

Profile: Deb Monke, CLAS, President of the National Association of Legal Assistants

[by Regan Morris]

Do you have CLA (Certified Legal Assistant) after your name? How about a touch of CLAS? LawCrossing speaks with Deb Monke, the President of the National Association of Legal Assistants about how with online classes it is easier than ever to get certification.

You don't need certification to work as a paralegal, but it doesn't hurt. Deb Monke, CLAS, president of the National Association of Legal Assistants, said the more credentials you have, the better. With CLAS, the S stands for specialized, which more and more paralegals are these days.

Ms. Monke's specialty is intellectual property.

"I'm a big believer in investing in yourself," she said. "And the more you can do to improve yourself, the more marketable you're going to be."

Ms. Monke, 50, an intellectual property administrator for State Farm Insurance Companies in Bloomington, IL, has been a paralegal since the early 1980s. She has been involved with the NALA leadership since 1985.

Ms. Monke believes participating in industry associations at both the national and state level is important for paralegals hoping to learn new skills and specialize in different areas of law.

Ms. Monke has served as a regional director, treasurer, and secretary of NALA and as editor of the NALA newsletter. She co-founded and was charter president of the Central Illinois Paralegal Association and frequently speaks at NALA events around the country.

"Working in the local associations, you get to know a lot of the other local paralegals in your area; you get a close networking situation going, opportunities to expand skill sets

that you might not necessarily at that time get on the job," she said. "But you may get involved and all of a sudden you're planning a seminar for your local paralegal association, and it's something you can transfer to your position to assist you with things. And then I recommend that at the national level for some of the same reasons, but also to open up your world a little bit, to understand what's going on in the profession across the country."

Ms. Monke, who became interested in the law during high school because of a fascinating great uncle who was a judge, said her biggest goal as president of NALA is to help assure more and more classes and educational seminars are offered online so paralegals can study no matter where in the world they are.

"One of the focal points this year is we just this fall kicked off our live educational online classes, and so we're still focusing on that," she said. "We've had one semester and we're going to start our next semester next month. The other thing is we have a specialty task force put together where we're looking at redesigning the specialty credentialing program that we offer to a curriculum-based program."

Once you have a CLA you can then move on to nine specialty areas of law. You learn as much as you can from experience and then sit for a test for the CLAS, once you feel you're ready.

"What we're going to do is have an online

curriculum program that has testing built into all the modules," she said.

So a student can gain experience in the classroom or online and then take a test at the end of each module in real estate law, for example, or intellectual property.

Ms. Monke went to work for a law firm at age 19 after getting an associate's degree as a legal secretary. She was taught paralegal work on the job at the firm. Back in the 1970s, she said, few people knew the word paralegal.

She eventually went back to school to get a bachelor's degree in legal studies and a paralegal certificate at Illinois State. She specialized in intellectual property about ten years ago when she started working primarily to protect State Farm's trademarks.

"I think one of the biggest challenges of being president of NALA is keeping up with everything, because we do offer so many opportunities in our education and credentialing system," she said.

The advantage of specializing is becoming an expert in your field and knowing exactly what issues to look for in particular cases or documents. Would it be difficult for a specialized paralegal like herself to go back and work as a general paralegal?

"No, I don't think so. And that goes back to several-many-years of working in a general practice area and a lot of different areas," she said, adding that it's hard to know when



in your career to specialize.

"I'm one who always thinks you need to keep some doors open," she said. "But I do think specialization is a good thing. I do think you need a few years of some general work, because it's going to broaden your knowledge and then make it easier possibly to move into a more specialized area. It gives you a better understanding of what's going on."

The biggest change Ms. Monke has seen in the profession over 30 years?

"Well for one, there's a lot more educational programs available, and people are getting formal education," she said. "And two, of course, is as the profession grows, people are getting more responsibility and being allowed to do more at law offices."

Ms. Monke, an early bird who starts her day at the office by 7 and leaves before lunch most Fridays, said the main focus of NALA is to promote the educational programs and to help people within the profession.