



Feature

## From Paralegal to Attorney: One Woman's Legal Journey

By Mahsa Khalilifar

For Tracie Goodwin, being a paralegal wasn't quite enough.

**"After being a paralegal for about five years, I began looking for more of a challenge," she says. "I decided to become an attorney mainly because I wanted more control over the work I did, and I wanted more of a challenge."**



Goodwin was born in Houston, Texas, but moved to Fresno, California, when she was 18. She had been working as a legal secretary for eight years when she decided to enter the paralegal arena.

"My boss had been giving me progressively more challenging projects, which I found more interesting than legal secretary work. The autonomy and the responsibility that came with being

a paralegal appealed to me," she explains. "Once I decided to get a paralegal certificate, I had to find a paralegal program that worked with my schedule."

Working about 50 hours per week and married with children, Goodwin needed to find a flexible program. A two-year paralegal program at the city college and a one-year program at the local law school were being offered. After considering both, she found that neither worked well with her hectic schedule. A bit later, she found a 12-week, two-day-per-weekend course offered at California State University, Fresno, that worked for her. She received her bachelor's degree in liberal arts with a credential emphasis after a "grueling 12 weeks."

Although Goodwin's initial hopes of being a teacher didn't pan out, she continued her career in the legal field and has not looked back. After working as a paralegal for five years, she received the opportunity to progress further professionally.

"I have been working at the same law firm since I graduated from college. The firm I work at was very supportive of my going to law school," she says. "After my first year of law school, I passed the 'baby bar,' and I was promoted to a law clerk. I worked as a law clerk until I found out I passed the bar this last May. The firm I work at offered me a job as an associate, which I accepted."

She decided to take law classes at Concord Law School, an online law school. Although she went through a family tragedy—her father's passing during her last year before law school finals—she managed to graduate in July of 2006.

"I was very overwhelmed, and every day I had to talk myself out of dropping out of law school," she admits. "I just tried to take everything one day at a time."

Goodwin also saw opportunities for more financial gain working as an attorney.

"I also wanted to earn more money. I was doing very similar work to what our associates were doing but making considerably less," she says. "Also, when you are a paralegal, you only see a small portion of a case, and you are limited to doing what you are directed to do by the attorneys. I wanted the challenge of being able to work up a case totally on my own, implementing my own ideas."

Now practicing at Sagaser, Jones & Helsley, Goodwin insists, though, that law school is not for everyone.

"Make certain you weigh the pros and cons of being a paralegal as opposed to being an attorney before you make your decision," she advises. "While being an attorney can give you more control over the cases you work on and allow you to use your creativity, it also requires more hours, more responsibility, and more accountability for your work."

She also notes that her job definitely weighs more heavily on her day-to-day activities.

"When I was a paralegal I didn't have to worry about committing malpractice. Being an attorney, at least in private practice, is more stressful than being a paralegal," she says. "When you're deciding whether to become an attorney, you should look at the type of lifestyle you want to have. While being a paralegal is challenging, you generally don't have



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to take your work home with you — even if it's just thinking about it."

Now a grandmother, Goodwin loves spending time with her granddaughter, two cats, two rabbits, and "number of tortoises." She credits her husband with being her number-one fan.

"My husband has been really wonderful," she says. "He was very supportive and wouldn't let me give up."

Goodwin doesn't regret her decision to switch careers, and she hopes others will consider the job change if it is right for them.

"Being an attorney feels like a 24-hour job sometimes. However, I think it's a very good profession to go into, and I think it is particularly a good profession for women," Goodwin, a mother of three, says. "You have a lot more options with a law degree than with a paralegal certificate."

If you are a paralegal and are interested in applying to Concord Law School, you must hold an undergraduate degree or higher and must pass the Concord Online Admissions Test. You must also provide Concord with official transcripts from relevant colleges and universities. After the first year of law school, the State Bar of California requires you to pass the First-Year Law Students' Examination before continuing studies.

Concord Law School's program-specific requirements are below:

1. The Concord J.D. program is a four-year, part-time program.
2. The terms are year-long; coursework must be completed in terms of 48-52 weeks as stipulated by the State Bar of California rules.
3. Students report that they study 25-30 hours per week.
4. The first two years of the J.D. program, the curriculum is comprised of required courses.
5. Students have the opportunity to take electives in their 3L and 4L years. Electives include a series of health law courses, patent law courses, cyberlaw courses, advocacy courses, and business law courses — business planning and contract drafting. In the fourth year, there is also an externship program, the Legal Education Experience Program (LEEP), where the student works in a legal setting under the supervision of an attorney.
6. Admission requirements are a bachelor's degree and generally a 3.0 GPA or better. Applicants also must take Concord's online admission test, although Concord does not require the LSAT.
7. Tuition is \$8,900 per year.
8. Applicants may request information at the Concord site. An admissions person will contact them for an interview and provide access to the online exam and application. For more information, please go to [info.concordlawschool.edu/admissions](http://info.concordlawschool.edu/admissions).

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