



Profile: Scott Panek, Paralegal for the Law Offices of Kathleen Zellner

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Legal Footsoldier: Paralegal Scott Panek speaks to LawCrossing about the development of his career, from a messenger for a law firm in the Chicago Loop area to a paralegal and office manager in one of the country's top boutique firms.

Scott Panek began his legal career as a messenger, delivering court documents on foot throughout the Chicago Loop, the downtown area known for its breathtaking skyscrapers and numerous law firms.

He was a sophomore at DePaul University when he noticed a billboard advertising the position at Robert Clifford & Associates - a major medical malpractice law firm. At the time, he didn't know what kind of law they practiced. He only knew that he needed a job and that a law firm would look better on his resume than the construction work he had recently been doing.

That was almost 14 years ago. After he finished his degree in philosophy and sociology, Panek went to work for the Clifford firm full time and, over the years, took on an increasing amount of responsibility. Panek now works as a paralegal and office manager at the Law Offices of Kathleen Zellner. To this day, he has never looked back.

"As the years progressed, each associate would bring me to the side and teach me something new," he told LawCrossing. "They taught me how to do legal research, do the routine court calls, filing, copying, and general office administration stuff."

He soon became manager of the mailroom while he continued to help with research and routine court calls. During college, he considered going to law school, but his experience at the firm showed him that there were other ways to pursue a legal career.

Panek eventually decided that he wanted to

become a certified paralegal and enrolled at Roosevelt University. After attending classes for four months-eight hours a day, four days a week-he finally earned his certificate. Meanwhile, he was working at the firm with the night crew, abstracting depositions or doing dictations.

Panek, who moved to Ms. Zellner's (profiled July 26, 2004) office eight years ago, said his paralegal studies made his work life easier and taught him some investigative skills he hadn't learned on the job.

"It's hands on: going to court, finding out where everything is at the Daley Center, the Federal Building. You're pretty much finding out where you have to go to get certain things accomplished," he said.

Friends and family often ask Panek why he doesn't just go to law school and become an attorney. Panek replies with a good answer.

"A paralegal is kind of like how a paramedic is to a doctor. They are the ones that are going to the scene, stabilizing the situation," he tells them. "Paralegals are pretty much the same way. They put the demonstrative stuff together for a case. An attorney often says we need these records; the paralegal will find out a way to get them and then get them to the attorney."

Panek started with Ms. Zellner as a paralegal and is now the office manager, although his work still involves occasional research and other paralegal duties.

When Panek first started the job in 1997,

he did a lot of routine court calls, filing complaints, research, and obtaining medical records for malpractice cases whenever an attorney was not necessary. Zellner's firm focuses predominantly on medical malpractice and criminal trials and is known for aggressively using DNA tests to free convicted criminals from Illinois prisons.

Although Panek was well versed in plaintiff cases and medical malpractice civil suits, criminal defense was a new challenge for him.

"When I first started with Ms. Zellner, I never really worked on a criminal case. My first experience with a criminal case was through this firm and with the DNA cases, like with Billy Wardell," who, after serving 11 years behind bars, was ultimately cleared of rape charges. Panek believes that criminal law is exciting, especially when the team works on cases involving innocent parties, helping to free the wrongfully accused from prison. He and the rest of the staff work with State Attorneys "on a common goal, which is to prove our client innocent."

He remarks that the people he works with are the best aspect of his job.

"We're a small team here, and the thing that's great about us being small is that each [person] is an integral part of the team. So when I'm working here I feel like I'm not just one person working; I'm working as part of a whole."

The team includes Panek, three attorneys, one law clerk, a paralegal, and usually one or



two part-timers from Wheaton College during the school year.

As office manager, Panek is responsible for most of the administrative work—ensuring that bills get paid and medical record requests are in order and returned on schedule. Occasionally, when the Cook County Sheriff is not available, the court appoints him as a special process server, a position in which he tracks people down and serves them with complaints or subpoenas.

Panek urges people interested in the paralegal profession to go for it. He suggests people try and get into a law firm before obtaining paralegal certification so that they know whether or not they enjoy life in a law firm and because some paralegal courses require a sponsoring attorney. He also recommends examining the different areas of law before applying to a particular job.

“Certain people, they believe the only way you can work in the legal profession is by becoming an attorney, and that’s not correct,” he says. “Even great attorneys, they need staff that they can depend on.”