

A Long Road Traveled

From Student to Reporter

Becoming a court reporter is no easy task and requires traveling on a road fraught with challenges. How can you ensure a safe passage? Perseverance, commitment and dedication. Here's how one reporter did it.

As I reflect over these past years of the battle I fought to get where I am today, I can't help but be proud that I have chosen this career. Benjamin Franklin once said, "He that can have patience can have what he will."

Before I was a court reporter, I was a legal secretary, and I was at a point in my life that I knew that it was past time for me to determine "what" and "who" I wanted to be. I didn't want to sit behind a desk for the rest of my life. I wanted variety and a challenging call of duty.

The law office where I worked had a beautiful view of the courthouse. I would see court reporters toting their equipment to and from their depositions, trials and hearings. One day I asked the court reporter about her profession as she sat waiting in our office for the attorneys and their clients. I was amazed. Three months later I was sitting in my first theory class — a move that changed my life forever.

Once I was in school, I began noticing a lot of negative talk about how extremely difficult it was to become a court reporter. I heard so much negative talk from my peers that I decided to shut my ears to all of it. To make matters more difficult, I felt like all the odds were against me. I was driving an hour and 20 minutes one way two nights a week, working 40 hours a week, getting up at 4:45 a.m. to practice on my machine and raising my daughter as a single parent. But I beat those odds, and you can, too.

About the Author

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Building Speed

One of the hardest aspects of trying to become a court reporter is building your speed. Here are some of the approaches that helped me.

Skill building affected every aspect of my life, and it did and continues to do unimaginable things for me. Wisely scheduling practice time will be one of the most valuable tools you can give yourself that will help you progress. Learn to discipline yourself when the constant, everyday challenges get in the way of practicing. Have a vision and make it a reality.

Practice every day. If you find yourself omitting an occasional day of practice, you will get out of your routine quickly. Before you know it, your machine hasn't received any attention in days. Daily dedication means applying efforts while on vacation and during holidays. When I went on vacation, sessions went too. It was so relaxing doing a practice session while viewing the sun coming up over the Gulf of Mexico.

I remember one instance of putting off my machine practice. I had just bought a new house, and there were so many other things that I needed to do. My practice time came to a screeching halt. I actually felt so guilty about not practicing that I had to close the door to the room where my machine sat. I soon realized I needed to re-evaluate what was more important in life and prioritize.

Of course, I came upon obstacles both internal and external, but I have coped with them. One I frequently came upon is time spent doing effective practice. My whole day revolved around my practice schedule. I scheduled appointments, errands, social engagements, etc., all around my practice schedule. If it was going to interfere, I made adjustments. My sessions always came first. Many times I woke up at 3 a.m., unable to sleep. I got up and practiced into the wee hours of the morning.

Keep track of your practice times. This helped me see how I was progressing. I compared each day with the last, each week with the last, each month with the last, even each year with the last. If I knew that I wasn't going to be able to have a session on a particular day, then I added an extra 30 to 45 minutes to each session the week prior to that day.

Try not to get distracted at times when you are frustrated at the speed in which you're progressing. As long as you know that you are making a serious effort to improve, then that shouldn't bother you.

One time I was frustrated because I just wasn't progressing like I thought I should, and I had

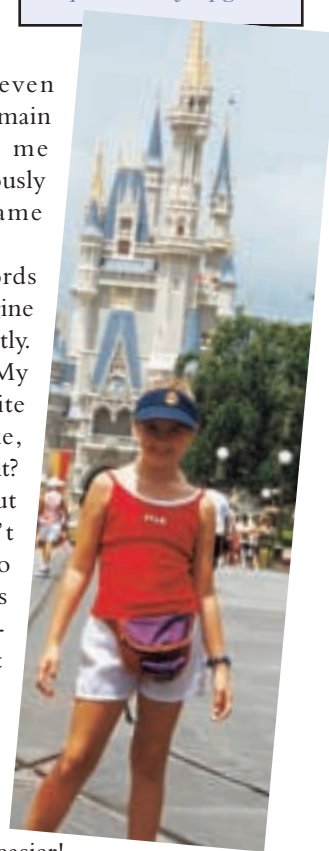
heard an advertisement on the radio about ginkgo biloba. The advertisement said it helped you concentrate better and improved memory skills. I went directly to the nearest vitamin store and bought a \$28 bottle. Oh, the things we do to help us write faster. And I can't forget about those relaxation tapes either. In the end, I realized that continuous daily dedication, a desire to succeed and a positive reflection on how well I had done up to that point were the only factors that I needed to progress.

Conquer the difficult take. When there was a difficult take I was working on, I wrote it out in longhand and propped it up in front of me. Then I practiced all the troublesome areas over and over again, without the dictation. If I was still having trouble, I broke it down even more and identified the main area that was causing me to stumble and continuously wrote it until it became easier.

