Roosevelt University celebrates 40 years preparing paralegals for law firms

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN
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It was her second week at Butler, Rubin, Saltarelli & Boyd LLP, and Carrie Lausen was literally flying high.

The year was 1988, and Lausen—a newly minted paralegal from Roosevelt University—was one of three firm members on a flight to Hartford, Conn., for a document review on a pending lawsuit.

After earning a business degree in 1985 from Indiana University, Lausen took a job as a clerk for a now-defunct Japanese bank.

But wanting to launch a professional career, Lausen enrolled in the paralegal program at Roosevelt. Two weeks after graduation, she had a job at Butler, Rubin.

Two weeks after that, she was on the flight to Hartford along with one partner and one associate.

It was the first time she had flown for work.

“I just felt so important,” Lausen said. “It seemed very cool at the time.”

Lausen is one of the more than 10,000 graduates of Roosevelt’s paralegal program this year, which celebrates its 40th birthday. She has served as the program’s director since 1999.

The school offers both a four-year bachelor’s program in paralegal studies and a post-baccalaureate program that full-time students can complete in 4½ months.

As one of Illinois’ 17 ABA-approved paralegal programs, Roosevelt graduates about 150 students per year, most of whom work in the Chicago area, Lausen said.

“The paralegal profession grew out of a need in the legal environment for work being done that was not a secretarial position and also not a attorney position,” Lausen said.

“The original paralegals were secretaries who took on more responsibility.”

Originally called “legal assistants,” paralegals handle substantive legal work without providing direct client representation. Typical responsibilities include legal research, document drafting, interviewing clients and witnesses, managing information databases and assisting attorneys in court.

“We often joke that paralegals know more than new lawyers,” Lausen said, “because they can actually do the work, while the new lawyers have been studying theory in law school.”

In the 1970s, the National Center for Paralegal Studies in Atlanta approached Roosevelt and other universities about creating paralegal training programs. Roosevelt accepted and became ABA-approved in 1976.

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Kevin Henderson, a 1994 graduate, also found that work as a paralegal scratched his attorney itch.

At Johnson & Bell Ltd., Henderson worked with the defense on toxic-tort litigation for a case that went to trial in Bloomington.

“It did exactly what I hoped,” Henderson said. “It was giving me insight into the practice of law.”

He returned to Roosevelt in 1996 to work as a career counselor and is now director of members at the American Bar Association.

“I owe most of my career to (Roosevelt’s) program,” he said.

“It’s an opportunity for someone who is interested in law but either they do not have the financial means to go to law school or, like me, they are not really aware of what it would be like to work in the legal profession.”

Financial pressures also impacted Henderson’s decision, as he could not afford to go into the debt that comes with law school.

Tuition at Roosevelt is about $11,000. According to the Illinois Paralegal Association’s most recent survey in 2013, median salaries for Cook County paralegals range from $40,000 for paralegals with less than a year of experience to $69,990 for those with 12 years or more.

Patricia Pilawski of Perkins, Coie LLP graduated in 1982. She began her career as a paralegal with Shell Oil Co and then attended the 30-paralegal team at Skadden, Arps, Meagher & Flom LLP.

For Pilawski, paralegal work was a stepping stone to administrative work, which she has done at Jenner & Block LLP, Kirkland & Ellis LLP and now Perkins, Coie.

“The program taught you real-life practical skills that helped you work in the legal field and be successful,” Pilawski said.

“Just having that background, I think it was important for me to be able to lead a bunch of people who expected me to know what I was doing,” she said.

“It was giving me insight into the practice of law.”

Carrie Lausen

Carrie Lausen, one of the firm’s most recent graduates, now practices as a paralegal at The John Marshall School.

“The school employs licensed attorneys as instructors; Risser credits their experience for her smooth law school transition.”

She also credits the school’s curriculum of legal research and writing, civil litigation, ethics and professional responsibility.

“I was a paralegal myself, and now I will be an attorney,” Risser said. “Paralegals are very knowledgeable people, and when you have a team spirit in the office, then everybody works for the greater good.”

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