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CELEBRATING 10 YEARS

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Attorney melds two careers into one home office

By Rena Warden

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Lorie Brown was flipping through the medical records of a dead baby when she stumbled across a scribbled note neither the plaintiff, for whose attorney she was consulting, or the defense counsel, had previously noticed.

The cryptic scrawl stated simply "chromosome analysis pending." Brown immediately realized the possible magnitude of her finding and followed up on the analysis. In a few hours, she discovered that the baby had a genetic defect and could never have been born alive.

Using her unique blend of medical knowledge and legal expertise, Brown helped the family of the dead child conclude their grieving process and understand why their baby was no longer living, and she allowed the doctor involved in the case to avoid a potentially damaging malpractice suit.

A 1982 graduate of Indiana University-Bloomington, Brown held a bachelor of science degree in nursing before continuing her education at the University of California - Los Angeles, where she obtained her master's degree in nursing. Brown then returned to IU where she attended law school. This education combination allows her entry into an elite group of legal-medical professionals called nurse-attorneys.

Brown is one of only 65 nurse-attorneys currently practicing in Indiana. With an average of two legal professionals of this type emerging from each graduating law school class, Brown's vocation is highly specialized and offers much sought-after services.

Working from her Indianapolis home, Brown concentrates her practice in two primary areas. A small portion of her workload is made up of private medical providers who require her assistance with licensing and contract issues.

Dr. Robert Steele came to Brown for help when his parent employer



IL photo/Robin Jerstad

Lorie Brown offers her legal-medical consulting service from her home.

refused to meet the terms agreed upon in his contract. She represented Steele in the case and won compensation for him.

"Lorie is very tenacious, very diligent and most importantly very accessible," said Steele. "The fact that she is a nurse is nice because she speaks the language of medicine."

While Brown has worked on more than 60 individual contract and licensing cases, the largest portion of her time is unmistakably spent with the other half of her practice. Brown works primarily as a consultant for other attorneys involved in cases dealing with medical issues. While many of these are malpractice suits, she also deals with personal injury and a variety of other case types.

"If you think about it," said Brown, "many, if not most, cases today deal in

some way with medicine. What I do is bridge the medical-legal gap for attorneys who may not understand the workings of health care and for health care providers who may not understand the ins and outs of our legal system."

Brown takes no cases of her own. Instead, she offers her assistance to attorneys on both sides of the legal "fence" and fills in where they need her expertise. In many cases, this requires that she review individual cases to determine whether they are relevant. This is a difficult, yet satisfying, part of Brown's job.

"It's hard being a nurse and knowing that a doctor is going to be sued possibly as a result of my findings," said Brown. "But I take comfort in knowing that any malpractice case I consult on is truly valid."

In her capacity as assistant, Brown is occasionally required to act as legal secretary, researcher and paralegal at the same time. She often finds herself spending hours organizing and summarizing medical records and putting together event chronologies of individual cases.

This is something that could not be done effectively by either a nurse only or an attorney only. Brown's combined specialty lets her use the tools of both professions to correctly structure medical record summaries within a case.

Dual expertise helps her in other capacities as well. As a nurse, Brown understands medical language and can sort through health information to find pertinent facts. She also is aware of resources that attorneys may not know exist, such as the operating log.

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Brown's legal expertise provides her with equally valuable tools. She is often asked to research and depose doctors and other expert witnesses, as well as to file legal motions. Brown also assists regularly in mediation exercises.

"There is really no one else in Indiana who does what I do," said Brown. "There are many nurse-attorneys who act as co-counsel, but since I solely consult, I offer a unique service. I kind of act as co-counsel, but since I solely consult, I offer a unique service. I'm kind of like a legal pinch-hitter for whoever needs me."

Probably the most difficult part of Brown's job is remaining neutral. Because she does consulting work for both prosecuting and defense attorneys she must be careful to avoid conflicts.

"It really all depends on how you spin the information," said Brown. "I have dealt with cases centering around fibromyalgia on several occasions, and evidence exists both to support and detract from claims that the condition is caused by trauma. The information I highlight depends on which side I am consulting for at

any given time."

Brown began her legal career as a law clerk at the firm of Harrison & Moberly. After working at the Indiana Department of Insurance, Brown found a home as a malpractice defense attorney at the Indianapolis law firm of Tabbert Hahn Earnest & Weddle.

At Tabbert Hahn, she built a solid client base and honed her skills as an attorney. While she enjoyed her work, Brown wanted to be more available for her two children, Evan, 4, and Jordan, almost 2.

"It's hard to be a woman in the legal field," said Brown. "At a firm, either you are on the partnership track or you're pretty much headed for a dead end."

Brown, not liking either of these options, chose to branch out. She left Tabbert Hahn and opened Brown Law Office, based in her north-side home.

"It was hard to decide to work from home," said Brown. "But I have two small children, and they are my priority right now. I'm a single mother, and working at home I can be there for them when they need me."

While Brown enjoys her practice, there are things she misses about working at a larger law firm. For one, she no longer gets to establish a personal relationship with her clients. In

many cases, she deals only with the attorney and never meets the people actually involved in the suit.

In general, though, Brown is happy with her practice. At any given time she is usually working on 30 cases. Technology allows her to act as a consultant statewide, and the lack of overhead that would come from opening an office gives her a greater degree of financial freedom.

Brown is also active in the legal community. She founded the Indiana chapter of The American Association of Nurse Attorneys. She is also a highly sought-after motivational speaker, and she is a contributing author to the American Journal of Nursing.

Most of Brown's clients hear about her via word-of-mouth. She would like to grow and develop her practice, but she has no interest in opening an office or hiring employees. She does occasionally subcontract work to other nurses during particularly busy times.

"Working at home is the same as working in a firm," said Brown. "I just have to walk down the hall instead of going to an office. Customer service is still my first priority, and I still work hard for my clients. For the first time in my life, though, I have balance between personal freedom and financial security." •