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Paralegals finding new niche with entrepreneurial twist

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Paralegal Judith Metzler operates out of her home in Independence. She provides probate and estate work to attorneys through her company, Executive Legal Services.

Judith Metzler was a trailblazer when she first began working independently as a paralegal in 1985, but these days, she is among many paralegals giving the profession an entrepreneurial bent.

Judith Metzler was a trailblazer when she first began working independently as a paralegal in 1985 after her son, Ron, was born.

These days, Ms. Metzler is among many paralegals giving the profession an entrepreneurial bent. She does probate and estate work for lawyers through her company, Executive Legal Services of Independence. During the past five years as demand for paralegals who conduct interviews, do research, write briefs and complete other administrative duties under the supervision of attorneys has grown, the idea of paralegals working outside the law office has become prevalent. "The lawyers I worked for were very accepting of the idea of my working on my own, even back then," Ms. Metzler said. "They all told me that I was an entrepreneur in my area. They used to tease me because I had a cell phone before anybody else did. They said that I was a spy. Plus, they got more bang for their buck because they did

not have to pay me any benefits." Leslie Baran saw a chance to start her own business when bankruptcy courts in 2004 began to require that all petitions be filed electronically. She was convinced that by combining her legal expertise with her partner, Barbara Meyer's, computer savvy, that she could help attorneys to file electronically. That's when they founded Legal Support Simplified LLC in Independence. "Not all attorneys have the time or inclination to learn to do things such as electronic filing and they might not want to put somebody on their staff just to have them do this work," Ms. Meyer said. "That would be too difficult and too expensive, particularly if bankruptcies are not a major portion of their business." Ms. Baran said her service has been advertised through flyers and in the

phone book as well as by word of mouth. New bankruptcy laws that make it harder for people to dissolve their debts and oblige more filers to follow a repayment plan will take effect in October. "Our business is growing, and we might hire more people depending in part on the new bankruptcy law and the effect it will have on consumer filing," Ms. Baran said. "We doubled our client base in the past year, and we are just now expanding to offer more types of legal services getting into personal injury in addition to bankruptcy." Robert Turpin took his paralegal expertise and gave it a twist when he opened Robert C. Turpin Paralegal Investigating in 1989. He said attorneys contact him to collect data and investigate details of cases. "Lawyers are somewhat restrained by what they can do," Mr. Turpin said. "I have moral values like anybody else. But you sometimes have to bend the rules — not break them but get around them — to get what you want and that is what I have a chance to do. Lawyers come to me and they want me to do some investigating for them. Some of what I come up with really helps the client, like when a man was accused of arson and I got together information that showed he was not guilty." Mr. Turpin, who has been a paralegal since 1980, said he often relies on the contacts he has made at various government agencies to conduct his investigations. Locally, several universities, colleges and the Academy of Court Reporting offer paralegal programs. Ursuline College in Pepper Pike's 3-year-old paralegal program is among the newest. "Cleveland has a very sophisticated legal community, so critical thinking and writing skills are much in demand," said Anne Lukas, director of the Ursuline College Accelerated Program. "And the lawyers appreciate the fact that our students have both a liberal arts background and paralegal training. Our programs, we have a bachelor's degree program and a certificate program for people with undergraduate degrees, are very fast-paced. This gets students attuned to what they can expect in a law office." The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists the paralegal profession as one of the fastest-growing professions during the past 20 years. The field often appeals to older students who are starting a second career because lawyers appreciate maturity and they want assistants who can work independently, Ms. Lukas said. "The line between legal secretaries and paralegals is definitely growing stronger," said Deborah Peters, director of recruiting for Major Legal Services of Cleveland, which recruits and places attorneys throughout Ohio. "There are definitely more paralegal programs locally, and the field is becoming more professional, particularly in specialized fields such as bankruptcy. We get more people wanting to hire paralegals because having them is cost-effective."

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