

the Transcript

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Summer 2020

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President's Message



Dear NYSCRA Members,

These past few months have been a time of tremendous change and challenge. No one has been unaffected by the pandemic and government guidelines for social distancing efforts. This has been felt acutely by the legal community, including many of our colleagues. We must stay strong and stay together.

The changes and challenges have not slowed NYSCRA down. We continue to be an association that works hard to promote awareness of stenographic court reporting. Back in March, just after the lockdown in New York began, we held a free webinar about how to conduct a deposition on Zoom. In May, we held a free student webinar attended by over 160 students from about half the states in the country. Our featured speakers were Dominick Tursi, Karen Perlman, Christopher Day, Yuliya Yemtsova, and me. It was incredibly heartening to see people offering each other assistance on how to navigate New York's Unemployment Insurance website. Court reporting stays strong because of the community we cultivate.

We have some exciting upcoming

events. NYSCRA is working with Project Steno to offer a day of workshops on Saturday, October 3rd. Also, I am pleased to announce that my mentor and long-time member of my Toastmasters club, Jason Wisdom, will be conducting a personal marketing and branding webinar on Sunday, August 16th. Details for both of these events are contained in this newsletter.

We recognize, of course, that we are not just part of a community bound together by our profession. We are also a community of citizens of the country. In light of the recent events, we chose not to stay silent. On Independence Day, July 4th, we released a statement which is found on page 3. It was emailed to all our members, posted on our Facebook page to an audience of over 1,400 followers, and also appears on our website. I am proud that the Board worked together in relatively short

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President's Message

continued

order to produce a statement of its quality.

Recently, on July 7, we held a Board meeting where I created a new committee called Bar Associations Outreach Committee. The committee's mission is to cultivate lasting relationships and contact with other associations related to the bench and bar. We believe that such relationships are crucial to advocating for our profession, educating our consumers, and sharing relevant information with the many professional associations in New York State. Any member who wishes to be a part of this new committee, please contact our Board immediately.

Additionally, several new volunteers are training to learn how to proctor our online NYRCR exams. Speaking of volunteering, I would like to thank every Board member who has served during my current term. Your willingness to serve and dedication to our profession does not go unnoticed.

This coming November NYSCRA has plans to rent a table at the New York State School Counselors Association convention in Verona, New York. Please reach out to me directly if interested in showing guidance counselors across New York State how wonderful the court reporting profession really is.

My first president's message announced the theme of TRANSformation. Transform, indeed. It was going to happen whether we planned for it or not, whether we welcomed it or not. But as a community that supports each other, we will prevail through the hard times.

Warmly,

Joshua B. Edwards

NYSCRA President

Independence Day, July 4, 2020

We the Board of the New York State Court Reporters Association wish to take this opportunity to express our position on the following important matters. We recognize the serious injustice that exists, and has existed for far too long, against Black and Brown people in our country, and other communities of color. We have seen it in the recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery and, sadly, many others. And we also recognize that these are not recent issues, that they have been part of the fabric of our country since its inception. NYSCRA strongly condemns all actions of racial injustice, discrimination, and police brutality.

Joshua B. Edwards, NYSCRA President

On Behalf of the Board



Creating a Bright Future

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The remaining portion, after costs, goes to **NYSCRA**.

Session	Speaker	Time (all times Eastern)
<i>Write Clean, Write Fast. All Day? No Sweat!</i>	Ed Varallo, RMR, CRR, FAPR Board member, Project Steno Author, <i>The Realtime Writer's Manual</i> and <i>Ed's Steno Pro</i>	10:30 – 11:30 .1 CEU (pending)
<i>The Surprising Results of Project Steno's Nationwide Survey</i> (inaugural presentation)	Nancy Varallo, RDR, CRR, FAPR Executive Director, Project Steno	12:00 – 1:00 .1 CEU (pending)
<i>Developing a High School Program in Your State</i>	Glyn Poage, RDR, CRR, FAPR Board member, Project Steno	2:00 – 3:00 .1 CEU (pending)
<i>How to Conduct a Basic Training Class</i>	Tiva Wood, RDR, CMR, FAPR Board member, Project Steno	3:30 – 4:30 .1 CEU (pending)



NYSCRA PRESENTS

PERSONAL MARKETING

FOR FREELANCE COURT REPORTERS

SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 7:00 – 8:00 P.M.

