

## THE BIRTH OF A CREDENTIAL

by Deborah Baer McKinney, RP  
with contributions by  
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Do I dare compare PACE to childbirth? Thinking about the exam seven months later, I find many similarities. Just as a pregnant woman prepares for the impending birth, I prepared for PACE by reviewing the Study Manual and participating in the study group, with each member of the group presenting one of the domains. I listened to the seminar audiotapes and dragged out old textbooks. I kept my appointments with the study group (doctor), both looking forward to them and dreading them at the same time. As the date of the exam (due date) approached, I felt my anxiety level rise. Was I truly prepared? Could I handle it? Would I succeed? What was I thinking??

I knew I wanted to take the exam prior to the NFPA Annual Meeting in Anchorage. The first step was to complete the PACE application. I obtained the application from NFPA with a phone call and a credit card. I then requested a transcript from the College of Mount St. Joseph to prove I met the educational criteria. Next, I obtained a letter from my office manager verifying my years of work experience and a letter of reference from an attorney verifying his knowledge of my paralegal work, detailing the type of work I have performed. The whole packet was then forwarded to the Professional Examination Services (PES) along with a check for the examination fee balance of \$210.00. Then came the terrible wait. When was I going to have to face the music? After some delay [Oh, no - did they lose my application? Was I rejected?] I received notification of the test date. The pains began with the last minute cramming. It was a cold, snowy March morning as Renee Rothweiler Cipriani and I drove to Sylvan Technology Center in Blue Ash [the hospital]. We were tempted to use the snow as an excuse to postpone the test, but decided to face the dragon, PACE. On a dare, we had decided to become Cincinnati's guinea pigs together. What had we been thinking? As we walked in, the technician checked off our names, and advised us to use the restroom before we began as there was no getting up in the middle of the exam (I won't gross you out with a metaphor here). The room is set up to be soundproof, but there are several other people there taking preparatory tests such as the LSAT and GMAT as well as other certification tests. Be prepared for the audio and video surveillance. We also had to present a driver's license for verification. No chance of cheating or backing out now.

Renee and I were seated in adjoining cubicles with dividers that prevented any inadvertent peeks at her answers. We began with a tutorial on the computer which 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. We were given 15 minutes for the tutorial, but finished it in a matter of minutes (Is that all there is to it? This will be a breeze!). The pains increased as we proceeded to take the exam. Was it my imagination or did they purposely put the questions I

couldn't answer in the beginning of the exam just to increase my anxiety?

The format is relatively simple - multiple choice with four possible answers (guesses). You simply click on 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 complete the exam, but with this format, Renee and I were able to finish in one and a half hours. That included going back over the questions I had skipped, as well as those I had narrowed down to two possible answers. I looked at my time and pondered whether to go back and check all my answers. As I was deciding that I would end up changing right answers to wrong answers if I did that, I heard Renee typing. Good heavens - what was she doing?? For the past hour and a half, all I had heard from her was the clicking of the mouse. What could she be doing that required typing? I hadn't typed anything. Could she have become totally frustrated and decided to sabotage the computer? Had she discovered some way to determine the correct answers? She then got up and left the room. I then quickly decided that I was going to leave my answers alone and finish the exam. A different screen appeared on my computer. Then I understood - there is a comment section at the end. It was her comments that Renee had been typing! We were told that our results would be verified, then sent to NFPA. NFPA would send our results to us within 21 days. Something told me 21 days would seem like 21 years.

Renee and I stared at each other as we walked out to the car. We were almost in tears as we decided to have an early lunch before heading to work. Maybe that would help our stomachs settle down. Over lunch we discussed various questions which had us perplexed. We had answered about a dozen of them differently, and another dozen we had simply guessed. We were convinced that 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 which 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 only told a couple of 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 Renee had passed, but I had failed.

Over the next few days, however, we started realizing that maybe we didn't do so badly after all and our anxiety lessened. 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 made lucky guesses on some of those. Eight days after the exam, I received a phone call from my daughter that I had mail

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from PES. I told her to hurry and open the envelope. I held my breath as she scanned the letter until she read the part that said CONGRATULATIONS. I started jumping up and down and told Renee to find out if she received her letter. Renee called her next-door neighbor (Beth) and asked her to check her mailbox for a letter from PES and to call her right back at work. Beth called a few minutes later and read, "CONGRATULATIONS, you have passed PACE."

Our anxiety was replaced by relief, then excitement over our accomplishment. We had slain the dragon, we had given birth to a credential - RP.

Why did we take PACE? Are we psychotic or masochistic? There are several benefits to being credentialed. They include:

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

Renee and I are very self-directed and self-motivated. We took PACE both to advance our profession and to validate our 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.

We encourage our fellow members to overcome their fears and hesitancy, and take the exam. You'll be glad you did!!

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**What is NFPA?**

(National Federation of Paralegal Association, Inc.)

You hear that term bantered around all the time by members who seem to be knowledgeable about what goes on, leaving other looking around quizzically. NFPA has been a part of the paralegal profession for a long time — longer than has the CPA and it has seen many developments in the legal profession over the last twenty years.

A federation is a group of organizations that share a common bond, and the CPA is a part of the group. In order to strengthen our position nationally and in order to derive a benefit from paralegal organizations within other states, we joined the federation. The CPA, as with the other organizations, has one vote on the national level, regardless of how big or small our organization becomes in terms of membership numbers. Therefore, every paralegal organization in attendance at the national meeting derives the same privileges and carries the same weight. It's similar to our Senate

where smaller states have the same voting rights and privileges as larger states.

Each year our CPA members elect a person to speak for them at the national level. There is also a second person who may speak in the absence of the primary representative. Your primary and secondary representatives need to be sure that, when they speak at the national meetings, they have your interests at heart and vote on issues from which you ultimately derive a benefit. The CPA is not bound by the decisions that NFPA makes, but it generally follows the guidelines that it recommends.

The NFPA committee meetings are held monthly, generally at lunch time, at a convenient location in downtown Cincinnati. We realize that many paralegals work in the Greater Cincinnati suburbs or in Northern Kentucky, and are not able to attend lunch time meetings. Anyone may join a meeting via telephone, as long as we have advance notice and are able to send you the agenda items before the meetings commence. Several CPA members participate in committee meetings via telephone.

Of course it may take some reading and several meetings for newcomers to get up-to-speed on national issues, not because they are so complex, but because there are generally many topics to be covered. However, once you familiarize yourself with what's going on, you'll enjoy adding to the lively discussions. Not all committee members agree on every issue, and not all decisions are unanimous; but diverse ideas and different opinions fuel the sifting of information so that all subjects are looked at from all angles.

The CPA board and committee members would like to have more people involved in the association. Everyone has talent to offer. The time commitment varies and can be as little as one hour a month, or greater if you wish to participate in any ad hoc projects. Please join us. Come and discuss issues such as recovery of paralegal fees, character and fitness requirements, inmates performing paralegal duties, marketing of PACE (paralegal advanced competency exam), etc. Call me, Carolyn Saenz, at 629-1465, if you can join us for an hour each month. ☐

**PACE STUDY GROUP PART TRES**

Interest has been expressed in forming a third study group to prepare for PACE. At least five members are needed to make the group effective. The group meets every other week at noon for an hour. Each member of the group is expected to be prepared to contribute to the discussion and to make one or two presentations. Purchase of the PACE Study Manual is required. Call Deborah Baer McKinney at (513) 721-4450.