

Raising the bar New lawyer didn't go to law school

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By **BILL FREEHLING**
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The word around campus spreads fast. Some professors gain a reputation for being easier than others, and students often gravitate toward them.

Carolyn Seklil never had the opportunity to pick and choose law instructors. For better or worse, she was stuck with "professor" Stuart Sullivan for her entire legal education.

But Sullivan is not a professor of law, and Seklil never attended law school.

Sullivan has spent the better part of two decades as one of Spotsylvania County's top prosecutors. Seklil has worked in Spotsylvania's Victim/Witness Assistance Program for the past six years and has directed the program for nearly three.

So how did Seklil end up in Richmond this past summer at a ceremony to be sworn in as a lawyer in the Virginia State Bar?

The answer lies in a program nearly unique to Virginia, and in a teacher-student relationship forged by Sullivan and Seklil.

Seklil (pronounced Seck-lee) has worked in the field of law for about 10 years. She started as a deputy clerk in Spotsylvania's Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. Then she worked at a private law firm as a receptionist and typist before joining the victim/witness program in Spotsylvania's commonwealth's attorney's office.

Seklil has taught ballet to children in the evening for most of her adult life. In the victim/witness program, she worked with children who had been victims of crime. She got inter-

ested in juvenile law and started wondering about attending law school.

But Seklil couldn't afford to quit her job and become a full-time student. So she enrolled in Virginia's law-reader program—a rarely used alternative to law school.

Virginia is one of just a handful of states that allow people to become attorneys without attending law school, said Scott Street, secretary/treasurer of the Virginia Board of Bar Examiners. That board oversees the law-reader program and examines applicants seeking to join the Virginia State Bar.

The program is far from an easy way to become a lawyer, Street said. Street said about five law readers per year attempt to take the Bar exam. He said the pass rate is about half that of test-takers who went to law school.

Law readers first have to find a full-time attorney willing to teach them all aspects of the law. The Board of Bar Examiners sets tough curriculum guidelines, and law readers must submit exams on each subject to the board. Law readers must have undergraduate degrees and meet the board's character requirements.

"It's a tough way to do it," Street said.

The numbers bear that out. As of August 2006, there were 25,447 attorneys in the Virginia State Bar who were in active and good standing. Just 188 of those were law readers—less than 1 percent.

Street said there used to be more law readers. But as law schools have opened up in nearly

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Law-reader requirements

Virginia is one of few states that allow people to become practicing attorneys without going to law school. Virginia's Law Reader Program allows candidates to study the law on their own. Here are some of the requirements to be admitted to and complete the program:

- An undergraduate degree.
- Acceptance by the Virginia Board of Bar Examiners.
- Access to a practicing attorney willing to teach the same subjects offered in law school.
- Submit course curricula and take exams on each subject.
- Access to a law library.
- Complete program in three years.
- Pass state bar exam.

LAW: Program was done outside work hours

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all parts of the state, it has become less common. Street said reading the law remains a way for people with full-time jobs to get a legal education. He said there are some great attorneys in Virginia who have gone that route.

Seklii started the law-reader program in January 2002. She paid the \$800 fee to the Board of Bar Examiners to begin. She had to buy textbooks from law school bookstores. She quit her night job teaching ballet and spent her after-work hours cramming on torts, contracts and all other aspects of the criminal and civil code.

Sullivan had to do some cramming of his own, reminding himself of the finer parts of certain aspects of the law not typically encountered by prosecutors. He received no fee.

It helped that Seklii and Sullivan had access to a law library in their office, and also that they had the support of Spotsylvania Commonwealth's Attorney Bill Neely. The program was done outside regular work hours.

Seklii and Sullivan said there were many difficult aspects to the program. It was hard not having other students with

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whom to discuss work and compare results. Sullivan admits that he is far from an expert in many of the subjects he was teaching.

Seklii said she spent about 18 hours a week studying year-round, on top of her 40-hour workweek.

"It's a lot of work," Seklii said. "It's very demanding and exhausting."

She finished the program in the summer of 2005. She spent six months studying for the Bar exam, a two-day test that she took this past February. The person she sat next to at the exam had attended Harvard Law School.

In April, she learned that she had passed on her first try.

"I was just so relieved," she said.

Seklii attended the swearing-in ceremony this summer at the Virginia Supreme Court. She was the only law reader there.

Sullivan noted that there is a

big difference between what you learn in law school and what you do as a practicing attorney. Seklii said she feels prepared for her upcoming legal career.

"I'm as ready as I can possibly be," Seklii said.

Seklii and Sullivan will soon go into private practice together in downtown Fredericksburg. After 18 years on the job, Sullivan quit his post as Spotsylvania's deputy commonwealth attorney earlier this month. Seklii will leave the office in early October.

Sullivan plans to practice criminal defense, personal injury and domestic relations law. Seklii will focus on juvenile and family law.

Neely said he'll miss the pair in his office. He said Sullivan has developed a reputation as an exceptional criminal trial lawyer, and that Seklii's calm and mature judgment will serve her well in private practice.

"They'll be excellent," Neely said. "They'll make a great team."

After all, they've already been teammates in the classroom for more than four years.

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TRIAL: Witnesses say defendant not in Stafford

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from jail and recorded.

A forensic scientist earlier testified that shoe prints near where Madaris' body was were similar to those found on a Timberland shoe.

Rogers' semen was found in Madaris, but defense attorneys argue that any sex between the two was consensual.

What remains a mystery is where Madaris was between Wednesday night and Saturday. Scientific evidence presented dur-

ing the trial shows that she died between 12 and 24 hours before her body was discovered on a Sunday morning.

Defense attorneys Mark Gardner, Christopher Leibig and Joseph Flood put on a number of witnesses yesterday in an attempt to show that Rogers was not in Stafford during the time Madaris was killed.

Witnesses said that Rogers was with friends, at a race track and with a woman during the weekend Madaris' body was found.

Asked if Rogers could have gone

to Stafford at some point, one witness said, "not unless he was driving 200 mph."

Madaris, who worked for an escort service, and Rogers dated and lived together for a brief time in the latter part of 2004.

Defense witnesses said they were together on the day she was last seen alive and appeared to be cordial.

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