

Why I Am Choosing to Become a Paralegal

My great and glorious career never manifested. After obtaining a degree in English, I spent years working in unfulfilling jobs that did not play to my strengths. No matter how many questions I asked during the interview, I somehow managed to find positions where there were either no real growth opportunity or serious, internal company problems. I knew I would one day go back to school for some type of more specialized training; however, being a person of diverse interests, I could not decide which interest would sustain me in the long run.

The solution to my career crisis came in an unexpected way. On a late spring day in 2007, my mother was involved in a car accident. She had broken her arm in several places. Although a relatively minor injury, it had a major impact on our family. We live on a farm where a large portion of our food supply comes from our garden. Since my father is gone for weeks at a time with his job, my mother is the main person who tends the garden and functions as the primary care-giver for my invalid grandfather. It takes an able-bodied person to do all of this. For our family to survive, I quit my going-nowhere job to spend the summer gardening and nursing two patients. My parents spent the summer constantly on the phone with our lawyer about the accident. Meanwhile, with legal issues at the forefront of my mind, a separate component of my brain was going, "Hmmm. A paralegal. Never thought of THAT before."

By the end of summer my mother's cast came off and I emerged with a new plan. It was a mad scramble to get my financial aid and school application documents together in time for the fall semester, but by August 1, 2007, I was ready. Eventually, my parents would settle their lawsuit, but I had found a new direction for my life.

I knew that I had chosen a career that would finally take advantage of all my strengths. My new career would build upon my writing and vocabulary skills taking them to new

dimensions. My research skills would be utilized. My analytical abilities would be challenged. My interest in psychological warfare would find a healthy outlet.

The real test came during my internship this past summer. I began as just another lowly, unpaid intern schlepping around the office, performing whatever menial tasks I could. I cleaned, filed, photocopied, and ran errands—all the while carrying pen and notebook in hand to furiously scribble whatever scrap of knowledge they would throw my way.

Illness plagued our law office all summer. Fortunately, I stayed healthy. Then, on June 20, 2008, my lawyer discovered that ordering a couple loan payoffs for a Monday real estate closing had somehow fallen through the cracks due to all the absences of my co-workers. It was after 3 p.m. on Friday afternoon and I was the only other person in the office. I jumped on the phone calling the banks, begging and pleading to get them to rush us those payoffs. By 4:55 p.m. we had what we needed for the closing. In crunch time the lowly intern had stepped up. On that rainy afternoon in late June, the Earth shifted on its axis.

A few days later I arrived at work at 8 a.m. to find a file with handwritten instructions sitting on the chair at the desk where I usually work. The task was drafting a couple motions with corresponding letters. Since paralegals heavily rely on a go-by, it was not beyond the scope of my capabilities to find similar documents in the computer and change the pertinent information to create new documents.

An hour later the lawyer arrived at the office and immediately asked me if I had seen the file sitting in the chair. Since I had not been scheduled to work the day before, he launched into an explanation about what had happened regarding the file. The lawyer had put it in the chair intending the project for the co-worker with whom I share the desk. She had an emergency during lunch and did not return to work that afternoon. The file remained sitting there until I got

to the office the next day. Apparently, there was some urgency to the assignment, so the lawyer told me to get the file he had left in the chair because he wanted me to start working on the project. I was able to look him in the eye and say, “Yeah, I finished that already. It’s in YOUR chair for you to review.”

Everyone at the office had seen me running around all summer with my notebook ever in hand, but those two instances really sealed my fate at the law firm. The minimum hours required by my school internship soon turned into working as much as my class schedule would permit. While I still performed a thousand menial tasks, higher responsibility and meatier assignments were increasingly thrown my way.

One day I was called into the lawyer’s office where he sat holding a brochure for an NBI seminar. It was a seminar I desperately wanted to attend, but knew I could not afford. At the time I had no source of income. With soaring gas prices and a daily 2½ hour round-trip commute, financial aid only stretched so far. I had not bothered to mention my interest around the office because in what universe do lowly, unpaid interns get to attend expensive seminars with the office footing the bill? Still, I found myself there that afternoon being offered the privilege to do just that—with the condition that I would be transitioning to a part-time, paid position while in school and coming on board full-time after graduation. I gave the only response I could: “Yes, I am interested.”

Before leaving each day I stop by the lawyer’s office to see if he needs anything else. Almost without fail he thanks me for my help and hard work. I know from chatting with one of his realtor buddies that my boss brags on me a lot. I am fortunate to now work in an environment where there is mutual respect and where I am encouraged to grow professionally.

Each day on the job brings new problem-solving challenges that appeal to my love of

puzzles. Each day I get to flaunt my strengths and get paid for it. Each day I get to help people through some of the most serious, most complicated problems of their lives to try to make things better for them.

It was a rainy afternoon in June when my career crisis finally found its silver lining.