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FEATURES:

Diary of a Survivor

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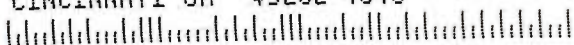
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PACE TESTIMONIAL

by *Renee Rothweiler Cipriani, RP*

Throughout my career as a paralegal, I have encountered instances in which I felt I was not selected for a position, and usually not even interviewed, because I did not have a bachelor's degree. This can obviously be an easy way for employers to screen candidates. There have also been times when I felt that attorneys with my firm have not understood my experience, education, and abilities, leading them to underutilize me or simply not work with me.

In one particular instance, I was asked to work with a partner on a large estate. The surviving spouse, however, insisted that only a partner work on her husband's estate. She did not understand a paralegal's purpose or my skills. The attorney with whom I worked respected my abilities and talked with her about my education and experience, stressing that I am a skilled professional working hand-in-hand with him. I did end up working on the estate, but not without much angst.

When PACE became available, I thought that maybe the credential would help me eliminate some of the situations I have described. My competence would be evident to the legal community and the general public. I worked closely with Deborah Baer McKinney, and she too felt the PACE credential would substantiate her competency. First, we set out to educate our firm and ask for the firm's support. Together, we drafted a memo to our firm's management committee explaining the history of the development of PACE and how it would benefit the firm and ourselves as individuals if we earned this credential. We asked the firm to reimburse us for the exam fee if we successfully completed PACE.

The members of the firm's management committee surprised us by stating they felt we should be rewarded for our attempt regardless of whether we passed the exam. With that encouragement and support, Deb and I were inspired and immediately began preparing for the exam. We participated in Cincinnati's first study group and scheduled our exam date immediately following the completion of the study group.

Deb and I provided each other with emotional support, which is important. Who doesn't experience anxiety in preparing for a test? Deb and I rode to the testing center together, studying on the way. As we walked in, the technician requested a photo ID, checked off our names, and instructed us to use the restroom before we began, as there was no getting up during the exam. The room is set up with 20 to 25 cubicles, and there were several other people in the room taking preparatory tests such as the LSAT and

GMAT, as well as other certification tests. The room was monitored by video and sound recording. Settling into our seats, we realized we'd reached the point of no return.

Deb and I were seated in adjacent cubicles. The testing format was introduced with a 15-minute tutorial that demonstrated how to mark answers, how to change answers, how to go to the next question, how to go back one, how to mark questions to go back to, and how to review the entire exam one question at a time.

I did not know the answers to the first six questions — what had I gotten myself into? The format of the exam is relatively simple: multiple choice with four possible answers. You simply click on the circle next to your selection (hopefully the right answer) with the mouse and move on to the next question. There are 200 questions, and you are given four hours to take the exam, but with this format, Deb and I were able to finish in 90 minutes. That included going back over questions I had skipped and those I had marked because I had narrowed them down to two possible answers.

I looked at the time and pondered whether to go back and double-check all my answers. Knowing how I test, I decided that I would only second-guess myself and possibly change a right answer to a wrong answer. Deciding to go with my first instinct, I clicked "finished." As important as studying the material, be aware of how you personally respond to test stress and anxiety.

Text on the screen explained that my results would be verified by NFPA and that I would receive my results from PES within 21 days — great! Three weeks to worry. The final screen is a comments section allowing you to evaluate the exam.

When I left the testing center, I felt like a deer caught in headlights, and, medically, I probably exhibited symptoms of shock following trauma. Deb and I decided to take an early lunch before returning to the office. Over lunch, we discussed various questions that had us perplexed. We had answered about a dozen of them differently, and on another dozen we had simply guessed. We were convinced we had both failed. We agonized over the fact that the exam emphasized Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and Evidence and had several legal-terminology questions that we had not studied.

The exam did test advanced levels of competency and would be very difficult for an entry level paralegal. We were glad that we had told only a couple people that we were taking the exam that day. Maybe we could reschedule after some heavy studying and pass the second time, and no one would know about our failure. My secret fear was

that Deb had passed but I had failed.

Over the next few days, however, after our anxiety lessened, we began to realize that maybe we didn't do so badly after all. There were only 20 to 30 questions out of the 200 of which we were unsure. The passing rate had to allow for that many mistakes, and certainly we had made lucky guesses on some of those.

Just eight days after we had taken the exam, Deb received a phone call from her daughter that she had mail from PES. She read the part to Deb that said "Congratulations," and that's all she needed. I immediately called my neighbor and asked her to check my mailbox for an envelope from PES. I couldn't possibly wait until the end of the day. My neighbor called a few minutes later and read "Congratulations, you have passed PACE."

Our anxiety was replaced by relief, then excitement over our accomplishment. What a roller coaster ride! We immediately told our co-workers that they were now in the presence of Cincinnati's first RPs. About an hour later, Deb and I received a phone call from an attorney asking us to assist him in the conference room by witnessing the execution of some document. When Deb and I walked in, however, we were greeted by the entire firm. We had cake emblazoned with "Congratulations, Renee and Deb" and cards. The next day, the firm memorialized our success by presenting us with cut-glass business card holders engraved with our names and the date of our certification. Of course, new business cards with our credential were ordered. The support of Santen & Hughes was overwhelming.

There are several benefits to being credentialed. They include:

1. Increased value to your firm
2. Increased responsibility
3. Job market advantage
4. Expansion of the role of the paralegal
5. Client marketing
6. Higher salaries

Deb and I are very self-directed and self-motivated. We took PACE both to advance our profession as a whole and to validate our own skills and competency. We immediately experienced a personal sense of accomplishment and pride, and we garnered more respect from our firm, clients, and the legal community. I am happy to explain what the "RP" means behind my name.

I encourage fellow paralegals to overcome their fears and hesitancy and take the exam. You'll be glad you did!

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