambers for judges and offices for court employees; and the third floor will be reserved for future law school use.

Part-time law classes and continuing legal education programs will be held at the Tampa campus upon its opening, which is expected in Fall 2003. The Stetson faculty also is considering development of a one-year master’s degree in legal studies that would be offered in Tampa.

The architecture will reflect the same distinctive, Spanish-Mediterranean style of the Gulfport campus, including a tower that will overlook Tampa’s major thoroughfares.

The College of Law is expected to play a major role in the revitalization of the historic Tampa Heights neighborhood, and the campus plans have sparked the interest of developers in the surrounding properties.

“It is fitting that Florida’s oldest law school will open a campus in one of Tampa’s oldest neighborhoods, Tampa Heights,” Vause said. The law center will reside on the former site of the Tampa police headquarters.

“I think it’s going to make a tremendous difference,” said Tampa Mayor Dick Greco, describing how the addition of the Stetson campus and a renovated city park will transform the Tampa Heights neighborhood. “Everyone worked very hard to make this happen, and I can’t tell you how much the City is going to appreciate what the ultimate use of this land is going to be.”

The first phase of construction, with an estimated cost of $8.5 million, is expected to take approximately 12 months.