There were many words that I couldn't ever imagine being able to write correctly. For example, *discipline*. My theory taught me to write this word in one stroke, STKPHREUPB. Easy, right? One stroke, that's all. But my fingers just didn't see it that way. It was so awkward to write this word. Today, it's a different story. I can write that word and many others. Everything comes naturally now. Since I've been reporting, it seems as though writing has become easier. Yes, I said easier!

The first time I did a take that had medical terminology in it, I was astonished. You don't really mean I have to write these long four- and five-syllable words, do you? Then came the long literary words. Now, why in the world would I have to learn how to write *consanguineous* or *illocutionary* and know the meaning of the word? Yes, those

I visited Disney World several years ago and took a picture of my daughter standing in front of Cinderella's Castle. After I took the picture, I promised myself that the next time we were here, and I took another photograph as a memento, that I would be reporting in my successful career. I enlarged that picture and posted it in my practice room (now office), and it was a daily reminder of my goal.



were rough times, but I am a much better person and reporter because I made the effort.

Sometimes the only time I felt protected from the world was during my practice sessions. The minute my fingertips felt the structure of the keys and my ears and brain began to hear the words being spoken, I felt as though I was in my own realm.

Designing my own steno during skill building has been a process that has taken years, and it will continue to grow as my skill grows. It enhanced my self-appreciation and has been self-molding to this day. More important, I had to earn it through many trials and tribulations.

The wisdom I gained during those years of practicing carries over to other aims in my life. I comprehend much more now than I ever have. I am strategically focused and limiting boundaries have become unlocked. The relationships I have with attorneys have been enhanced now that I'm a reporter. They tell me they are proud that I have taken such an interest in the judicial system, and they respect me and shake my hand, not to mention call me when they need a reporter!

Save your paper. I saved all the paper I had practiced on until my practice room was overflowing with five years' worth of steno paper. I placed them in neat four-foot-high columns. When I saw all those pads of paper, I knew that each one counted for a particular level or a particular take that I had struggled with, and it gave me a newfound respect for my session times.

Asking for Advice

While I was a student, I called some of the court reporters I knew and asked them how they got through it all. One told me that she shed many tears over her machine, but every tear was worth a day in her career that she is now spending. Sometimes just talking to them helped me get through my sessions, because I knew that they had been where I had been and that they got through their sessions too.

Talk with some of the court reporting firms in your area and tell them that you are a student and you would like to come in and spend a few hours watching. Or call your local trial courts about observing how the proceedings are done. Watch the reporter and see how she handles different situations. Think about joining NCRA's Virtual Mentors Program. You can find it at www.NCRAonline.org/vmp/index.html.

Some Other Tips

I have come to realize that this is a top-level skill, and it has its stresses that come along with it. To deal with this I learned to exercise. At one time when I was "down and out"

over my skillbuilding process, it helped relieve stress. At the gym I could just let it go on the weights or StairMaster or treadmill. I watched the closed-captioning on the television and knew that somewhere there is someone making those words appear and that they too had a skillbuilding process. I would mentally figure out how to spell phonetically each word that appeared.

The *JCR* was a valuable tool. With each new issue, I flipped right to the student section and began reading. I really could relate to this column and saw how much it benefited me.

As a legal secretary, I was introduced to politics when the attorney I worked for decided to run for a judge's position in our jurisdiction. Also, when I learned my cousin, Arkansas Senator Mike Beebe, has plans of running for governor in 2002, I became even more interested. I was curious about legislation, and I wanted to find out how it was affecting reporters today. So I contacted NCRA in January 2000 and advised them that I wanted to become more involved in reporting issues. To my surprise I got an immediate response. NCRA was holding a legislative boot camp in Washington, D.C., the following month. I had been a member for six years and had not gotten involved in any issues, so I decided now was the time.

The boot camp changed me, and I have even a stronger respect for my profession. One particular moment in Washington that will stand out in my mind forever was when all of us were gathered for the first meeting. The speaker instructed everybody to stand and say where you're from and how long you've been reporting. I realized that I was sitting in a room with an abundance of longtime reporters. Twelve years, 22 years, 31 years, 16 years. Was I the only rookie here? I said I'd been reporting eight months. That brought a round of supportive applause.

Reaching My Goal

I have appreciated every struggle I have had to endure, because that is what leads you to success. At times I even felt as though I was afraid of success. That feeling is long gone because I have finally endured it after many, many years of commitment, hard work and compassion for the legal system as a whole.

I will never forget my first solo job. Luckily, my client was a young attorney fresh out of law school. He was probably just as nervous as I was. Thankfully, it went well, and the compensation I received on that first job was more than what I had received in the past working a full 40-hour week.

You owe it to yourself to do the best you can do to succeed. I love this career and wouldn't think of doing anything else. I've been reporting some time now and must say, it has been more rewarding than I could have dared to imagine. ■