



## Profile: Jennifer Arnold, family law paralegal, Sullivan & Grace, Raleigh, NC

[by Regan Morris]

Organization and intellectual curiosity are the keys to Jennifer Arnold's success. LawCrossing speaks to the family law paralegal about her career.

Jennifer Arnold, 32, considered going to law school. A political science major, she wanted a career in the law, but was nervous about committing to several years of law school. She wanted some real-world experience first.

Arnold's father, an executive headhunter who used to work in the pharmaceutical field, encouraged her to enroll in a paralegal program.

"He's always said, 'You should be in law, Jennifer. You've just got the mind for it,'" she said. "Law was something I always wanted to consider, and paralegal school, which I attended after undergrad—it got me really excited about it. It was something that felt right for me."

Arnold joined Sullivan & Grace in 1997 as a temporary secretary while immersed in an intensive six-month course at the Meredith College Legal Assistants Program. When she graduated, she was promoted to paralegal at the small family law firm, and she now teaches at Meredith College.

A civil litigation specialist at school, Arnold said she can't imagine leaving family law and that the skills of civil litigation spill over into her work.

"I started out as a temporary position when I was at school to make some money, and it turned into much more than that," she said. "I can't imagine honestly doing anything different."

Arnold is an active member of the North

Carolina Bar Association's Legal Assistants Division and Family Law Section. She is the past Chair of the Pro Bono Committee and still an active member. In addition, she is a member of the Long-Range Planning Committee and the Pro Bono Award Committee, which she started.

"I started an award for the legal assistants division so we could honor other paralegals for their pro bono services," she said. "It was for the Legal Assistants Division of the North Carolina Bar Association. For me, it was important to me to see paralegals get rewarded because I know they do a lot of the legwork on the cases that the attorneys are getting awarded for."

The group plans to give out its first award in May.

Arnold was the recipient of the Volunteer Lawyers Program's 2002 James G. Lye Award for outstanding paralegal service. And she was recently named one of the 15 most successful paralegals in America and will be featured in the book *Lessons from the Top Paralegal Experts: The 15 Most Successful Paralegals in America and What You Can Learn from Them*, written by paralegal author Carole Bruno.

Arnold said education and curiosity are the best ways to be a successful paralegal.

"I think part of it is learning all you can learn, which is something I think many paralegals forget to do," she said. "Open your ears, and ask your questions. You know, 'Why am I do-

ing this? Why do we need that?' And I really think that's kind of the key to it."

With family law, paralegals and attorneys often catch their clients at their worst. But Arnold said she likes the personal contact of family law and that it is rewarding to help people resolve such serious personal problems.

"I have a lot of personal contact with clients, which is very important to me," she said. "I'm not the type where I'd be comfortable in corporate law, where you're dealing with a business or an entity. I need to be dealing with these people one-on-one. That's kind of who I am; it's a natural fit for me."

She urges people considering a paralegal career to study at a university or certified paralegal studies program to get a solid legal foundation. And always stay current through attending seminars and reading trade news.

"Family law is such a changing field, you really have to stay up to date with what's going on in case law and changes in statutes, or you kind of get left behind," she said. "I go to a fair amount of conferences—continuing legal education conferences—because I think it's really important for us. Although we don't practice law, we still need to know it to understand what we're doing."

Arnold is a frequent speaker at legal seminars in North Carolina and writes for trade publications and Bar Association newsletters. With family law, she said, no two days are the same.



"I go to court if it's a big hearing and it's pretty document intensive and we have a lot of exhibits," she said. "There's really no set routine. Where in real estate, you've got closing documents, and you have a set pattern. In family law, every case is completely different and may have different work with it."

Arnold knows how to organize. She's a big fan of using checklists and systems to work efficiently.

"I'm a big believer in don't reinvent the wheel," she said. "So, when you've done something, create your checklist or your shortlist on your notebooks at your desk where you've got your information so you're not going to spend the time looking for it again or figuring out how you did it previously."

Is law school still a possibility?

"It's always in my mind. I have not made the final decision yet of what I want to do, but if I do go to law school, it would be over the next five years," she said. "I'd hope to come back to the same office. I've just found a home here and a lot of support from the attorneys and from my co-workers."