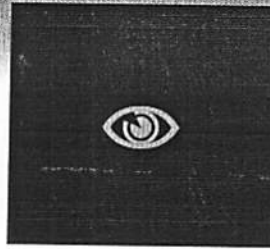


PARALEGAL SPOTLIGHT



From Rock Bottom to Rock Star

North Carolina paralegal breaks the cycle of domestic violence, addiction and homelessness to become an all-star student and homeless advocate.

LYNNE J. DEVENNY, NCCP

Majoring in paralegal studies is a challenge under any circumstances. The academic work is demanding, and learning substantive legal concepts and specialized practice skills requires extensive studying and an affinity for the law. Committing to and completing a rigorous paralegal program, even with a stable home and a supportive family, is hard

Setting the Stage for Hardship

Through her job as a family law paralegal, Smith identifies with many children involved in the juvenile court system. An only child, she was removed from her alcoholic mother's care and sent to live with her grandparents at the age of eight. She recalls a hard childhood, providing free labor on their farm and fearing her grandfather, who had a heavy hand when

as well as a family history of addiction, caught up with her. She spent most of her second semester unable to get out of bed. In retrospect, she knows that she was experiencing severe depression.

Unable to continue college, Smith started waitressing to support herself. She tracked down her mother in Florida and lived with her for a few years but found that, due to her mother's alcohol-

"It's dangerous being homeless. You can't keep shoes. You never have a toothbrush. You can't sleep anywhere. Sometimes you have nothing to eat or drink. You hear about people wanting to help the homeless, but when you're out there it's a completely different story. People will just as soon spit on you as help you."

enough. But North Carolina family law paralegal Lorie Smith (formerly Pacheco) earned an associate degree in paralegal studies, maintaining a 4.0 GPA and receiving prestigious state and national awards for her academic achievements, all while living in a homeless shelter in a new city where she did not know a soul.

it came to discipline.

Smith dreamed of being a veterinarian when she grew up. After high school, she briefly studied nursing at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania for the 1985-1986 academic year. But during this time, Smith's unresolved feelings regarding her mother's abandonment,

ism, they could not sustain a healthy relationship. She trained race horses for a living from 1987 to 1999, but she was involved in several long-term relationships in which she was the victim of domestic violence. "I didn't feel like I was worth anything," Smith described of her feelings of hopelessness at the time.

Her own depression and substance abuse grew progressively worse. After struggling to start over many times without success, she gave up trying to wrestle her own demons. Smith suddenly found herself living on the streets with no place to go and no one to turn to.

Hitting Rock Bottom

For almost two years, Smith wandered throughout various cities in North and South Carolina, including Myrtle Beach, struggling with addiction and mental health issues. As a homeless person, she was unwelcome in many areas, especially cities that relied heavily on tourism. She knew her situation was dangerous, but she did not know how to change it.

"I knew I needed to get some help. I felt like I was going to die. It's dangerous being homeless," Smith said. "You can't keep shoes. You never have a toothbrush.



Lorie Smith, family law paralegal and homeless advocate.

You can't sleep anywhere. Sometimes you have nothing to eat or drink. You're sweating, and you stink. You hear about people wanting to help the homeless, but when you're out there it's a completely different story. People will just as soon

sounded interesting. "I didn't know how the court system worked at all, but once I got into it I really loved it, especially case briefs and research," Smith said.

Smith's paralegal instructor and mentor, Susan Clarke, is still awed by Smith's ability

gal program that she was one of 20 scholars chosen from almost 1,500 nominees nationwide for *USA Today's* 2009 All-USA Community College Academic Team. The team honors the "best of the best" undergraduate academic all-stars from across

I never thought of myself as a people person, but it's easy for me to calm clients down and tell them that bad times don't last forever. Sometimes I share my own experiences so they'll know I really do understand.

spit on you as help you. You're treated like you're not even human, like an animal."

But she could not reach out for help. Smith's self-esteem was so low that she believed no one wanted to help her and that she did not deserve it. She could not imagine accessing area resources that she now knows were available. She explained how getting from one place to another looked impossible. "Your whole world shrinks when you're on foot," she said.

Smith recalls the constant dangers of homelessness, including theft and physical attacks. But even knowing the dangers, she says the psychological toll is so devastating that "you're scared to be homeless - and at the same time, scared *not* to be homeless....[it seems] like an insurmountable task to go from having absolutely nothing to having a job, a home and all the things that normal people have."

It took a brutal assault in Brunswick County, North Carolina in 2005 to break Smith's cycle of homelessness and addiction. While she was recovering from her injuries in the local hospital, a caring and persistent social worker urged her to get help. This time, Smith was ready to trust someone to help her. The social worker called First Fruit Ministries, a transitional women's housing shelter in Wilmington, North Carolina, to see if they had room for her and arranged transportation to the shelter after she was discharged.

