



Runner-up: *Kristine M. Custodio, CP*

Kristine M. Custodio didn't originally plan on becoming a paralegal. In fact, in 1999, she received a bachelor's degree from California State University, Long Beach in Long Beach, Calif., in human development with an emphasis in physical therapy. That same year, she was planning to obtain her graduate degree in the field when her mother became ill. Custodio returned home to San Diego, where she became the administrator to her family's adult developmentally disabled residential facility because her mother was too ill to work. Custodio continues to be involved with her family's business to this day.

Upon returning to San Diego, Custodio worked at a design firm for three years while also taking classes to obtain her paralegal certificate from the University of California, San Diego Extension's American Bar Association-approved paralegal program. "Even as a small child, I had been obsessed with the pursuit of justice, so I thought I would do well in this field," Custodio said.

After she received her paralegal certificate in 2003, Custodio was hired at the San Diego firm Butterfield Schechter as a file clerk and, just a few months later, she was promoted to paralegal. A paralegal for just five years, Custodio has hit the ground running and shows no signs of slowing down.

Work Ethic

As one of four paralegals in the 4-attorney firm of Butterfield Schechter, Custodio wears many hats. The firm specializes in employee benefit matters including pension plans, Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) compliance and litigation, stock option plans, estate planning and more. "I work in most areas, especially retirement plans and litigation," Custodio said.

Custodio supports partner Marc S. Schechter in all phases of pretrial litigation and research. In the retirement plan practice, Custodio is the project manager for more than 250 plans. "In the pension practice, I often draft amendments or ancillary documents to keep the plan in compliance with the law and submit those documents to the [Internal Revenue Service]," she added.

Another of Custodio's duties is handling Schechter's IRS and Department of Labor audits. "[Custodio] is organized like crazy," said Schechter, who nominated her

for Paralegal of the Year. "We are very paper-intensive and she handles calendaring, keeps us on top of deadlines, drafts plan amendments and oversees all of our firm's e-filing."

The firm mostly handles federal court cases, which must be filed with the court electronically. Custodio built the firm's e-filing database from the ground up. "[Custodio] has pioneered the integration and modernization of our law firm," wrote Butterfield Schechter attorney Elizabeth Sales in her nomination letter. "She has attended numerous [CLE] courses during her free time in order to gain the knowledge and competency to allow our law firm to implement the latest software for our litigation, audit and retirement plan practice."

Custodio's marketing skills have not gone to waste either. She designed and put together the firm's 10th anniversary newsletter. She also helps update the firm's Web site. Custodio said she enjoys working for a boss who gives her the freedom to succeed and learn along the way. "Marc Schechter has been in the field for more than 20 years, so it's really an honor to have someone like him have that kind of trust in your skills," she said.

According to Schechter, the feeling is mutual. "[Custodio] is an amazing paralegal and makes it easier for me to practice law," Schechter added. "She is so

dedicated, hard working and passionate about her work. I wouldn't be surprised if she went to law school one day."

A Passion for Schools

Networking is extremely important to Custodio. "I live by the saying, 'the more people you know, the more you know,'" she said. To that end, Custodio has become heavily involved with the San Diego Paralegal Association. "This is where my heart and soul is," she added.

The duties Custodio performs for the organization are a testament to her love for the association and the paralegal profession. When Custodio first started working with SDPA in 2005, she served as director. "She immediately hit the ground running," said Darlene McLellan, a 22-year paralegal at Hargreaves & Taylor in San Diego, and SDPA's vice president of programs and education. "[Custodio] volunteered for every event in some capacity. She also took on an important role of editing and finalizing new bylaws, which are the main foundation of SDPA."

Currently, Custodio is executive vice president of marketing for the grassroots organization, as well as the school liaison committee chair. "The school liaison committee is where I have found my absolute passion in life," she said.

Within the school liaison committee, Custodio manages four programs — the speaker's bureau/leadership development committee, the mentor program, the student commission and the scholarship program.

Her work with students doesn't end there. According to McLellan, Custodio spearheaded SDPA's reunification with all the colleges that have paralegal programs. "She contacted the directors of each program and established a professional rapport," she said. "She provided each paralegal program at the schools with classroom speaking appearances by SDPA members." Custodio also is on the advisory board for the University of San Diego's Paralegal Program and this year she headed the committee for SDPA's annual Bridging the Gap event, which facilitates relationships between working paralegals and students.

Custodio is involved in paralegal associations at the state and national level as well. SDPA is a member of the California Alliance of Paralegal Associations, and Custodio is active in CAPA's leadership and educational conference

events. Last year, SDPA hosted CAPA's 19th Annual Education Conference, which Custodio helped coordinate.

SDPA currently is working on becoming a NALA affiliate. "I've been appointed by my board to be the NALA representative for SDPA," Custodio said. "I'm a NALA member and I became a certified paralegal in January 2006."

Speaking, Writing and Volunteering

As if all her association work was not enough, Custodio still finds time to engage in public speaking, write for industry publications and volunteer.

Custodio speaks at various paralegal schools on a regular basis. She also gave a presentation on ethical decision making in the workplace to the 32nd Street U.S. Navy Legal Command. She writes for SDPA, CAPA and *The Daily Transcript*, a daily business publication in San Diego, on various topics, including California Business & Professions Code 6450, which Custodio finds many California companies and law firms still don't know about, even though it has been in effect since 2001. "I have nicknamed [Custodio] 'The 6450 Enforcer,'" McLellan said.

This year, Custodio started volunteering, along with McLellan, at the Center for Community Solutions in San

Diego to help domestic violence victims. There, they assist attorneys with the preparation of forms, provide resources for the clients, and act as liaisons for other community programs and volunteers. "From a paralegal perspective, it's amazing to be able to offer our expertise and serve clients in need who otherwise would not be able to obtain those services," Custodio said.

Setting an Example

McLellan said Custodio is a perfect role model for paralegals nationwide. "She has pride. She is passionate. She exudes personality. She is knowledgeable [and] congenial, and her ethical standards are impeccable," she said. "I want her to continue to be all she can be, and this nomination is something for the students she speaks to [and mentors] to look up to and strive for themselves."

Custodio is flattered to be selected as a Paralegal of the Year runner-up. "It's such an honor to me that people like my mentor, who have been in the field for 20 years, think of me in that high a regard," she said. "The best thing about receiving this honor is that I'm touching more and more people, and I hope they will in turn touch more people so we can make a concerted effort to benefit our field and each other."

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Custodio networks with Merrill R. Cannon, vice president of legal and administrative affairs for National Lending Associates, Inc., at an SDPA mandatory continuing legal education seminar on estate planning.