



Karen Hukill, Paralegal, Law Offices of J. Michael Kelly, Santa Monica, CA

[by Nikki LaCrosse]

Family law is one of the busiest and most intense areas of the law. Karen Hukill has been a paralegal specializing in family law for 21 years. The last 19 of those years have been spent at the Law Offices of J. Michael Kelly. Kelly is a prominent divorce and family law attorney in Santa Monica, CA.

Her firm's practice covers a wide range of family-related issues and is known for handling large-asset divorces involving executives and celebrities. "We handle divorce, paternity, and palimony; but our special emphasis is child custody and child visitation law," Hukill explains. "Within the confines of child custody, we also deal with abuse—sexual and physical—parental kidnapping, and international child custody orders."

Hukill is frank about the fact that she became a paralegal for the income. "My dad's business was going through financial difficulties, and he couldn't send me to college. He gave me \$5,000 and said, 'Go see what you can do.'" She chose to enroll in the Legal Assistant course at Sawyer Business School in Van Nuys, CA. "The program was only a year, and the starting income was \$2,200 a month. Back in 1983, that was a whole lot of money to me."

While Hukill admits that a good income is still a motivation to work, it is the work itself that keeps her putting in the hours, and the hours can be long. "When I was single, it was nothing to leave the house at 5 a.m. and get home at ten o'clock at night. My trials could go five to ten days long."

Now a wife and mother, Hukill works from her home and tries to avoid the courtroom. "I gather evidence, and I do research on current case law. Because my firm specializes in litigation, it is my job to put their [attorneys'] argument on paper, together with a memorandum of points and authorities, which is basically the case law." She also prepares

witnesses for trial and gives lectures and seminars on paralegal work.

She stresses that in addition to good reading and writing skills, a paralegal needs to "have the ability to be teachable and trainable. Lately, my continuing education is about custody among same-sex partners," Hukill says. "It's ugly right now because it is in the initial stages and because it is about what is in the best interests of the child."

An international custody battle she worked on in the late 1980s led to a lifelong friendship. Karen helped represent a woman named Yvonne, who was from the Netherlands, when her husband abducted their two children and fled to America. He hid for three years. "I was present with the United States court orders and the orders obtained in the Netherlands via the Hague Convention," Hukill remembers. "I physically held Yvonne as she was shaking and crying. The police department served the warrant in the early-morning hours. Yvonne was reunited with her boys...and their father was arrested while still in his boxer shorts." It was a particularly sweet moment when Hukill recently received a wedding invitation from Yvonne's son.

In 2000, the American Bar Association (ABA) revamped the educational requirements for paralegal programs to receive ABA approval. That same year, the California Legislature voted in a legal definition of the term "paralegal" and outlined the educational requirements and certification process necessary for a person to practice as a paralegal in the state. Prior to that, anyone could advertise

him/herself as a paralegal, and many people who had no legal training did just that.

"These idiots filed bankruptcy, immigration, and custody cases and made so many gross errors that damaged the clients that the ABA had to step in," Hukill exclaims. "As a result, it had given those of us who have studied hard, and worked hard, a very bad name."

While she feels that the new rules have weeded out a lot of the "sham paralegals," Hukill warns that there are still many out there and that people who need legal help the most are frequently the most vulnerable. "People pay them \$200 to file divorce paperwork and then years later find out they are not divorced," she notes. "The tax implications are huge. People thought they were single for five years and were filing single, and they were really filing married but separately. That's a big difference, to say nothing of the fines and penalties."

Given the intense emotional subjects that she deals with, Hukill has had to learn to separate work from her personal life. "It's emotional. It's intense and draining. Five years into it, I was pretty jaded. I was single, and I thought that the concept of marriage and family was some big fairy tale," Hukill says. "So, I worked that out and stuck with it, but people, paralegals, and, in a lot of cases, attorneys have a high ratio of switching to another field." While a handful of former clients have become friends, the majority of the people Karen work for don't look back. "No one ever calls me up and thanks me for the great big settlement I got them because they



just lost half of their s*** and their children.”

Asked what the best part of her job is, Hukill replies, “I work on some really interesting cases. I have met some amazing people in my lifetime.” She mentions a case in which she helped an Egyptian woman named Nisreen secure a legal divorce and thereby escape death by stoning. “It was hard for me to imagine that such primitive practices existed,” Hukill says. “Nisreen opened my eyes to women’s suffering in various parts of the world. It changed my life forever.”