



Profile: Phillip Signey, Paralegal, Munger, Tolles & Olson

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Phillip Signey literally saw a sign which convinced him to become a paralegal more than 20 years ago. He started doing routine unlawful detainers and collections work and has since built a diverse practice focused solely on litigation. Signey talks with LawCrossing this week about the ever-changing profession and his second book on paralegals, which is due out this fall.

It was the mid 1970s, and Phillip Signey was unemployed. He left his job as a junior high school teacher to become an education administrator because he "hated teaching." He also didn't like the administrative work and had no idea what to do. That's when he saw the sign.

"I wasn't very happy," Signey told LawCrossing about his teaching and unemployment days. "And I saw a sign, believe it or not, at the University of West L.A. that said, 'Be a Paralegal.' And I said, 'Okay. I'll do that.'"

Around that time, a friend had given him an article on the growing paralegal profession. He decided to give it a go. Signey enrolled in a paralegal-studies course at the University of West L.A. and a few months later joined a small two-attorney firm. Compared to teaching junior high school students, Signey was in heaven. The work was interesting, and he found through the law that his research would make him knowledgeable about many different topics.

Signey was surprised to discover that the paralegal field was a female-dominated profession at the time. When he studied in 1978, he was the only man in his class, which he says was made up of teachers and nurses. He jokes that he might not have married his wife of 26 years had he known he would be surrounded by so many women.

During the last 25 years, Signey says his job has changed dramatically. Aside from the obvious technology leaps that have changed the profession, Signey says paralegals are

given much more responsibility now than ever before. Education for paralegals is key, he says, and gone are the days when anyone could enter the profession. He writes textbooks to help paralegals get the education they need. His first book, *The Litigation Paralegal*, is a textbook which guides students through the different skills they will need in the courtroom and the firm. His second book is due out in the next few months and will probably be called *California Civil Litigation for Paralegals*.

California state law is vastly different from the federal system and many other state systems, and his publishers saw a niche in the market for a local textbook. Midway through his paralegal career, Signey returned to teaching. Only this time it was with adult students who were interested in the class he was teaching: *Civil Procedure and Legal Writing* at Cal State in Long Beach, CA, where he lives.

Although he is too busy to teach these days, Signey says when he does teach, he tells students the most important facet of the paralegal profession is fact-finding.

"You start out with raw data. You have to turn it into fact and then give it to the attorneys in a way that they can use it so it becomes knowledge," he said. "When I teach, this is what I emphasize."

Since his litigation practice with Munger, Tolles & Olson primarily focuses on antitrust and securities, Signey's fact-finding lately deals with listening to the recorded con-

versations of stockbrokers, in search of a "smoking-gun" phone call. Signey wouldn't provide details of the stock-fraud case he's now involved in but says it can be fascinating to hear the brokers' conversations, particularly about their weekends in Las Vegas.

Brokers are required by law to record their conversations.

On an average day, Signey says he monitors 40-50 cases around the country, cases that he is either directly involved in or cases that could have an impact on one of his firm's clients. He takes the train to work from Long Beach and receives email on his BlackBerry while reading the paper. Every day is different, he says. Researching clients and various cases takes up much of his day.

Signey, who has been with Munger, Tolles & Olson for the last seven years, says it's satisfying to be given more and more responsibility on the job and he feels that the paralegal profession in general has become more prestigious.

"In the old days, people didn't know who you were, didn't know what you did. It was a strange profession," he said. "Now I handle antitrust and securities cases, and I've got some of the biggest corporations in the world as my clients. I deal with them day to day on huge multi-million-dollar cases. This kind of responsibility, I never dreamed I'd have."