Getting Back on Her Feet

After she moved to First Fruit Ministries, Smith received help for her addiction issues and in 2006 found her first job, working as an assistant dog groomer, since becoming homeless. She later left that job and worked for a short period in a production job at a factory, earning enough money to buy a car.

In 2007, Smith decided to enroll at Cape Fear Community College (CFCC). She chose paralegal studies because she had met a few paralegals, and their jobs

to analyze case law. "Lorie has an amazing ability to read a case and understand it—she is exceptional at case briefs," Clarke said. "I remember when she once presented a brief in class, she caught legal issues that I had missed. She explained the case much better than I could have."

While a student at CFCC, Smith excelled academically and maintained a 4.0 grade point average. She was active in Phi Theta Kappa, an academic honor society, including serving a term as its vice president. In 2008, she was awarded the North Carolina State Bar Association Paralegal Division Scholarship. She also received the 2009 Student Achievement Award at a CFCC Board of Trustees meeting and won the 2009 North Carolina Community College System Academic Excellence Award. Both are competitive academic awards based on grades, community service and essay submissions and are presented to only a few students from each community college in the North Carolina system.

As for maintaining a perfect grade point average, Smith attributes it to her love of the subject matter as well as wanting to meet the expectations of the many people who had supported her and helped her reach this point in her life. "I was just so thankful for the opportunity. People were counting on me to do well because they helped me. I studied and worked hard," she said.

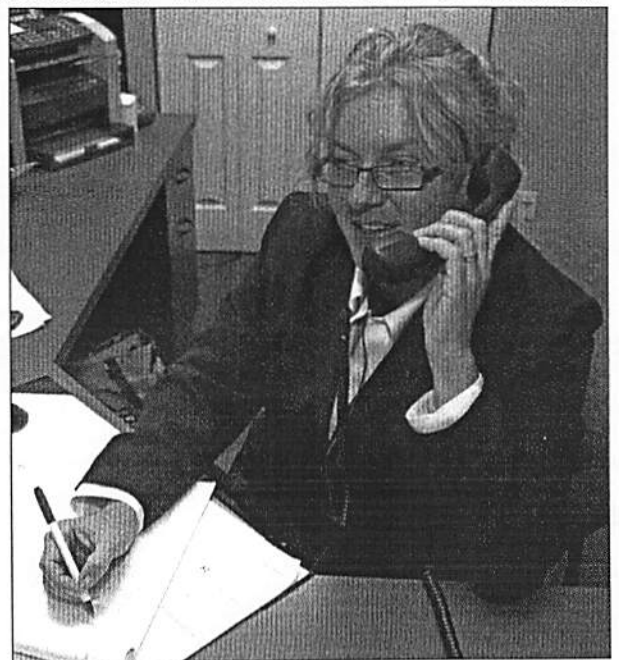
Smith also credits her academic achievements to a terrific memory and strong writing skills learned from excellent high school English teachers. "The law just really made sense to me; it seemed like a natural fit," she said.

She was so successful in CFCC's parale-

gal program that she was one of 20 scholars who not only excel in scholarship but also extend their intellectual abilities beyond the classroom to benefit society. Students are nominated by their schools, and participants are featured in *USA Today* and receive a \$2,500 cash award.

In April 2009, Smith traveled with Clarke; CFCC's president, Dr. Eric McKeithan; and her fiancé, David Smith, to Phoenix, Arizona, to receive the *USA Today* award and be honored at the American Association of Community Colleges convention.

Smith attributes much of her success to Clarke's friendship and encouragement and describes her as "like a moth-



Smith's hardships help her calm clients who experience setbacks in their own lives.

er to me." Clarke explains what makes Smith special. "Lorie is physically beautiful - with an infectious smile, she's full of energy, never stops and never quits. She's extremely courteous and respectful. She has this look about her that makes you believe she is always thinking. She wants to learn every- | **continued on page 49**

thing about the practice of law. She is also hysterically funny and can do many impressions," Clarke said. "Lorie is extremely loyal and giving. She is a joy to know and leaves people she has known richer for knowing her."

Smith won another prestigious academic award, a Guistwhite Scholarship valued at \$5,000, for her outstanding record at CFCC. She is using the scholarship money to help fund a bachelor's degree in non-profit business administration at UNC-Pembroke. Currently a junior, she attends college part-time while working full-time as a paralegal.

Moving Into the Spotlight

In July 2009, Smith celebrated a whirlwind weekend of personal triumphs. "I graduated on Friday, got married on Saturday and started my first paralegal job on Monday," she said.

