

Association Commendation

AAJ honors Natalie Andrus with its 2007 Paralegal of the Year award.

By Melody Ip

For the past five years, the American Association for Justice has honored a paralegal affiliate member who demonstrates a commitment to the legal profession and dedication to the association's mission. On July 16, AAJ and the award's sponsor, Thomson West, announced Natalie Andrus, a litigation paralegal with Grysen and Associates in Spring Lake, Mich., as the recipient of its 2007 Paralegal of the Year award. "[This award] has made me stop to think what positive things I can do with this," Andrus said. "This award has given me the strength to fight the fight and do what I can to make a difference."

When Elliot Grysen, a medical malpractice attorney who founded Grysen and Associates in 1987, nominated Andrus, he knew his application had to be stellar. The winner not only would have to meet AAJ's qualifications but also surpass the accomplishments of all other nominees. "I had seen the candidate notice for several years and often thought Natalie was the ideal person," Grysen said. He spent an entire Saturday filling out the nomination application. "This year I thought about her contributions to our firm over the past year, the trials that she attended, her many nights getting me ready for the next day, and decided Natalie is what a paralegal should be."

Nominees are required to be a paralegal affiliate of AAJ for at least one year, and must be nominated by an AAJ attorney member or fellow paralegal affiliate. Among the submitted nominations, the judges looked for contributions such as tutoring and mentoring paralegal students, speaking engagements, teaching commitments and upholding AAJ's mission.

While going through Andrus' nomination, the judges — two AAJ paralegal affiliate members, one attorney member and the AAJ paralegal affiliate chair — were most impressed that she had all the criteria for which they were looking. "She

not only taught and mentored legal students but also had gone back to school to earn her degree in paralegal studies," said Nathalie Etori, AAJ's membership coordinator. "She has a lot of contacts with other schools that have paralegal programs, and promotes getting involved in



Natalie Andrus, AAJ's 2007 Paralegal of the Year

AAJ. Now she is helping AAJ find places to publicize AAJ membership. It also impressed the judges how much her [nominating] attorney was indebted to her."

Andrus has worked as a freelance paralegal since 1995 and officially started working for Grysen in April 1998, managing his cases nationwide, assisting in trials, mediations and settlements, and conducting focus groups. She also supervises and directs other paralegals and support staff, and communicates with clients and opposing lawyers. Grysen described Andrus as someone who seeks to ensure that each person has the best representation in court regardless of wealth or power. "Natalie does all of this while balancing

her roles as a great mother to two boys, wife, church member and community supporter," Grysen said.

One month prior to the award announcement, Grysen told Andrus he nominated her for AAJ's award. "He told me that there were over 50,000 attorney members of AAJ worldwide, so he did not anticipate that I would receive the award but wanted [me] to know that he nominated me," Andrus said. "I was just flattered that he would take the time to nominate me." One month later, Andrus and Grysen were at an airport in Phoenix waiting for an expert witness to arrive when Grysen told Andrus she was AAJ's 2007 Paralegal of the Year. Andrus began to cry when she heard the news.

Although Andrus has been a paralegal for 20 years, in 1993 she attended law school at Thomas Cooley Law School in Lansing, Mich., where she was determined to complete her law degree and become a lawyer so she could help change the wrongs and injustices of the world. After completing one year of law school, she realized her goals were unattainable and withdrew from school. "As a wife and mother of a two-year-old son [at the time], the best road for me was working as a freelance paralegal and striving to be the best paralegal that I could be in assisting lawyers toward justice." Having a freelance/contract status has allowed Andrus the freedom to work, yet remain closely involved in her sons' lives.

Andrus' road to a paralegal career began when she earned an associate degree in prelaw from Grand Rapids Community College in Michigan in 1986, followed by a bachelor's degree in prelaw from the University of Michigan in 1989. In 2003, she received a master's degree in legal studies from Eastern Michigan University.

Andrus has supported paralegal education by mentoring and teaching
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students at Davenport University in Grand Rapids, Mich., for the past 13 years. She also taught at Grand Rapids Community College from 1998 to 2000. "I love all aspects of law, including teaching others," Andrus said. Barb Craft, coordinator of the legal studies department at Davenport University, placed several students with Andrus for internships and described her as an outstanding mentor. "[The students] all report working with her has been a valuable experience," Craft said.

Although Andrus has been a freelance paralegal since 1995, in 2005 she opened her own limited liability company, Paralegal Specialists, in order to freelance her work to a variety of firms, as well as hire students and interns who worked with her in the past. However, she has yet to pursue this business, as her busy schedule at Grysen and Associates has not left her time to contract her services elsewhere or to hire any staff. "This career goal I am still uncer-

tain about," Andrus said. "I enjoy the work that I currently do; however, I feel that there is a need for contract paralegals in the legal community. If I could hire and train paralegals and then contract them to various law firms, then I feel it could be a win/win situation for all."

As AAJ's Paralegal of the Year, Andrus was awarded free airfare, accommodations and registration to the AAJ 2007 Annual Convention in Chicago in July where she was presented with the award, with her husband, Robert, two sons, Forrest and Spencer, and Grysen all in attendance. "Many people do not understand what a paralegal does and what a huge honor this was for me to have a lawyer take the time to even nominate me," Andrus said. "Many paralegals have said that lawyers do not realize what they do every day. My response is 'yes, they do!' We are their right hand. We are a team. Together we seek out a goal. That goal is justice for our clients." ■

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