

The SFVBA Launches New Paralegal Section!

By Angela M. Hutchinson



ADMINISTRATIVE, PROFESSIONALS' DAY IS OBSERVED ON APRIL 25 TO recognize the work of secretaries, administrative assistants, receptionists and other office support staff. Lawyers know first hand the importance of an excellent administrative team, especially paralegals, who play a significant role in law firms of all sizes.

The San Fernando Valley Bar Association recently launched a new Paralegal Section, co-chaired by Amy Bernardino and Sarah Thrift. Bernardino is a Senior Corporate Paralegal at PennyMac, a specialty asset management firm in Moorpark. Her duties include corporate maintenance for over 20 entities, supporting attorneys and business groups with a multitude of financial transactions and assisting with various SEC filings. Bernardino reports directly to the public company's General Counsel, Corporate & Securities.

Sarah Thrift is a Litigation Paralegal with Lewitt, Hackman, Shapiro, Marshall & Harlan, a full-service business, real estate and civil litigation law firm in Encino. Thrift has been with Lewitt Hackman for almost eight years. Her work focuses on civil litigation in the areas of business, securities, employment, intellectual property and real estate. Her experience includes assisting with all phases of litigation from drafting and filing of the initial pleadings through discovery, motion practice, trial preparation and even some appellate work. Thrift also has expertise in managing complex class action and other document intensive cases through the use of advanced electronic discovery tools and document management systems.

Thrift and Bernardino talk to *Valley Lawyer* about the Paralegal Section's goals, their reason for getting involved and their work as paralegals. SFVBA members and their administrative staff who are interested in becoming involved with the newly launched Paralegal Section should contact the Bar's offices for more information.



Sarah Thrift
Paralegal Co-Chair



Amy Bernardino
Paralegal Co-Chair

Valley Lawyer: What inspired you to work in the paralegal field?

Sarah Thrift: I was always interested in the law and considered becoming an attorney while in high school. After taking a few years off when my daughter was young, I began working as a legal secretary. I really enjoyed the work, but wanted a greater challenge, so I went back to school to complete my degree and earn my paralegal certificate. The aspect of the job which most inspired me to work in the paralegal field is having the opportunity to assist people during what can be an incredibly stressful and frustrating time.

Amy Bernardino: I was working as an administrative assistant in the legal department of a video game company, and I realized a lot of the work I was doing (corporate filings, reviewing licenses, etc.) were paralegal-type tasks. I wanted to take on more of these tasks and have greater responsibility, so I decided to obtain my paralegal certificate. I quickly realized that the corporate and securities area was where I would thrive. I began working for a mortgage company as a paralegal assistant while I was still getting my certificate, and found a fantastic mentor. Over six years later, I am still thankful I went down this path.

VL: How did you become involved with the SFVBA Paralegal Section?

AB: Most bar associations do not have a paralegal section, and while paralegals are usually allowed to join them, paralegals do not always feel like they are a part of the organization. Sarah Thrift and I decided to approach the SFVBA through one of its trustees, who is also our colleague, and see if they would be interested in having a section dedicated to paralegals. Sarah and I were thrilled when the response was a resounding “yes.”

ST: Amy and I were both members of the Los Angeles Paralegal Association. LAPA’s San Fernando Valley section had been dormant for many years. We felt there was a need for quality continuing education for paralegals and other legal professionals in the San Fernando Valley, so we decided to work together to revive the section. For the last few years, we served as the co-chairs of LAPA’s San Fernando Valley section, hosting many successful continuing education seminars and networking events.

We decided we wanted to pursue a greater connection and collaboration between paralegals and attorneys in the San Fernando Valley, so we approached Kira Masteller, an SFVBA Trustee and an attorney at my firm, Lewitt Hackman, to propose developing a paralegal section for the SFVBA. Kira was enthusiastic about the idea (especially since she was previously a paralegal herself).

VL: What are some of the main goals of the Section?

AB: The main goal of the Section is to offer informative and interesting MCLE seminars to legal professionals in the area, with a specific focus on paralegals. The Section also aims to put in the forefront of attorneys’ and paralegals’ minds Business and Professions Code §6450, which defines “paralegal” and sets forth initial and continuing education requirements.

ST: The goals of the Section are to advance the paralegal profession and strengthen the professional relationship between paralegals and the attorneys with whom they work. We plan to achieve these goals by offering continuing legal education seminars on topics that will be of interest to all legal professionals.

VL: What advice do you have for those professionals that have an interest in becoming a paralegal?

ST: Take your professional development seriously! Understand the requirements for paralegals outlined in Business and Professions Code Sec.6450 et seq., make sure you are compliant and educate the attorneys you work with about them too. Pursue continuing legal education and advanced certifications if you want to be taken seriously as a valuable member of the legal team.

Be proactive on the cases you are involved with and ask lots of questions. The more interest you show, the more opportunities and responsibility you will be given. And be sure to keep up to date with the technological advances affecting our field, particularly those in the area of e-discovery. A paralegal with experience and understanding in this area will always be in demand.

AB: Earning your paralegal certificate does not ensure your ability to get a job as a paralegal. Almost as important as your paralegal education is your ability to network. Attend networking events sponsored by the San Fernando Valley Bar Association. Even if you have not decided on a specific field yet, attend MCLE seminars that are interesting to you. Not only will you become knowledgeable in different disciplines, but you will also meet paralegals and attorneys who might prove instrumental in your career search.

VL: What do you like most about your work? And what is the most challenging aspect?

ST: I love what I do, so isolating the thing I like most about my work is difficult... What I find most rewarding about my work is having the opportunity to assist clients through the often frustrating and stressful experience of litigation... The most challenging aspect of my work is developing new ways to handle the constantly expanding volume of documents and information involved in litigation today.

Electronic discovery is having a profound impact on the way litigation is handled and the technology keeps advancing. Having an understanding of this technology has allowed me the opportunity to develop systems and implement software solutions which have kept our firm on top of these changes.

AB: The nature of my work affords me the opportunity to learn something new each day. The most challenging aspect is absorbing the information timely and being able to apply it immediately. ⚡

Angela M. Hutchinson celebrates four years as the Editor of SFVBA’s Valley Lawyer magazine. She works as a communications consultant, helping businesses and non-profit organizations develop and execute media and marketing initiatives. She can be reached at editor@sfvba.org.