In the summer of 2009, Smith completed a 160-hour internship at Hager & Associates, a family law firm in Wilmington, North Carolina. The internship went so well that the firm hired her full time as a paralegal. She was surprised to find herself working in a family law office. "Family law was my least favorite class. I thought it was boring then, but I found I really like it," she confessed.

As a paralegal to senior partner Virginia Hager and former associate Lee-Anne Quattrucci, part of Smith's job is talking to the firm's clients, many of whom have experienced severe setbacks in their own personal lives. "Ms. Hager says I should get a degree in social work because I'm so good with clients," Smith said. "A lot of them have problems with drugs and addiction. Until this job, I never thought of myself as a people person, but it's easy for me to calm them down and tell them that bad times don't last forever. Sometimes I share my own experiences, so they'll know I really do understand."

Quattrucci describes Smith as "vivacious, outgoing and hardworking" and a "pleasure to work with." She attributes Smith's success, in part, to her resilience. "Lorie is a very strong woman, and whenever she falls she gets back up. She has done that in her own life and with work. If she makes a mistake, then she fixes it and keeps on moving," Quattrucci said.

Smith encourages people who believe they have hit rock bottom to have faith that things will improve. "Sometimes you just need to know that you can rest, place your faith in God, and know that you

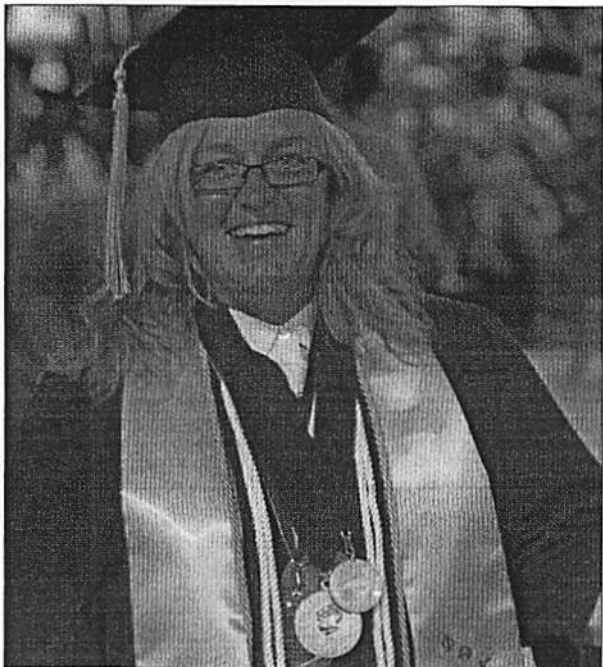
learning something new. She loves the academic challenge of earning her bachelor's degree but is not sure how she will apply it. Running a non-profit organization interests her, but through her work as a family law paralegal and her own childhood experiences, Smith has discovered that she wants to help children in the juvenile court system. She is drawn to the work done by legal professionals assisting these children and the Department of Social Services.

Smith is comfortable with a little uncertainty regarding her long-term goals and is trying to focus on the stability of her new home, job and successful college career. "As long as I'm not moving backward, it's okay to stand still for a while. I'm going to stay steady, learn and work on maintaining that 4.0 GPA," she said.

She plans to take the summer off and spend time with her new husband, riding four-wheelers on the beach and surf-fishing. With regard to how she spends her limited spare time, she laughingly says, "I'm a professional napper."

As a result of her own experience on the streets and the help she received to turn her life around, Smith has become a fierce advocate for the homeless. Since enrolling at CFCC, she has encouraged almost a half dozen women from the shelter to

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Smith has won multiple academic awards.

can be forgiven and move forward. Sometimes you have to let a lot of stuff go and get rid of the garbage or it'll hound you and suck the life out of you."

Star of Her Own Show

In November 2009, Smith was appointed to the Paralegal Advisory Committee at CFCC. She is interested in helping CFCC develop its internship program. She acknowledges that there are fewer jobs available in the area due to the economy, which makes locating internships harder, but she believes that internships are critical to paralegal students, who need hands-on experience in a law office.

Smith admits that she gets bored if she is not

enroll in school, although she admits it has been difficult for some of them to stick with their educational plans. She expresses frustration that it is so hard for many women to break the cycle of domestic violence, addiction and homelessness, even with many helping hands, but she knows firsthand that it can be done. Recently appointed to the Executive Board for the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in the Cape Fear Region, spearheaded by The United Way, she continues to work to help homeless individuals.

She has walked in their shoes, and she knows how it feels. □

Lynne J. DeVenny is a North Carolina State Bar Certified Paralegal employed by Elliot Pishko Morgan, P.A., in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She specializes in workers' compensation and civil injury cases. She blogs at Practical Paralegalism (<http://www.practicalparalegalism.com>) and co-hosts a monthly podcast for paralegals, "The Paralegal Voice," at Legal Talk Network (<http://www.legaltalknetwork.com>).