

'Then, Again...'

My Road to Certification

By Melissa Hamilton, ACP

When I graduated with my Bachelor of Science degree as a legal assistant, I considered sitting for the CLA exam. Then, again, more studying and an intensive two-day written examination was more than I could face right out of college. I began my job hunt instead.

After much searching, I finally found employment as a claims analyst for the state workers compensation agency. This job utilized my legal training, but not as a legal assistant. Maybe I should have sat for that CLA exam.

After more than eight years of working in claims, the urgency of finding employment as a paralegal overtook me. I landed a legal assistant position in the legal advisory unit of the Department of Human Services. I was finally working as a legal assistant, and I thought more about the CLA exam. Then, again, I was newly married, so I did not want to start studying again.

More than two years later, I found my current paralegal position with the North Dakota Department of Transportation. The NDDOT values continued training and recommends that employees at every level be certified in their disciplines. It was nice to have this support, and I toyed with the idea of taking the CLA exam.

Then, again, I had just started a new job and wanted to make sure I was secure in my position before taking on all that studying.

This seemed to be a developing pattern.

I did, however, join my local paralegal association, the Western Dakota Association of Legal Assistants, and the National Association of Legal Assistants (before we became "NALA, The Association of Legal Assistants/Paralegals"). In my second year as a WDALA member, my professional enthusiasm was blossoming and I volunteered to serve as secretary. I also got serious about sitting for the CLA exam.

I ordered the *CLA Review Manual*, the *NALA Manual for Paralegals*, and the *CLA Mock Exam and Study Guide*. I also attended the NALA Convention in Tampa where I made a quest of finding out as much as I could about the CLA exam. Everyone I talked to had recommendations and tips on what and how to study.

The handouts from a member presentation on organizing a CLA review course included a tip-sheet on how to prepare for and take the examination. These tips, and the encouragement I received at the convention reassured me that I had made the right decision to finally sit for the CLA exam—no more "then, again" excuses.

I followed a recommendation to attend the *NALA Short Course* in Denver, just a short plane ride from my home in Bismarck. This intensive course recalled much of what I had learned in college as well as presenting knowledge in new areas.

I was refreshed and rejuvenated in my preparation. Then, again, I became discouraged that I wasn't able to study more.

My husband worked rotating shifts, I had two daughters under the age of three, and a full-time job. I felt overwhelmed and I started to think of excuses not to take the exam. But this time I rejected "then, again" and delved into all the positive energy I received at the NALA Convention and the *Short Course*. I had to do this.

I went back to the basics. I broke each part of the exam into parts and studied these in the evening after the girls were in bed, and, as much as I could, on the weekends. Time was running out, however, and I realized that I needed help.

My parents had always encouraged me to never quit learning, so every Friday after work I would pack up the girls, all my books and study materials, and drive to the family farm about two hours away. I would spend all weekend studying in the camper out back while Mom watched the girls. They would bring me lunch on my study breaks.

Late Sunday afternoon, we would pack up and head home. We repeated this drill every weekend until it was time to take the exam. To this day, my daughters call my parents' camper "Mommy's study place."

I was able to take the exam at a law firm in Mandan, just across the Missouri



River from Bismarck. The day of the examination was numbingly cold (below zero) and windy. My mind was also numb after the first day of testing, but I returned for the second day and completed the exam. I wasn't too confident about my performance, which was to be expected according to the information I had in my study materials. At least I had achieved my goal of sitting for the exam.

When I received the results weeks later,

I found that I had passed everything except the "Judgment & Analysis" section. The essay tripped me up.

I was disappointed, but my husband gently reminded me that this was a great victory for someone with a family and full-time job—and for someone who thought she had probably failed the entire exam. I needed to get back to the books and study to retake that last section.

I considered what else I could do to

study. I already had all the books and had attended the *Short Course*. Then, I remembered the NALA Campus program with a J&A course that I could do online. I signed up and threw myself back into studying.

A great benefit of the NALA Campus course was that it was all online and interactive. I could study on my own schedule and get instantaneous feedback. This was a great refresher and confidence booster. My confidence was soaring when I went to retake the J&A section.

As the time drew near for the results to arrive by mail, I stalked our postman daily. My mom was with me the day the distinctive envelope from NALA arrived and I turned it over apprehensively in my hands. Mom reminded me that the worst that could happen would be to try again, so I tore open the envelope, and...I passed!

Mom bought a special frame for my CLA Certificate that I proudly display at work.

I remember all of the "then, again" excuses that led to years passing before I finally sat for the CLA exam. It seems that a "then, again" always stood in the way of the commitment needed. Then, again, I found that the valuable resources of NALA, along with the support and guidance of loved ones, can get you through the CLA/CP examination—even if you need to take it again.

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