

# Joyce Nelle: An Old Fashioned and Professional Legal Secretary



By William H. Walker

**O**n February 27, 2009, Joyce Nelle passed away after 31 years and 43 days of service to my office and 35 years to the legal profession. The St. Petersburg legal community lost a most professional legal assistant.

Our relationship began in the usual way, with her applying for a position as secretary while I was an associate at Rolfe Duggar's office. After a little more than a year, Joyce and I decided to open our own office. With Rolfe's generous help and mentoring over the years from Rolfe and Myron Mensh, our new office survived those critical first years and eventually became a firm of two lawyers (Adam Rubenfield and me), two secretaries and one law clerk.

Without Joyce, many of the things that have occurred in my practice and my life outside the office would have been very different, if they occurred at all.

In the beginning, we both did whatever needed to be done, other than those things that required a license to practice law (which were, of course, somewhat few in the very beginning). As time passed, our respective roles in the office became more defined. My eventual role was simply to be the lawyer, and try to become as good a lawyer as possible. Joyce took on, in a word, everything else.

She was the secretary, client contact, buyer, office manager, cook (incredible lunches were enjoyed from time to time), bookkeeper and everything else. Although I assisted when needed, Joyce would rarely ask for help.

That list of duties, however, does not describe her real role in our office. Joyce was the rock upon which my practice and a good part of my life were built. She was fiercely loyal to the office, dedicated to the performance of her job and honest in the absolute. In a word, she was a true professional.

As lawyers, we have volumes defining this term "professionalism;" however, it



may well be impossible for a lawyer to be truly professional absent professionalism within the lawyer's supporting staff. Based upon my experience as Joyce's "partner" in practice, I offer some essential characteristics of professionalism in her position that Joyce epitomized throughout her career:

1. The clock is not the determining factor in the hours required. The work for each day must be done, done well and timely;
2. A pleasant, efficient and knowledgeable response must be always available for all client inquires and contacts;
3. Honesty and integrity are core values that transcend all others;
4. When the lawyer gets lazy or wants to cut corners (which I am sure never happens), the response is always "no, do it right!"
5. A sufficient knowledge of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, to comply with its provisions applicable to his/her position is a given.
6. Loyalty to the office as well as the lawyer, and the lawyer's returned loyalty are essential.

There are several terms applicable to the position Joyce held in our office, including secretary, legal secretary, legal assistant, certified legal assistant and paralegal. Each term has its separate definitions and the scope

of duties under the various terms may vary. All of the terms share the common duty of supporting the lawyer.

Joyce's favorite job description was simply "old fashioned legal secretary." By any name, however, her real place was by my side, helping me with everything in our practice to make our office a success.

Over the decades, I embarked on a career in the sport of competitive diving, traveling around the country and to various parts of the world as a coach, diving judge, team leader and eventually President of United States Diving. Having Joyce enabled me take the time and give the effort to pursue these activities, because I could always trust that the office was well cared for in my absence.

As a fitting legacy to this incredible woman, we are establishing an endowed scholarship through the St. Petersburg Bar Foundation for the benefit of a deserving student in the St. Petersburg College Legal Assistant Program. Through the generosity of individual members of our bar, the Northeast High School Class of 1968 and the United States Diving Foundation, a fund is being created which will perpetually enable a contribution in the name of Joyce Nelle of at least \$1000 annually to a deserving student.

I want to thank the many lawyers, secretaries and legal assistants for your cards, letters and phone calls expressing your sympathy, your many offers of assistance and for your encouragement. Joyce has left things very well organized and, as the true professional she was, she has enabled my office to continue on, which we shall do in her honor.

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*Bill Walker practices commercial trial law in St. Petersburg. He is a past president of the St. Petersburg Bar Association, past trustee of the St. Petersburg Foundation and has served in various bar positions during his 35 years in practice. He is currently co-chair of the Special Projects Committee.*