



## Lisa B. Vessels; Paralegal; Duane Morris, LLP; Miami, FL The Crossroads of Changing Jobs

[Anne O'Dell]

Between her work for the Florida Bar's 11th Circuit Committee for Unlicensed Practice of Law, her involvement with the South Florida Paralegal Association, and her work as a paralegal in a BigLaw litigation department, Lisa Vessels said there is "never a dull moment" in her professional life.

She lives in the southwest end of Miami in a small community called Devon Aire. Her office, a satellite of Duane Morris, LLP, is located in downtown Miami.

"My position is very interesting... I primarily report to one partner and an associate, but assist with special projects within the litigation department as needed.

"Currently, I am working in commercial litigation with a major focus on patent infringement litigation. We also deal with contract dispute issues and other interesting areas of commercial litigation."

Vessels said that she enjoys the diversity that her position offers.

"Litigation covers so many areas of law, and each project dealing with a new subject makes the routine work more interesting. I also enjoy the people I work with. The partner to whom I report really respects my personal development, and that's very important to me."

Her typical workload includes managing cases for attorneys, conducting legal research, coordinating expert witnesses, and conducting research for media opportunities.

"The partner with whom I work, Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, is also an active participant in local community projects and appears regularly on a segment for CNN called *Legal Briefs*... Research into current events for her segments and projects comes up from time to time."

Vessels said she has been a paralegal "for the past nine years or so, although the title has varied during that time." Prior to that, Vessels said she had worked as a legal secretary for five or six years.

"For a large portion of the nine years as a paralegal, my work was primarily in the aircraft-leasing arena—a small corner of the legal world that became even smaller after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The decline in commercial airline travel really affected the bottom line of any affiliated business.

"Although I had worked in commercial litigation early in my law-related experience, it was more in the role of a legal secretary. My current position with Duane Morris began as a paralegal for one partner in the aircraft-leasing field. I was loaned to the litigation department during the slower periods with aircraft leasing and ended up moving into the litigation department permanently early this year."

Although Vessels cannot recall making a conscious decision to pursue a legal career, she kept returning to the field over the years.

"When I decided to pursue a bachelor's degree," she said, "it was then I realized the legal field was where I was going to stay and that the paralegal studies bachelor's degree made the most sense for me in terms of my career."

Vessels said that eventually a recruiter saw her résumé and contacted her about working at a local law firm that needed a paralegal with an aircraft-leasing background.

In 2005, Vessels began volunteering as the webmaster for the South Florida Paralegal Association (SFPA), which, she said, "has been a very rewarding position.

"As webmaster for SFPA, I have had the opportunity to serve the paralegals of South Florida and participate in many other community service activities in which SFPA is active.

"Also, I was recently appointed to the 11th Circuit Committee for Unlicensed Practice of Law (UPL) for the Florida Bar. Working on the UPL committee has provided some interesting insight into a large problem in my community."

Recently proposed legislation to regulate paralegals in the Florida and other states has been a concern for Vessels, who believes that her state will pave the way for important legislation in other areas.

"Paralegal regulation has been a hot issue throughout the U.S. for the past decade or so," she said.

"My belief is that Florida will be the first state to pass legislation requiring those who wish to use the title 'paralegal' to adhere to a standard of education which would include instruction in not only paralegal studies, but require education in ethics as well as professional responsibility. The proposed legislation would also require continuing education, which I believe is critical for paralegals, and provide for a board to oversee the administration of the regulation throughout the state."



She further noted that in Florida, paralegals are allowed to bill hours worked directly to clients, and the paralegals in question are not required to provide credentials to qualify their work. In these cases, attorneys will usually evaluate whether or not a paralegal is qualified to work, "which means that standard varies widely," said Vessels

"There have been several cases in Florida where judges considering attorneys' fees awards have instituted their own standards for paralegals which attorneys have billed time to their client. Again, since no standard exists, each judge has his or her own definition of qualifications and educational standards for a paralegal."

Vessels is proud to state that her local professional organization, the South Florida Paralegal Association, "has also become a vocal advocate for the members with regard to the pending paralegal regulation legislation, as well as serving as a pool for the Florida Bar for candidates to various committees which require non-lawyer participation—such as the UPL and Grievance Committees—which serve a valuable purpose to not only the legal community, but also the public at large."

She also is grateful to SFPA for offering convenient and affordable continuing legal education to its members.

"Currently, there are only a few national companies providing continuing education for paralegals in our community, and those that have voluntarily become certified paralegals through NALA or another national paralegal association are required to maintain their paralegal education with continuing education in the paralegal field."

To future paralegals and would-be paralegal students, Vessels advises, "Don't take the easy road. Find a school that meets the highest standards. Take the tough classes; you'll be glad when you go to apply the knowledge. If at all possible, work toward a

bachelor's degree or a post-baccalaureate certificate in paralegal studies, because your paralegal course study work will be on a much higher level.

"With all the uncertainty about what will be required for the paralegal profession in the future, don't gamble that your school isn't accepted for an educational requirement."