

Lambton woman reinvents her career

In the blink of an eye, Heather Cassidy's professional life changed forever.

An automobile accident four years ago left her unable to handle the physical demands of her job in the child care field, a job she had enjoyed for 21 years.

"The accident happened only a block from my house in Wyoming when I stopped to wait for some traffic before making a left-hand turn."

She says another vehicle came from behind and hit her, leaving her with multiple soft tissue injuries that still require a multitude of treatments.

"Just like that, my income dropped from \$60,000 a year to \$20,000 a year (provided by the insurance company) in one minute."

As a single mom with four kids to raise, Cassidy, 43, had to reassess her career path as quickly as possible.

"I considered social work but that required three years at school and my own kids were preparing for college."

"So I thought, what can I do where I can set my own pace?"

After deciding there was no way she would uproot her family to relocate, Cassidy began assessing the Sarnia job market.

She knew she had an aptitude for advocacy and started considering paralegal work.

"I've always stood up for what I think is right," she said. "I've always looked for fairness."

A legal career was very appealing, but there were some serious hurdles to overcome. A big one involved the use of her left arm, which tires easily after a period of writing or typing.

"I thought, if I have my own business and set my own pace, I can switch up whatever I'm doing. If I'm tired of writing, I can do some research. If I'm tired of typing, I can get out



Cathy Dobson
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and make a delivery, do some driving. I do all the work at my own pace and still meet all my deadlines."

She enrolled in Westervelt College in London for a one-year program, set on pursuing a career in family law, wills and estates.

But it wasn't going to be that easy.

Half way through the course, big changes in the paralegal profession were handed down by the Law Society of Upper Canada.

Whereas paralegals never had to have credentials before, the law society decided regulations were needed. Paralegals were to become licensed, insured and regulated.

Westervelt adapted by adding two extra courses to its program, one dealing with ethics, the other offering 180 hours of practical experience in the field.

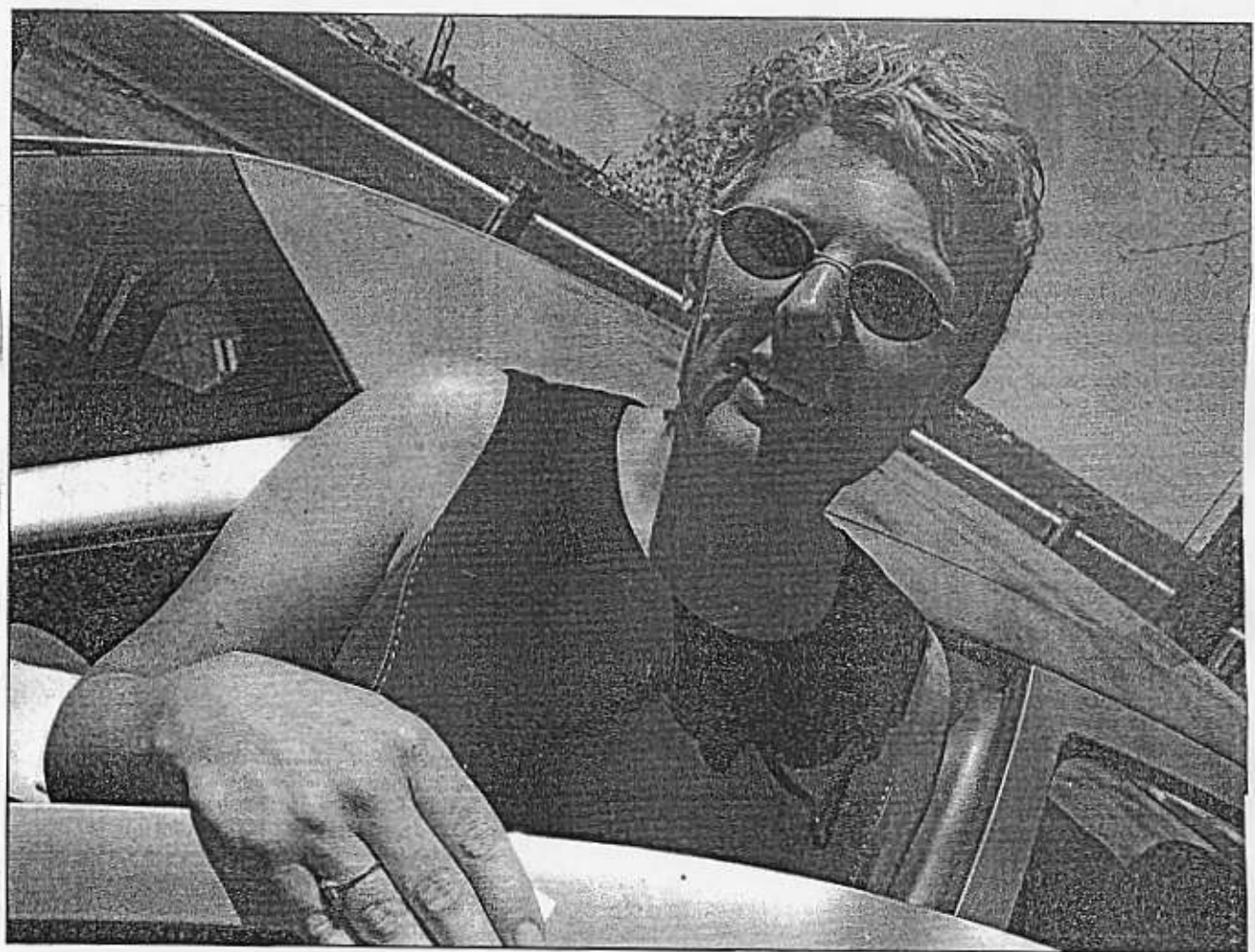
Cassidy gladly took the courses and prepared to write the law society's exam.

But she was disappointed to learn that paralegals could no longer practice family law, draft wills or handle real estate transactions.

"I found out I couldn't do what I wanted so I tried to find other employment." She took a secretarial job in a law office, but found her injuries didn't allow her to keep up with the hectic pace.

Cassidy decided to write the paralegal exam after all, realizing that running her own business was a better fit for her.

She also enrolled with the Sarnia-Lambton Business Development Centre (BDC) where she received assistance with a business plan, improved



Heather Cassidy has started her own paralegal service, making a midlife career change that included careful study of the local job market. **CATHY DOBSON** cdobson@theobserver.ca

her bookkeeping skills and got financial assistance from the government for the first year of her business.

On May 1, she began operating out of her home. "I have to say the paralegal community in Sarnia has been amazing," said Cassidy. "They've referred me to clients, they've given me work and been very welcoming."

The role of a paralegal is

not widely understood by the public. Paralegals provide legal expertise and impartial legal advice at affordable fees.

They are licensed to work on matters before small claims court, provincial boards, agencies, and tribunals, as well as matters that come under the Provincial Offences Act, such as highway traffic cases.

Some services offered by Cassidy include: debt

recovery, small claims court, landlord and tenant issues, provincial offences and review and/or preparation of legal agreements, contracts and documents.

"My clients may not be under 12 years of age anymore but an inability to communicate and difficulty resolving problems are still issues for any age and any organization," she said with a laugh.

To contact Heather Cassidy paralegal services, call 519-845-1537 or e-mail hccassidy@xcelco.on.ca.