



FINDING **CALM** IN THE **CHAOS**

Caitlin Clancy
Yarborough Applegate LLC



Just four months into my first paralegal job, I was thrown into a two-week medical malpractice trial. The entire month, including two weeks of trial prep and two weeks in trial, was a blur. This first month was probably the most stressed I had ever been in my whole life. Before being a paralegal, I served lattes and brewed coffee at a coffee shop on my college campus. My professional life had changed dramatically.

I have used my first trial experience as a building block for all my trial preparations since then. There will always be some chaos leading up to, or during the trial, so I have tried to critique and develop an organized chaos system for myself to stay as calm as possible. Paralegals tend to be the calm in the chaos, whether we actually feel calm during the trial or not. Our attorneys lean on us for extra support. That may include: having their exhibits marked the way they prefer, making sure their favorite fizzy water is included in the trial kit, or making sure the client is taken care of. When we calmly handle those details, the lawyers can tend to the legal strategy and hundreds of lawyer tasks that only they can complete to get the case in front of the judge and jury. This is why I remind myself before every trial prep how important I am to the trial team.

In addition to my trial preparation checklist, here are a few things I do to remain calm and confident throughout trial preparation and trial:

Adding Value. As soon as a case is assigned to me, I think about how to add value for our client and our team. I work on cultivating relationships, to the best of my ability, with our client(s), expert witnesses, and other witnesses. When you are juggling witness schedules at trial, those relationships pay off.

We can do hard things. I cannot stress the importance of this: remind yourself that you can do hard things. We have answered discovery, talked to the witnesses, prepared for depositions, reviewed medical records,

and now the time has come to pull it alltogether. As litigation paralegals, the courtroom is where we want to be, and every trial is a learning experience for everyone. Have confidence that you can get through this.

Ask questions. It may be intimidating, especially as a young paralegal, but ask as many questions as possible about the case and the process. When you ask, you are almost always provided with an answer. Approach trial as an opportunity to grow and learn.

Be humble or be humbled. Trial is a whole different battle from the discovery process. Understand that you can be extremely prepared, knowledgeable, and skilled, but something will come up and you have to roll with it. That does not mean that you are less of a paralegal; it means that trial plays out just how life ebbs and flows.

Ask for help. I will forever be grateful for my two friends and colleagues at the first firm where I worked. When I was knee-deep in trial preparation and trial, they were my most significant resources and support. If you are in a supportive work environment, your colleagues will be able and willing to help. You will be there for them when their trials come around, so lean into those relationships and ask for help.

Set aside time for you. Your mental health should always be a top priority. Even if this means setting aside a five minute walk around the block, creating a playlist to listen to as you mark your exhibits, or having meals prepared so you can properly fuel. If you do not take care of yourself, you will not be able to take care of others. This is a non-negotiable point for me during any trial preparation.

Be okay with making mistakes. We are all human and mistakes will happen. At the moment you discover a mistake, it may seem like the end of the world, but you will learn and grow from this experience. Some mistakes create a harsh lesson you will have to learn,

but you will be okay. These are not mistakes **IF** you learn from them. You were a valid team member before the mistake and you will be valuable after. Remind yourself of this.

How can we get better next time? After the trial, reflect on the good moments and the situations where you can get better. Were you able to handle the trial pad with ease during the trial? Great! Give yourself credit post-trial. Could you have been better organized with the exhibit list? Was jury selection hectic? How can you improve during these times? How can your team improve? Reach out to the listserv, go to a seminar, or attend a webinar and see how other paralegals are handling these trial tasks and to find tips from seasoned trial paralegals.

We have a massive role in trial preparation and during trials. During my first trial I was thrown into the pool, and knew it was time to sink or swim. I swam, but it was not pretty. I knew it was not a fashion show, so I chose to look at that first experience as an opportunity to improve on my trial skills. You will never stop learning and growing when it comes to trials.

You will continue to grow and build your confidence with each trial, and this will allow you to become a more integral part of the trial team. Your confidence will help develop your relationships with the attorneys you work with. It will bring you closer to your colleagues. When I can keep myself at peace with my presence on the trial team, I can use more energy on the litigation tasks at hand. Be the calming influence with the trial team and the attorneys.

We must remind ourselves that we are fully capable of being able to navigate through a trial. You may need to be your own cheerleader. If you have prepared for one or been through one, you are already a rockstar.

Always remember to breathe and believe. You were built for impact and to improve our client's lives.

AUTHOR BIOS



Tamara Bringer has been a litigation paralegal for Nurenberg Paris for 40 years and takes pride in walking clients who have suffered a traumatic injury or death through the tangled web of litigation. Over the years she has worked on mass disaster and complex litigation involving planes, trains, buses and everything in between. She is also the firm's Community Initiative Coordinator and has helped to shape the firm's community outreach programs from adopting a non-profit each month with boots on the ground (or dress shoes on the ground as she likes to say), to annual adopt a family and Make-A-Wish projects. Outside of the office she is dedicated to staying fit with cycling, strength training and running. She has two grown sons and lives in Willoughby, Ohio with her husband.

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Rosiceli Castillo is the managing trial litigation paralegal to Leon R. Russell at The Russell Law Firm in Flower Mound, TX. Rosi started her legal career nearly 20 years ago as Leon's legal secretary. However, Rosi does it all at the law firm; she is the receptionist, secretary, IT support and paralegal. In her time with The Russell Law Firm, she has been able to learn and train under our infamous leader, Sharon T. Russell. She concentrates on the research and discovery analysis of automotive crashworthiness cases, as well as direct trial presentation.

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Caitlin Clancy is a litigation paralegal with Yarborough Applegate LLC in Charleston, SC. Caitlin was born in Guatemala, but was adopted and grew up in Cary, NC. She graduated from the College of Charleston with a degree in History and then stumbled upon a paralegal job in another Charleston, SC medical malpractice/personal injury firm. It was there she fell in the love with the profession and has continued to work and focus mainly on catastrophic personal injury cases, medical malpractice, dram shop litigation, and wrongful death claims. Caitlin is passionate about the paralegal profession as well as continuing to keep the conversation of mental well health in the legal profession present. She strives to work hard for her clients and firm, but also makes it a non-negotiable to work just as hard for herself. In her spare time, Caitlin loves to weightlift, journal, watch all sports, read in coffee shops, snuggle with her cat Ziggy, and take walks on Charleston's beautiful beaches with her dog Ada.

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Michelle Fant is a paralegal at Payne Mitchell Ramsey Law Group in Dallas, Texas with 28 years of experience in the legal field. Michelle is the mother of four children and grandmother of four. When not in the office, Michelle enjoys spending time with her family, reading and traveling. Her next big adventure is traveling to Iceland with her husband to see the Northern Lights!

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Brittany Freeman is a paralegal at the Kelley | Uustal law firm in Fort Lauderdale, FL. She is on a team whose primary focus is catastrophic injury and wrongful death product liability cases. During her time at Kelley | Uustal, she has helped develop a new jury research process and leads the voir dire research team for trials. She attended American University in Washington, DC and graduated from