

Hear Us Roar!

By Paula Albright, CP, FCP, FRP

When I was 17 years old I took a job as a receptionist for a law firm in Fort Lauderdale. I was a brand new high school graduate with no real opportunity to go to college and even if I had, I had no idea about what I wanted to be “when I grew up.”

So off I went to my new job. Boy did I think I was the cat’s meow, working in a prestigious law firm and putting a weekly salary of 100 clams in my pocket. I felt like Mary Tyler Moore, and they were playing my song!

To say I loved it would be an understatement. Even though I still had no notion about what I was going to be when I grew up, I did know that whatever it was would involve the law—it just sort of “clicked” in my soul. I was hooked even though I still didn’t know what to do with this newfound love.

When I was 20, I bluffed my way into a position as a legal secretary/paralegal. By this time I had been a receptionist at two separate law firms and thought the new job would be a snap—what was the big deal? You put these little “thingies” in your ear and typed away. No sweat.

Boy! Did I get my come-uppance. The attorney I was hired to work with didn’t dictate. If we needed a petition or a motion, I was expected to draft it myself. No big deal—unless, of course, you were a 20-year-old kid who had bluffed her way into the job and hadn’t a clue about what she was doing.

Fortunately, back in those days we were able to check out court files. So, I checked them out, took them home, and read every word. I took the files to my

office and made copies of everything—and I do mean everything. I spent my lunch hours sitting in the courthouse reading files and making notes. I had form files that didn’t quit.

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Little by little, file-by-file, I was teaching myself and I was learning. I was also falling deeper and deeper in love with the law. The learning and the love affair continue today.

But I cannot take all the credit. I have had the privilege of working with some wonderful lawyers who patiently (and sometimes not so patiently) answered my questions. They understood that “yes” or “no” answers were not enough for me. I had to know why the answers were yes or no. I wholeheartedly believe that this need to know the answer behind the answer is the force behind my successful 20-year career as a paralegal.

Paralegals are a vital part of the legal community, and what we bring to the table every day to each and every client is something that cannot be achieved any other way. We bring a level of intelligence, experience, professionalism, passion and

commitment to the law that equals any other position in the legal field.

As members of this noble profession, we are also charged with bringing along the next generation, supporting them, encouraging them, and teaching them what we know—and what we have learned about what we know, so that they can improve and expand our profession for the next generations.

I believe that everyone is really great at something and has the ability to excel—to be the very best versions of ourselves. The key is to discover what that “something” is. Mine was becoming a paralegal and I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have discovered it early. I often refer to myself as a “legal geek” and I wear my geek status proudly. I love learning about the law and I love being a part of the law every day. I am such a legal geek that I recently was found diving into a large trash bin in my office to retrieve the very first volume of the *Southern Reporter* that my firm was throwing away.

I found it heartbreaking to see those musty old books on their way to a landfill. I wanted every single one of them, but that was impossible. So I decided that having the very first volume would be enough. I wanted the first volume because it is historic, and because my thirst for knowledge wanted to know what the hot-button topics of litigation were in 1887 to see how far we have come.

I guess you could say that being a paralegal is in my genes too. My mother was a medical malpractice paralegal, and I was enthralled by her stories. I just knew that what she did every day had to be the

most fantastic thing ever. Likewise, my identical twin sister, Susan, is also a paralegal. She is equally as in love with the law as I am and is as committed to the paralegal profession.

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There is sometimes an automatic, and unfortunate, assumption in the legal community that being a paralegal is just a steppingstone to becoming a lawyer, or that perhaps we're just frustrated lawyers. The paralegals I know, however, are as committed to their chosen careers as the lawyers that we work with every day. I would be lying if I said that I had never thought of going to law school, but, at the end of the day, in my heart I am a paralegal.

I believe the truth of this profession is that we choose to be paralegals. We are not paralegals because we can't do something else, but because we can't imagine doing anything else. The paralegal community that I am so incredibly fortunate to be a part of consists of the most wonderful, intelligent, supportive and dedicated professionals and friends that I have ever had the honor of knowing.

We hold our heads high and are proud of who we are and what we do. There are those who are formally educated and there are those, like me, who are not. Some of us started young and some are enjoying a second career. Some are married with children and some, like me, are the caretakers of very spoiled cats.

Regardless of where we come from, how we got started, or where we are now, we all have one thing in common: we are paralegals. Hear us roar!



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