Jason Wisdom is the past president of New York Toastmasters and an accomplished public speaker. During this one-hour webinar he will share his story of going from non-working freelancer, to turning down work during a recession. Topics include:

- Building a skills base
- Finding a niche
- Building a reputation
- Hard skills and soft skills
- Personal branding
- Agency relations and building a partnership
- Knowing your value
- Increasing utilization
- Career pacing



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The Inadequacy of an Audio-Only Record

By Christopher Day

How many times have we heard that our profession is outdated? There are many people across the country who ask the honest question, "Why don't we just record it?" Why do we have people taking stenographic notes when we could just press a button? Almost invariably these types of questions put us in the hot seat to justify our salaries and explain why stenographic reporting is still the most reliable, equitable, and inexpensive way of keeping the court record safe and accurate.

For many of us, this is a terrifying scenario. Did anyone become a court reporter because they enjoy public speaking? Does anyone reading this think about court reporters as the ideal spokespeople? The truth is court reporting is thought of as a job for introverts¹. This creates a scenario where you have a group of stenographers, many of whom are reticent people, surrounded by others that do not understand the value of stenographic reporting. New research is coming out day after day. I can't claim to have all the answers, but I can lay out some common misunderstandings and give all of my fellow introverts and reporters the tools they need to feel confident and secure about the amazing career they've chosen.

First, let's address the issue of garbled audio. In a courtroom or deposition setting, papers are shuffled around, people speak over each other, and hearing can become difficult or impossible. Audio is recorded digitally by an input device taking in the air pressure and turning that into electronic signals. These electronic signals are instructions for a computer or output device to reproduce the sound. Crosstalk and ambient sounds negatively affect the quality of those recordings. And once audio is determined inaudible or indiscernible, there's no transcriber or stenographer who can get it back.

The importance of a stenographer has been briefly touched on in case law here in New York, *People v. Ramsey*², where the court said, "Holding that audio recordings are the functional equivalent of stenographic transcripts were belied by the record

in this case." To put that another way, without a qualified stenographer, the record is in danger. It should be noted that our stenographic culture is what differentiates us here. Many of us receive annual union training or attend 30 hours or more of continuing education per cycle. Even those of us who do not join in those activities stay current with industry news to provide the best service possible. We know when the record is in danger of being compromised. We know when to speak up. That alone makes us a better choice for the trial court record.

Leaving protecting the record to an audio monitor or not bothering to hire an audio monitor can lead to hours of reconstruction hearings. Depending on the accounting method, the cost of recording can quickly skyrocket well above the cost of hiring a stenographic reporter.

A New York litigation firm blogged that over \$10 million a year is wasted in one Brooklyn courtroom. That estimate was derived from the average hourly cost of attorneys and time spent waiting in court. Using that same logic, recreating just three hours of garbled or lost audio could cost nearly a thousand dollars. Based on a Bureau of Labor Statistics average of \$50,000 annual salary for court reporters, three hours for a court reporter to capture the record is far more cost effective than three hours of digitally recording the record and then recreating what might have been said.

The myth that digital recording is less expensive than stenographic reporting needs to be further explored, as the results seem to vary wildly. In one study, a thousand pages produced from digital recordings was 50 percent more expensive than the same number of pages prepared by stenographers³. Storing the average seven-hour day of steno notes can be 500 to 8,000 times smaller than storing seven hours of an audio file. We know that computer storage is cheap. But when you're talking about taking what the public pays now for the storage of digital stenographic notes and multiplying that by 8,000 for audio storage, it's a bad deal.

Even where it may appear to be cost effective

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Inadequacy

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to digitally record, stenography is far more efficient and cost effective. The average person types about 50 words per minute. The average transcriber types 100 WPM. Stenographers get the words down at 225 WPM or higher. For the same work using typists or transcribers, you need two to five times the amount of labor. Courts already struggle with backlogs. Can they really afford to wait five times longer for deposition and court transcripts?

Finally, we get to the audio editing piece of it. There are newer technologies, such as voice cloning and deep fakes, where a computer can mimic a person's voice or image by using a sample of their voice or video of that person. Even without such technology, it is trivial to edit a piece of audio.

In a demonstration I produced with Phyllis Craver Lykken, I was able to download a wav editing software, open the file, and change her mock testimony to say that she shot someone. That took about three minutes⁴. In a regular court situation, a stenographer is taking verbatim notes contemporaneously with the proceeding and could testify that that testimony did not occur. In a world where we do not have a stenographic reporter, attorneys must rely on audio and video forensic experts and investigators to authenticate the recording or deliver an opinion on whether it has been altered.

It has also come to light that steganography software can be used to insert malicious code into audio files⁵. A bad actor could upload audio files to the court system for the purpose of damaging hardware, establishing unauthorized access, and illegally utilizing our state government's computers for cryptocurrency mining.

