



## Profile Mary Theroux, paralegal Bingham McCutchen LLC and president of the Los Angeles Paralegal Association.

[by Regan Morris]

Mary Theroux says the future looks good for niche paralegals. Like attorneys, paralegals are specializing in specific areas of law, and she thinks the trend will continue. LawCrossing speaks with the president of the Los Angeles Paralegal Association about her decision to specialize her practice in real estate and her advice for paralegals entering the profession.

Mary Theroux first became involved with the Los Angeles Paralegal Association about eight years ago because she wanted a party. She had attended various association educational seminars and she saw a gap; so why not get everyone together for purely social reasons?

"I went to one of their monthly meetings with their board of directors to talk to them about possibly having a holiday party that was a real party, not an educational event," she said. "And I went to them and said let me help you plan a party, and here I am. It was a great party."

LAPA members must have agreed because Ms. Theroux was elected president of the organization. But it's not all parties at LAPA. The organization hosts seminars and educational events. And now they throw a holiday party with a difference--fun and charitable. The upcoming party will include a silent auction of donated goods--DVD players, I-Pods, vacuum cleaners, etc.--and every cent of the proceeds goes to the Public Counsel's Adoption Project. Public Counsel is the largest pro-bono law firm in the United States, and the Adoption Project helps legally connect families and foster children.

"Three times a year we have what we call Adoption Saturday, and during Adoption Saturday it's just the final hearings, so we're finalizing the families," she said. "We just had an Adoption Saturday on November 20, and we finalized over 150 families. It's the final hearing where the judge says you are now a family. It's just really a great, festive day.

People come dressed up and wear tuxedos."

Theroux, who was the recipient of the 2002 5-Star Paralegal of the Year Award and the Public Counsel's Outstanding Volunteer Award in 2001, worked as a secretary and a legal assistant before entering the University of West Los Angeles School of Paralegal Studies.

"When I went to school, I just went to get a certificate and get an idea of what a paralegal does. And I liked it and kept going for more classes," she said. "I got a specialist certificate in corporations, real estate, and litigation."

UWLA has one of the best reputations in the country for paralegal studies, and you don't need a bachelor's degree to get in. Before enrolling, Ms. Theroux asked a friend which candidate she would hire if their skills were equal, but one went to UCLA and one to UWLA. She said UWLA, and Ms. Theroux said it's very important for people to choose schools wisely so they can compete for jobs once they graduate.

"At UWLA, they have specialists classes for criminal law, probate, family law, real estate, corporations, litigation, so their curriculum is a little more comprehensive," Ms. Theroux said.

Ms. Theroux, who worked as a litigation paralegal before switching to full-time, real estate transactional work about eight years ago, said it's becoming increasingly desirable for paralegals to specialize.

"I see now more people are specializing. It used to be that you did litigation or you did corporate or you did real estate," she said. "They're getting past that idea that if you do litigation, you can do it all. If you've seen one tree, you've seen them all. And litigation paralegals are not like that anymore. You understand the product more, you understand the service better what you're looking for."

An unemployment litigation paralegal, for example, knows just what to look for in documents and complaints, and the issues are totally different from what an environmental paralegal might look for. Ms. Theroux says Bingham McCutchen has very specialized paralegals in Indian law or workers compensation law. In her real estate group, there are paralegals specialized in real estate litigation. Ms. Theroux no longer does litigation and focuses on real estate transactions.

"The attorneys specialize around those lines, so I think it was a natural thing that the paralegals they're working with would also be specializing," she said. "I don't think you should choose when you first get out of school. This is not my first career either. I switched over. I was a secretary, and then I was a legal secretary and sort of grew into being a paralegal. When I started out, I loved litigation."

Although Ms. Theroux says she got "burned out" on litigation, she encourages new paralegals to explore as much as possible before focusing on a niche.

"I think when you're first starting out, you



should explore different areas that interest you. If you like employment law, try to find a job in that. But don't be so closed to it that you don't accept a position, and then you may miss an opportunity of something you would love and do a good job at," she said. "But attorneys tend to specialize, and the paralegal profession is growing in that way, and that's how you grow and how you progress."

Ms. Theroux, who was raised in Northern California, said litigation was a rush but the long hours were exhausting.

"I think I just woke up one day and said I can't do another rush," she said. "I like the transactional work, particularly real estate, because it's not adversarial."

Her job is to make her client, whether it's a buyer or seller, happy with the negotiated price and make sure the deal is in order.

"You have to be willing to negotiate and compromise, but at the end of the day, the job is to get it done and make everyone happy and everybody's a winner. It's not a go to trial and win a case, or go to trial and lose a case. Here everybody's a winner," she said. "When I was in litigation, there were times I'd work and go to trial, helping the attorney, and then I'd go back to the office and work all night to get ready for the next day at trial. And that's insane."

Ms. Theroux said that she sees many young paralegals afraid to ask questions because they feel they should know the answers from their education.

"You have to be willing to pay attention to detail. Pay attention to details and be organized and ask questions," she said. "If you don't know and you need more information, be sure to ask. Say I need more information from the attorneys, of the client, of the project. If you're given an assignment and you're not sure what it is that you're supposed to be doing, go back and ask. Don't be afraid to ask."

She said there is never a shortage of paralegals who ask to help with the holiday party and Adoption Saturday events.

"A couple of years ago, LAPA sort of became the host committee for the Adoption Saturday project. We sent out a request to the LAPA members saying would you be able to volunteer, and we had an overwhelming response. And basically, what they do is on that Saturday, they do courtroom check in, take pictures, cry with the family. It's a very happy day."

Ms. Theroux, who has two sons and two grandsons, says LAPA chooses a different charity each year to benefit from the holiday party.

"We try to make it a children's charity, and that's what the holidays should really be about."