



Pat Altstatt, CLAS; President, Nevada Paralegal Association; Las Vegas, NV

[Charisse Dengler]

It may have been an accident that Pat Altstatt ended up in the legal field, but it's an accident she's grateful for. In fact, she said if she would have known how enamored she'd become with the law, she would have gone on to become an attorney.

Altstatt got her start as a legal secretary after contacting an employment agency for help finding a job as a medical transcriptionist, a career she chose through a process of elimination.

"When I was graduating from high school, girls were expected to be one, housewives; two, secretaries; three, nurses; or four, teachers," she said. "I really didn't like any of those options, but I decided secretarial work was the lesser of the evils."

However, Altstatt's career plans took a turn toward the legal field when the agency, desperate to find her a job, sent her on an interview at a law firm that was even more desperate to find a legal secretary.

"I was hired as a legal secretary with absolutely no legal experience," she said. "Words cannot describe my boss's face when he 'smilingly' asked, 'What did I know about the law?' I 'smilingly' said back to him, 'What I had seen on *Owen Marshall* [a television series about a defense attorney that premiered in 1971].'"

"Luckily for me, he had the patience of a saint and taught me more than I ever dreamed I could learn in the three years I was employed with the firm; and after that job, I was hooked," she said.

"I continued moving up the ladder in terms of jobs—more money, more responsibility, continuing to learn new things and take on more responsibility—and eventually ended up in Las Vegas. Once established here, I was

actively recruited by a Phoenix law firm; they convinced me to relocate to Phoenix, paid me more money, and taught me to become a paralegal, specializing in large Chapter 11 debtor-reorganization cases."

Altstatt first began working as a paralegal in 1990 in Phoenix, AZ. Currently, she works for Santoro, Driggs, Walch, Kearney, Johnson & Thompson in the firm's bankruptcy and complex litigation departments.

"My focus is in bankruptcy—primarily creditor-oriented, with an occasional venture into the debtor side of bankruptcy—with some work in state and federal courts in civil litigation matters," she said. "People don't realize that bankruptcy is actually litigation. It is just on a fast track."

And as with any fast-paced litigation, Altstatt often faces the challenge of time constraints.

"Where in a civil litigation matter, you may languish around through several months and/or years of discovery, in a bankruptcy adversarial matter, you can file your complaint and have your trial six months later," she said. "And even though you go to trial in six months, you still have done all of your discovery the same as in a state or federal court civil case. It is just done very fast."

When she first went to work for Santoro, Driggs, Walch, Kearney, Johnson & Thompson, Altstatt was sort of an experiment.

"When they hired me, it was a test to see how the attorneys would react and if they could utilize a paralegal and those skills," she said. "At that time, they had no other paralegals in the firm, so to speak. The test succeeded, and there are now five additional paralegals besides me."

In addition to her work for the firm, Altstatt is also currently serving as president of the Nevada Paralegal Association (NPA). As president, her responsibilities include preparing monthly agendas, overseeing the financial aspects of the organization, and working with the parliamentarian to ensure all bylaws are being adhered to. She also works with the membership chairman to maintain a database of all the members.

"It is almost like running a mini-business—and a second full-time job. We just don't make any money," she said. "The experience and feeling like you are doing something to better the paralegal profession makes it all worthwhile."

As NPA's president, Altstatt has nothing but praise for paralegal associations and the networking possibilities they provide.

"The paralegal association is a huge networking tool for working paralegals, students, vendors, and other interested persons to become acquainted in a non-threatening environment," she said. "Monthly meetings, seminars, and other events further the paralegal's knowledge and work skills. The networking allows you to meet people in your field and in different areas of the law."



You always have someone to call when you have a question. The friendships continue even as you change jobs and even relocate.”

When it comes to major issues facing the legal community as a whole, Altstatt worries about the rising costs of legal services and the effect this has on families.

“It isn’t even just about pro bono work anymore. Your average Joe, who works a normal job and has a wife and kids, cannot afford to draw up a simple will to protect his family,” she said. “It would be nice to see the bar associations team up with the paralegal associations and make a contribution to the lower-middle-class that cannot afford to hire an attorney, but make too much money to qualify for the pro bono projects.”

Altstatt, who truly loves what she does, said there aren’t many days when she doesn’t want to get up and go to work.

“I enjoy the work I do, the challenges and the new tasks assigned,” she said. “Every client/matter is different. I enjoy the people I work with; they become an extended family after a time.”

“I used to feel sorry for my dad, having to go to work every day,” she said. “Now that I am that adult going to work every day, I can honestly say that, for the most part, I enjoy going to work every day and feel very blessed to have found a job that seems to give me more than I am able to give back.”

Living and working in Sin City for more than 20 years now, Altstatt not only works with attorneys, she’s also married to one. She and her husband, who work in the same office but in different practice areas, have four children and two grandchildren. The twosome love to travel and make a habit of going on at least one cruise every year.

“I am a total workaholic, so it is nice to take off for Mexico, where I have no access to cell phones, computers, and the ever-present email,” she said.

“Computers have taken the legal profession so far so fast,” she said. “What used to take hours in the local law library now takes minutes with Westlaw or Lexis. Voice mail, email—the list is endless of things that have changed to make our jobs ‘easier.’ But in retrospect, it seems to just make us try to get that much more accomplished. Sometimes I think the ‘70s were easier.”

In her free time, Altstatt likes to kick back with a good book, such as *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (which she’s currently hooked on), or hang out with her girlfriends.

“Living in Las Vegas, there is always something to do or somewhere to go,” she said. “And as the current marketing slogan goes, ‘What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.’”