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Tribe of Scribes

Typing lightning fast, court reporters get all the legal details

Want a secure, high-paying job in the legal field that still enables you to work flexible hours with no nights or weekends? Instead of angling for the partner track at a very lazy law firm, think of becoming a court reporter.

Even if you've never logged time on a jury or attended a trial, you've probably seen court reporters in action on shows like "Judge Judy" or programs on Court TV. Court reporters serve as scribes of sorts, keeping written records of legal proceedings. Clicking away on their stenography machines, court reporters sit in on trials big and small.

They can also choose to work during depositions and take down machine shorthand of every word uttered. Court reporters can be broadcast captioners from home, typing in Katie Couric's nighttime newscast verbatim. There's even a variation called CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation), in which these pros accompany deaf or hearing-impaired clients to places like college classes to provide an instant translation of speech into text.

Once dominated by men, the field has recently evolved. "Interestingly enough, it's now primarily women," said Marybeth Everhart, lead instructor of the court reporting program at Anne Arundel Community College (AACC). "Thirty years ago, it was mostly a male profession, but women have taken over because of the flexibility of the scheduling. They can pick and choose their days of work, make a reasonable income and work around their kids' schedules."

What does it take to break into the field? A typing speed of -- gulp -- 225 words per minute. But this isn't traditional word processing. Instead, court reporters and captioners have machines, and a language, all their own. Using a stenotype machine, which looks a bit like an old-fashioned typewriter, they can press multiple keys at once, recording combinations of letters that represent words, sound or phrases. "It's machine shorthand," said Everhart. "It's based on phonetics, but instead of symbols, we use letters. Unlike a typewriter,

we're not typing every single letter of every word. There are many common phrases in the English language and in legalese. So, in one stroke of the hand, you have a phrase like, 'from time to time.'"

Everhart worked as a court reporter for 20 years before helping to start the class at AACC, which is currently the only court-reporting and captioning class in the D.C. metro area. The program

started in January 2005; the current 16 students enrolled are its pioneers.

Diane Superczynski is one of these aspiring court scribblers. After two decades as a flight attendant with U.S. Airways, the 41-year-old mother of two from Pasadena, Md., decided to change careers. "My company was going into its second bankruptcy, and I thought we were going to close our doors," Superczynski said. "I needed a career that was flexible and lucrative, and [one that] I could take anywhere."

Mary Ellen Long is also a student at AACC. Her career spanned jobs in education, banking and the federal government, but now this 50-year-old mother from Dayton, Md., thinks she has finally

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Shari Broussard
Court Reporter

found her niche. “It was something I’d had an interest in since high school,” she said. “Not too long ago, I heard an ad for the college [AACC] and decided to pursue it.” Long said even her three kids are intrigued. “My daughters see me at it, and I tell them the real-life stories about the amount of money that people are making. My oldest is thinking about maybe looking into this as a sideline.”

You’ve got to spend money to make money, though. Students at AACC buy their own stenography machines, which run anywhere from \$1,000 for a used model to \$4,500 for a brand-new, top-of-the-line machine. Each student will complete the course when he or she can type the requisite 225 words per minute -- usually two-and-a-half years. Then the students head out into the marketplace, where they can choose to do freelance work or sign on with firms such as Capital Reporting Company (CRC), which has offices throughout the area.

Shari Broussard is CRC’s partner and vice president. She was the last graduate of the court reporting classes at Strayer University 20 years ago, and has been working as a court reporter ever since. “It’s a hard field to get into. Students come in, but they reach plateaus on their speed. They might stay [at the same speed] for six months and then they get frustrated and drop out.” Other than typing speed, there are no formal education requirements. But court reporters should be computer literate and have above-average English skills -- including spelling -- and excellent command of grammar and punctuation. They also need to be extremely accurate and work well under stress.

According to the National Court Reporters Association (ncraonline.org), the national average annual salary for court reporters who work in courtrooms and on depositions is \$62,000. Broadcast captioners earn anywhere from \$35,000 to \$75,000. Locally, a reporter starting out in

Prince George’s County usually makes \$38,000 to \$42,000 a year, but they can charge a per-page transcript fee to come closer to the national average.

Broussard said real-time reporting lands even higher salaries. Real-time means a reporter is typing something that a lawyer or other pro is reading -- say, live court testimony. “You make a lot of extra money as a real-time reporter, easily \$240,000 to \$250,000 a year,” she said. “I’m making the same page rate I made 20 years ago, but the extra income comes with experience.”

Despite the possibility of large salaries, there is a huge shortage of court reporters in the industry. “It’s not a well-known field. You find out through word of mouth,” said Superczynski. “I heard about it through an old acquaintance of mine who’d been making six figures for 15 years.” With only one school in the entire metro area holding classes, it’s not likely to become more well-known anytime soon.

But the job outlook is good. The U.S. Department of Labor projects that reporting job opportunities will grow as fast as the average for all occupations through 2010.

Superczynski said her new career choice is a challenge. “It’s hard. It’s like learning to play the piano in French when you don’t know either. You’re learning a language and a new skill at the same time. But if it were easy, reporters would be a dime a dozen.”

But Broussard said the hard work opens the door to a dynamic career. “You’re never at the same place two days in a row,” she said. “One day is business litigation, the next you’re doing a personal injury lawsuit or a discrimination or pharmaceutical case. Every day is challenging. I really do learn something new every day.” **LYNN THORNES**

For information, see aacc.edu/courtreporting.