There are those who point to automatic speech recognition as a solution. Again, when we compare the accuracy of the stenographic reporter to machine learning or natural language processing by computers, there's no contest. In a study done in 2019, court reporters had only 80 percent accuracy when tested on African American English (AAE or AAVE), a specific dialect of English. The question was asked, "Why don't we use Alexa and Siri in court?"⁶ A great deal of the news around the study did not cover the pilot studies.

In Pilot Study 1, regular people were tested, and they had 40 percent accuracy.⁷ In Pilot Study 2, lawyers were tested, and they had 60 percent accuracy. Most of us get no special training in AAE, so to score twice as high on such a test, by itself, shows that we are the closest to having that 100 percent accuracy rating for every speaker. Then Stanford came forward with a study on automatic speech recognition and its accuracy when taking down black speakers, white speakers, and AAE speakers. The study found that automatic speech recognition transcribed white speakers 80 percent accurately, transcribed black speakers 60 percent accurately, and "did worse" on AAE speakers^{8,9}.

I graded one of those AAE examples as if it was a stenography test. It got a 20. So any time someone says to a reporter, "AI is coming for your job," you can confidently say that it's not even close.

Ultimately, how society and the legal field wish to deal with having accurate trial court records for appellate review is up to the decision makers, voters, and administrators. Many of them have never had to sit at a desk for hours typing or writing what others



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Inadequacy

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say. With that lack of experience comes a lack of understanding of all that goes into our work.

It falls on all of us, the introverted and extroverted alike, to be armed with knowledge so that we can caution the bench and bar when they look for alternatives to stenographic reporting. Audio is too easy to fake, edit, weaponize, or lose for it to be a trustworthy method of keeping the record. It seems that at least part of our work as guardians of the record and advocates for communication access will be keeping apprised of technological developments and the damage that haphazard adoption of "new" methods might cause in our states and communities.

1 Susan Adams, "The 10 Best Jobs For Introverts", March 4, 2014, Forbes.

2 *People v Ramsey*, 26 NY3d 1010 [2015].

3 Chris Crawford, "A Study of Court Reporting and Digital Recording (DR) in the California and Florida Courts", Justice Served.

4 *Audio Editing Easy* by Christopher Day, published at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7uSkDGu_iQ

5 Catalin Cimpanu, "WAV audio files are now being used to hide malicious code", October 16, 2019, ZD Net.

6 Joseph Darius Jaafari and Nicole Lewis, "In Court, Where Are Siri and Alexa?", February 14, 2019, The Marshall Project.

7 Taylor Jones, et al. "Testifying while black: An experimental study of court reporter accuracy in transcription of African American English.", e11

8 Allison Koenecke, et al. "Racial disparities in automated speech recognition"

9 <https://fairspeech.stanford.edu/>

A Conversation with Debra A. Levinson and Relaxation Expert Jeffrey Migdow, M.D.

**By Debra A. Levinson, CSR-RMR-CRR-CRI
CEO | DALCO Reporting, Inc.**

dal@dalcoreporting.com

**Voluntary Certification Committee Chair |
NYSCRA**

Jeff, thank you for meeting today to again address our court reporting association. On June 2nd, NYSCRA hosted a webinar where you presented techniques on how to deal with test anxiety, a highly situational stressor, familiar to most court reporters. That was very well-attended and received excellent feedback.

There are specific relaxation techniques you recorded for NYSCRA to counter feeling over-stressed so that the demands of becoming credentialed, writing in realtime, or any number of stressors that affect our daily lives can be managed. With so many talented people in our profession unable to perform to potential, understanding more about the physiology of the mind/body connection would be helpful for many to understand and self-correct so the body can return to normal.

We are together now (masked and six feet apart) in your Lenox, MA office to talk more about symptoms, such as sweating and shaking hands, almost panic-like rapid breathing, in anticipation of timed dictation. For some reporters, the anxiety can become so excessive that it makes it difficult or even impossible to focus on the test.

Last month, you talked about how humans are continually in a low-level fight-or-flight response. I have my steno machine set up and ready to write your responses in realtime. I can feel my heart starting to beat a little faster just anticipating writing perfectly for you!

* * * *

Deb, it's really nice being with you today. I thoroughly enjoyed being with your group last month and talk about fight or flight in terms of test taking and the panic reactions we all go into because of that.

The truth is, as we all know, the experience of stress and panic and being overwhelmed go well beyond test taking. There's so many situations during the day where we feel our heart racing or we become short of breath, get that little tightness in

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A Conversation

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our stomach where we just have to stop and take a deep breath, and sometimes we're not able to. The situations can be real situations like someone going through a stoplight and almost hitting your car, or something in my mind, like fear about talking to my boss about getting a raise, or is my coworker going to be on my back all day about a certain project. So, the stress can come in real-life situations, relationships with people in our family or friends or a job or just fears that emerge out of our head, which can go all the way back to our childhood.

