



Melissa O.

What do you want to be when you grow up? That was a hard-to-answer question for my young self. My answer would usually be a teacher, a secretary, a bookkeeper, nurse – you know, something “safe” – or sometimes an “I don’t know.”

Then my ASVAB testing in high school indicated a “stenographer” as a potential career path, but what in the world was that?

Stenographer (noun): a person whose job is to transcribe speech in shorthand.

It sounded so boring and mechanical to my high-school self. I was going to college to be the first in my family with a college education.

Meanwhile, my dad ran a service station on South Dakota Highway 50, crossing paths with many patrons through the years, and one fateful day Pat Lenker, a court reporter from Winner, gave a glowing recommendation to him about stenography. So, while home one weekend during my first semester of college, Dad told me about this wonderful profession called court reporting, as he thought it would be something I’d be “good at.” So, after some careful thought, I made the leap: called Stenotype Institute in Sioux Falls, took a tour of the school, signed up for classes, and, lo and behold, graduated with a diploma in court reporting two and a half years later.

Now, with a diploma in court reporting in my hand and an engagement ring on my finger (from my biggest supporter, my now-hubby, Shane), I obtained a business loan, moved to Armour, and started freelance court reporting solo, along with transcribing medical dictation a few days a week for a clinic. To my good fortune, I became mentored by Jan Horner, an experienced freelancer from Delmont (who had

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relocated with her family from Denver), as I had really no clue of “real world” court reporting. Between the two of us, we began to secure more reporting jobs and decided to go into a court reporting business “partnership” of sorts. We had our business cards ready to go to the printers when she called me after working court one Tuesday afternoon saying the official court reporter in Lake Andes had just up and left (retiring a little early, as her last jury trial had settled). Jan, after assuring me that she was NOT interested in being an official reporter, encouraged me to contact Judge Paul Kern if I had any inclination in a career as an official.

When I telephoned Judge Kern inquiring about the official job position, he said he would need a reporter on the next Monday and Tuesday and spewed forth about five more dates. Yes, I will be there! The next call was to Jan, who said she would put the business card printing on hold.

As the fill-in reporter, I walked into an office with a desk, chair, telephone, a typewriter, and an extremely patient and tolerant Judge who would eventually consider me his indispensable personal assistant. And thank goodness for Dave Bergendahl from Yankton, who became my official court reporter mentor, always effortlessly knowing what to do.

I soon realized you never have the same day twice in this legal profession, as there is constant learning (oftentimes to more detail than you ever wanted to know). After about a month of what I'll term as break-in time, Judge Kern summoned me to his chambers and announced he was hiring me as the official court reporter. WOW! I was ecstatic! And, alas, those business cards were never printed.

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That was February 1995 and Judge Kern retired that June. What now? I am a probationary judicial employee with no judge, but then Magistrate Judge Lee Tappe was appointed to the circuit court bench in September 1995. Then in the fall of 2002, Judge Boyd McMurchie was assigned to our territory, and his retirement date was October 31, 2005. Magistrate Judge Bruce Anderson was then appointed and began his circuit court career January 2006 and continues to this present day. What a privilege it has been to work with four very honorable judges in the South Dakota Unified Judicial System.

Still, a few decades into this career, courtroom participants will inquire of me, “So how does that machine work?” Energetically I respond that it is a phonetic shorthand language, typed quickly and accurately, to produce a typewritten transcript known as the record.

I have been told that the court reporter is the hardest worker in the courtroom, which makes me beam with pride and accomplishment in a job well done. And court reporting is, most definitely, never boring.



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