

# In the Courthouse

## Life Without Transcript Income

BY RICHARD SCIRE

It was roughly four and a half years ago that I read an article in the *JCR* from a reporter encouraging readers to find their niche in the profession so they could make their career work for them. Although I cannot remember who wrote the article, the poignant message rang clear to me as a freelance reporter in southwest Florida. I was unhappy in the freelance world and was looking for the key to happiness in a career in which I had worked hard to achieve success.

When my twin brother, also a court reporter, called to tell me about a job opening with him in the Sarasota County Judicial Center (now renamed the Judge Lynn N. Silvertooth Judicial Center), I jumped at the chance. We had worked together previously in another county that once had a court contract to do all the criminal work, both misdemeanor and felony. I have always enjoyed that type of work. The freelance lifestyle — working at home and seeing different people every day — was less than fun for me. The only familiar faces that I saw on a daily basis were the hosts of *The View* and the cast of *Days of Our Lives*. Although working in my pajamas was fun in the beginning, it got old fast. When a neighbor asked me how I was feeling because she thought I had been sick a lot, I knew it was time for me to change — my career and my wardrobe. I was eager to return to a routine with which I was familiar and to do work that I knew would make a difference and of which I could be proud. I thought that if half the cast of *Days of Our Lives* could continue to come back from the dead, then so could I — metaphorically speaking anyway.

You can travel through the entire state of Florida and find a different setup in each judicial circuit for official reporters, from employees to subcontractors to digital recorders. Although all the circuits are run by the state, each circuit decides how to manage its reporting function. For Sarasota, one of the three counties that make up the 12th Judicial Circuit, court reporters are employees of the state and report for felony court only. There were four reporters to two judges until January of this year when a third felony division was added. Just four years ago, the starting salary was increased to \$45,000 to compete with the higher starting salary in Tampa, one circuit away, and there are annual raise increases. Slightly more than 17 hours per month are equally divided into sick time and annual leave, also known as vacation time. The transcript fees go to the state and not the reporter. Before you gasp, like many of the official reporters whom I met at the convention in New York in 2006, there are benefits to be reaped in place of those fees.

Extra compensation comes in the form of other methods. We may not get paid for the transcripts, but we do get paid to work on the transcripts. We are allotted as much time in the office to work on transcripts as the court schedules will allow. Office time when a

trial disappears because of a last-minute guilty plea is like gold. If we need to work on transcripts after hours or on weekends, we are compensated with overtime pay or compensatory time. The choice is left up to the reporter. The same is also true when waiting for a jury verdict should the hour go past 5 p.m.

Our steno machines, machine maintenance, desktop and laptop computers, software, software support, accounts to Westlaw and LexusNexis, and all office supplies from the fax and copy machines to the paper and transcript binders are provided for us, not to mention our office suite. By this summer, we're scheduled for a new office next to two of our felony courtrooms, as well as new Elan Miras. The state even pays for a scopist.

The biggest reward comes from our benefits and retirement plans. I was not disciplined enough to take those matters into my own hands as a freelance reporter, so the state's help is the biggest asset for me.

Although it is up to the individual reporter to pay for his or her certification tests and membership fees, two reporters from each county within our circuit attended the 2006 Annual Convention in New York City — all expenses paid. We were compensated for the weekend overtime as well.

It has been four years since I started working as an official court reporter. With all those perks, what I enjoy best about my position is the fellowship among all the employees in the judicial center where I work. The four reporters in Sarasota and the four in Manatee County work extremely well together. We work as one big office across the miles, just about 20-30 minutes apart.

Although I work primarily with three judges, they rotate every couple of years and are backup judges for one another. Getting to know each and every one of them — along with their judicial assistants, clerks, bailiffs, state attorneys, public defenders, and everyone in court administration — continues to be a pleasure.

There are pros and cons to every setup. It is a vast understatement to say that felony court has a large workload. Although I'm sure some of you are wondering if what I consider to be perks are really worthwhile, I can attest that they are. The poignant message from years ago still holds true today. I have found my niche for which I continue to be grateful.

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