

NALA 2022 Conference & Expo
A Summary
By Maureen C. Washington, ACP, CAS

Chief Encouragement Officer, Kristine Custodio Suero and Chief Advocacy Officer, Maureen C. Washington descended on the NALA 2022 Conference & Expo with San Diego and SDPA pride. Between July 14-16, 2022, excitement was and remained the main character on display. Throughout my 4-day excursion I was happily consumed in the world of the National Association of Legal Assistants. There was no room for imposter syndrome or passivity at this event. The following is a synopsis of my whirlwind experience.

Pre-Conference – July 13, 2022

Early morning on July 13, 2022, I began my 5-hour journey to one of my most anticipated events of the year. The drive was surreal as I contemplated what I would learn. The unknown offered many gregarious thoughts of what was to come. But nothing could have prepared me for the next 72 hours.

As I entered the property of the JW Marriott Phoenix Desert Ridge Resort & Spa I was confounded by the meticulous beauty of the landscape, the largeness of the main entrance foyers, and the simple kindness of each employee.

Day 1 – July 14, 2022

Bright and early on July 14, 2022, I set myself up to win: comfortable shoes and clothes, my iPad and iPhone, and most importantly, “BUSINESS CARDS”. This is a key tip for any first timer! As a representative of the San Diego Paralegal Association (SDPA), I had the privilege to prepare for the Affiliate Association Showcase later in the evening, exploring and scouting the lay of the land. The massive columns in the conference area were wrapped with inspirational NALA materials inviting attendees to embrace the conference theme, “Your Career is a Journey.” The grandiosity of the foyer to the carpet design to the crispness of the chilly air evoked awe and inspiration.

Loaded with a “go bag” full of media equipment and eager to set up, I made my way into the vendor expo hall where over 20 sponsors were setting up their information tables filled with marketing materials. After the interview area was prepared, I made my way to the registration desk where I connected the virtual faces with NALA staff members, Melody and Chelsea provided me with my conference badge and NALA sway! The badge flags were perfect to signal to other attendees about your background and to encourage networking. Of course, I chose the following: First Timer, California, NALA Member, and Open to Hugs.

On time and in regal form, Carl Morrison, ACP, ALOP arrived in the vendor hall. Kristine was right, his enthusiasm and passion for the paralegal profession were perfect to kick-off the first of several guest interviews. My eyes were fixated on this humble person who was plucked out of the virtual realm and landed into my reality. During the 15-minute window, Kristine and Carl displayed their energetic personalities while discussing all things paralegal, NALA, Legal Operations, and the Paralegal Voice podcast.

To my surprise, the charismatic NALA past President Jill I. Francisco, ACP provided an impromptu interview with Kristine. They discussed why Jill is so passionate about NALA and why she attends conference every year. As educators, their discussion focused on the next generation of paralegals and why lifelong learning is an essential habit.

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The opening session in the main room did not fail to meet expectations as NALA past President Melissa J. Hamilton, ACP provided a welcome message prior to the keynote speech by Maricopa County's Superior Court Commissioner, Melissa Zabor. Likewise, lunch exceeded my expectations as the over 400 in person like-minded professionals feasted and conversed together. Thereafter, I continued to recognize and connect the virtual faces with the legal professionals roaming the halls and corridors.

The NALA Affiliated Associations Annual Meeting and Award Ceremony was a great experience as I witnessed paralegal associations from different states being recognized by NALA for their volunteer efforts and support of the paralegal community. I was ecstatic to accept the NALA reward on behalf of the 2021 SDPA Newsletter Committee.

The NALA Affiliate Showcase also proved to be an incredible experience as the same droves of like-minded professionals descended on a Grand Canyon ballroom where Kristine and I proudly represented the SDPA. A NALA Affiliate Showcase is comparable to a professional mixer on steroids! That evening the energy was palpable and the sea of like-minded professionals were jovial. I learned that evening how highly esteemed the SDPA is in the eyes of fellow paralegals as they anxiously waited in long lines to hopefully grab some SDPA swag!

It may be hard to imagine if you have never attended an in-person conference, but time flies when you are having fun! However, amongst the camaraderie, NALA President, Debra L. Overstreet, ACP sat with me as we discussed her vision for NALA and her "Why" for becoming a NALA member and Advanced Certified Paralegal. I will never forget the genuineness and care she conveyed for paralegals and the National Association of Legal Assistants. Kristine and I ended the day with dining and networking with paralegals from Alaska, Arizona and Virginia.

Day 2 – July 15, 2022

Kristine and I rose early on July 15, 2022 to prepare for her interview with NALA CEO, Vanessa Finley, MBA, CAE (aka Vinnie). Engaging, genuine, and accommodating are a few of the words that describe this humble powerhouse. Vinnie happily and energetically shared her vision for NALA and discussed its biannual Utilization and Compensation Survey designed to support the continued growth and evolution of the paralegal profession.

This day was more centered on the educational aspect as I attended classes such as "The Anatomy of an Appeal" by Judge Richard Dietz, "Corporate Paralegals in the Age of Contract AI" by Memme Onwudiwe and "Everything you Wanted to Know About Motions in Limine" by Nancy Jordahl.

After lunch and relaxation, Kristine and I attended the evening reception and installation of the newly elected NALA officers. It was truly an honor to witness the NALA board and newly elected officer installation in-person. One memorable remark shared suggested that an in-person NALA Conference is similar to a family reunion. I agree.

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I also had the pleasure of interviewing NALA Certifying Board Chair, Lisa Stone, ACP who also shared her “Why” for becoming a NALA Advanced Certified Paralegal and her support of paralegals, in general. This was another memorable moment that reinforced my reason for being a part of NALA the premier national paralegal association: DACLE! (Distinction, Association, and Continuing Legal Education)

Day 3 – July 16, 2022

On the final day and in usual form, Kristine and I rose early on July 16, 2022, with a focus on education. However, prior to joining our classes we attended the first board meeting for the 2022-2023 NALA board. It was officially announced that Kristine was appointed as NALA’s Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee Chair! The reception later that evening was no different from the previous in that memorable moments, fantastic food and a lot of fun were shared among the sea of like-minded professionals.

What a whirlwind of excitement, networking, connections, and camaraderie! There are many things that I gained during my first-time attendance at the NALA Conference & Expo, but the main takeaway is that I am a part of a community of like-minded legal professionals who believe that being associated with NALA offers Distinction, Association, and Continuing Legal Education: DACLE!
