

# Why I Chose to be a Court Reporter

By: Sandra C. Semerad, RMR, CRR

It was 1980 and the Miracle on Ice had just taken America by storm. I was a freshman in high school and my own miracle (unbeknownst to me) was about to take place. I took an elective typing class and I broke 100 wpm in a short time. My typing teacher, Mr. Urbaniak, who was also the assistant football coach, asked me what I planned on doing with my crazy fast typing skills. I immediately answered that I planned on following my idol, Mary Tyler Moore, by moving to Minneapolis and becoming an executive secretary. His comment back to me changed my life. He said, "You should become a court reporter. They make way more money." And that was, as they say, "how it all began."



In 1984, I enrolled at the University of Minnesota Technical College in Crookston, MN, and 21 months later earned my degree. I was 19 years old and ready to find a job. The only problem was there weren't any officialships open, and very few freelancing positions available. Back in the '80s, Minnesota had three court reporting schools, along with at least one in Iowa and one in Sioux Falls. The market was tight. I heard about a freelance opening in Bismarck, ND, from a friend of mine and decided to check it out. A private detective agency had decided to add court reporting to its list of services; and one of my classmates, who was a year ahead of me, was working there. She and I had been friends in school, so I decided to give it a chance. I thought I'd get a year or two under my belt and then move to Minneapolis and start my dream job.

Fate has a way of steering you in directions you never saw coming. Three years after starting that job, my classmate and I decided to start our own freelance firm. We didn't see the need to pay a commission to a middleman when it was us doing all the legwork, so we set off on our own. We had naively signed a non-compete agreement with the private detective. He was so upset when we left that he threw a rock through our new office window twice! He got a visit from a friendly police officer and that was the end of that. The legal community rallied around us because of his bullying, and our business took off. In the meantime, I met and married my husband and heading back east to MN was not in the cards.

I worked 14 years with my business partner in Bismarck, and I had the good fortune to have worked on some very interesting cases. I always tell people that I don't know a lot about one thing, but I know a little bit about a lot of things. That's what freelancing can do for you. You hear something different every day, from neurosurgeons to school teachers. I was also lucky enough to travel on cases. I worked on a large case for over three years that took me all over North Dakota and the country: New York, Chicago, Hartford, New Orleans, Denver, Pittsburgh, and, yes, my beloved Minneapolis. Who knew that was even a possibility; right?

It was now 2000 and, once again, fate intervened. Y2K had just come and gone with no earth-shattering catastrophe and it felt right to make a life change. My husband and I are outdoor enthusiasts, so we moved to the Beautiful Black Hills where we could hike and snowmobile anytime we wanted rather than having to drive for hours on end. I was able to join a wonderful group of women: Johnson, Henderson, Clayborne & Quinn. After a few years they asked me to become a partner, and Rapid Reporting was born. As always, freelancing allowed me to travel extensively throughout South Dakota and even to Germany! Could there be anything better than that?

I thought I'd be a freelance court reporter until I died. But fate had other plans. (Do you see a pattern emerging here?) At Christmastime, 2011, an official position opened up in Deadwood; and, for some reason, while soaking in our hot tub one Friday night, it occurred to me to check it out. As a freelancer, I had never gotten any health benefits or paid time off, and after 25 years of shouldering that burden myself, it appealed to me to stick my toe in that water to see how it felt.

I started working in Deadwood in January 2012. Working in court made me feel like a newbie again. There was so much to learn. But now I understand who all those brief forms are made for! I've had the privilege for the past eight years of working for two of the best judges I know, along with many others; and I have to say it's been a pleasure.

As a freelancer, I worked my tail off meeting deadline after deadline. I always assumed the grass was greener and easier on the official side. I'm living proof that it's not. I still work my tail off meeting deadline after deadline, but it's nice to have a judge back me up when attorneys and witnesses get out of hand. And it's doubly nice having a judge control the time for breaks. No more running to the bathroom to snarf down a Snickers before we start up again! (I know some freelancers are vigorously nodding their head in agreement over that one.)

I'm now in my 34<sup>th</sup> year as a reporter and fate will no doubt take me in another direction soon. I'm excited to see what that chapter holds. One thing is for certain though, I chose the right career for me. I have loved every minute of it, and I've tried my best to encourage others to join such a lofty and noble profession!

PS: I ran into Mr. Urbaniak right before I graduated from UMC, and I told him that I had indeed decided to become a court reporter and thanked him for igniting that spark. He told me that he'd only taught typing that one year and quit teaching after that altogether to go into the family implement business. Who knows if I would have ever heard of court reporting if he hadn't been my typing teacher. Fate works in mysterious ways!