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Paralegal PERSPECTIVES

Thoughts on the 35th annual NFPA Convention

"Welcome to Portland," the flight attendant said as I was de-boarding the plane.

It was an overcast and dreary day, but at least it was not raining. I was in Portland, Ore. to attend my first National Federation of Paralegal Associations convention and represent the Paralegal Association of Rochester.

The convention was held at the Red Lion Hotel on The River in Jantzen Beach, which as it turns out actually is an island in the Columbia River. I laid low for the first day to get myself used to the three-hour time change, since I had been awake from 4 a.m. EST, and to gear up for the next few exciting days.

Thursday morning was the beginning of a very long weekend. After checking in and being "credentialed," I received my "welcome bag" along with a name tag that was to be worn everywhere I went in the hotel. I had not signed up for any of the morning's educational seminars, so it was time to visit with the many vendors who came to promote their products and services during the convention.

They ranged from private investigators, process servers, litigation and discovery, medical records, paralegal education programs, to the NFPA's 35th anniversary table. All of the vendors were very friendly and willing to share as much information as they possibly could; however, information was not the only thing shared. Vendors brought lots of "swag" — tokens and trinkets — to pass out, and I did get "swagged" I did.

At the first formal luncheon of the convention, attorney Robert who had quit the full-time practice of law to write novels, offered the keynote address. His presentation followed the format of the table of contents from his book and made us laugh, and cry. He definitely kept everyone's interest. After the luncheon, I attended two educational seminars I had signed up for — Advanced Ethics and Legal Writing — both of which gave me many new ideas to use at my place of employment, Volunteer Legal Services Project.

Thursday evening brought a vendor reception and the celebration of the NFPA's 35th anniversary. The reception began with hors d'oeuvres and then a champagne toast to NFPA. It was a great chance to network with attendees and members of other associations.

Friday consisted primarily of regional meetings for the five regions making up the NFPA. PAR is part of Region V and I met face-to-face with many people with whom I had only corresponded with previously via e-mail. Our discussion was focused mainly on agenda topics for the national policy meeting, held the following day.

The long-awaited Harvest Dinner was held Friday night. The food was fantastic and during the meal we heard from Comedian Jan McInnis — also known as "the work lady." She is known for "clean comedy with plenty of attitude" and made us laugh so hard that our dinner rolls got soggy! The dinner also included a Halloween costume contest and more opportunities for networking. First prize went to the NFPA board members who came dressed as the characters from "The Wizard of Oz." They looked fantastic.

When Saturday finally arrived, it was time for the national policy meeting. Since I was a 'newbie' to the process, mentors assisted me with any questions I had during the proceedings. After the NFPA board members were introduced, along with the parliamentarian and guests, the meeting was "called to order." Surprisingly during our current economy, 46 of the 54 associations that comprise NFPA were present and credentialed. It is interesting to note NFPA membership is listed at 10,035, yet in 2006 the U.S. Department of Labor said there were 238,000 paralegals working in the field. By 2016, it is projected that number will increase to 291,000.

The first official act on the agenda was to fill vacant positions on the board of directors. The candidates told us why they were seeking their posts before the vote was held.

Initially, three agenda items were defeated or passed prior to the meeting: The change in regional director procedures to provide assistance to the Navy Legalmen Association was passed; the use of SKYPE as a medium for committee meetings was defeated and a new agenda topic regarding the PACE Grandfathering Clause also was defeated before discussion.

One of the big topics for discussion this year concerned the development of an entry-level, basic competency exam for para-



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legals. Banter became quite spirited on the topic and, after a long and hearty debate, it was approved, along with the budget for the exam and the use of PES to assist with its development.

Other agenda topics approved included a change to the NFPA's bylaws to allow all members to attend board meeting, and minimal changes to Article III, Section 3.3 regarding classes of membership.

Defeated agenda topics included a revision to the NFPA's bylaws to require special elections for board vacancies and the PACE grandfathering clause to amend current PACE eligibility requirements.

As a first timer, it was very interesting for me to actually see my fellow paralegals discuss the topics in an open forum and resolve conflicts as they arose. Once, I actually did muster up enough bravado to speak at the microphone and at least get my "feet wet."

After it was all over, a number of my fellow paralegals from Region V and I met at a local restaurant for dinner and a little more discussion. It should be noted that the main topic of our debate at that point was the Yankee's World Series game!

When Sunday morning arrived, I was back at the policy meeting for the final, unresolved agenda topic — and a couple

of new ones they tried to slip in — the introduction of the new board and the passing of the torch for next year's convention, which I'll be attending in Philadelphia. The agenda topic discussed was the one requiring the NFPA's treasurer to submit a draft budget 60 days prior to the annual meeting instead of 30 days, which was defeated.

After we adjourned, hugs were given as well as business cards. Everyone who sat near me said they will see me next year in Philly.

I also enjoyed a couple of days of R&R with my spouse. We visited Mt. Hood, Timberline Lodge — where "The Shining" was filmed — some Oregon wineries, Multnomah Water Falls and a scenic drive along the ocean. It turned out to be a great couple of days, with some unusually warm and sunny weather.

I felt very honored to be a part of the convention and all of the history that comes with it. Although I may not understand the exact details of some of the proceedings, that will come with experience, and I can't wait for next year's convention in Philadelphia. Thanks for sharing my "newbie" experience with me.

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