The problem is, in terms of our central nervous system, the adrenal gland and the nerves can't tell the difference between a life-threatening situation, where we definitely do need to flight or flee a difficult situation, like trying to decide if I should drive through a yellow light or not or something I just made up in my head when I'm out taking a walk. Did I leave the oven on or not? In all cases, the initial reaction is the same.

The adrenal gland releases adrenaline, which creates the following reactions, which we talked about, including the eyes opening wider, the face becoming still, the breath stopping, and often the heart rate and the blood pressure going up. The initial reactions are related to a predator response where we stop breathing so we can hear better and the predator can't hear us. The heart rate speeds up so more blood can be pumped into our muscles so if we fight, we have those muscles on reserve. Or if we flee, we can run away as quickly as possible. The difficulty is at the same time we release sugar from our liver and insulin from the pancreas, which takes the sugar into the muscles, to allow the muscles to do the extra work in the flight-or-flight response. If in truth there isn't a strong stress, for example, I'm just worried I left the oven on or not sure if I'm going to be to a meeting on time or not, I'm just sitting in my car or walking slowly, adrenaline is released, sugar's released and insulin is released, but they really don't have any place to go because my body's not acting in a flight-or-flight type of way. Thus, my mind will immediately get more anxiety. The anxiety

comes from the fact that there's excess sugar in the blood, and the nervous system is on overdrive, but my body isn't moving to use up that extra energy. So now my whole walk can be ruined by the fact that I'm wondering about the oven, and I cut it short to rush back to see if it's on or not. Or I decide to go through the yellow light, which is fine, but then the next five minutes I'm feeling short of breath and what if another car came through and hit me, which is all mental tension but fueled by the fact I went into the flight-or-flight response in the first place.

Since we have so many experiences like this every day, it tends to age ourselves more quickly because they're working harder, put stress on the lungs and the heart, and make our minds more reactive. On top of this, if you're a coffee drinker or have a lot of sugar or caffeine in your system, then you're already in a low level flight-or-flight response, and then whenever stress comes up, it puts you into an almost overwhelming type of feeling. Fortunately, there is a way out through the breath.


The breath is the only function we have in our physiology that we can truly control that's related

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to internal organs. Even yogis, who are well-known for controlling their heart rate or blood pressure, do it by controlling their breath. Thus, I can choose to keep my breath held when a stressful situation occurs that's not life-threatening, or, instead, realize I'm feeling really tight for not a very good reason and take a few deep breaths.

Physiologically, it is impossible to breathe slowly and deeply through the nose and feel tension at the same time. The reason is as soon as I take some slow deep breaths through the nose, it relaxes my nervous system through the slowness of the breath and relaxes the emotional centers of my brain through the limbic system when the breath flows slowly in and out through the nose.

So, a good technique which we often hear, maybe even heard from our parents or tell our children, is just stop, and take a few deep breaths. The key, though, is you have to take slow deep breaths long enough that you actually feel relaxed. If you just take a few deep breaths and feel tense the whole time, as soon as you stop, you're back in the overwhelming response. But if I can take enough slow breaths that I actually feel slowed down, that means my adrenal gland has slowed down, the excess sugar in insulin is used up, and now I'm back in a relaxation state. Of course, my mind or the situation can throw me back into feeling tense in the next moment, but then I also have the choice to take a few deep breaths again.

I'm often asked by people how can I possibly remember to stop and breathe when I'm in a stressful situation, which is a great question. The only way out of that situation is to practice breathing slowly and deeply for a few minutes every hour or two during the day so it becomes a habit that is on my mind, directly in my central nervous system.

So, by practicing some gentle stretching and slow deep breathing through my nose periodically during the day, then when a stressful situation arises, I'm much more likely to remember and stop and breathe and re-center myself because I've been doing this periodically during the day when I haven't been under stress at all.

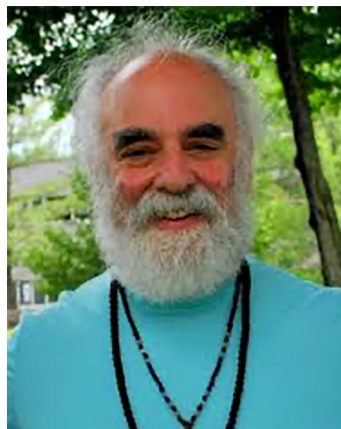
Some research studies show if we stop periodically during the day and stretch and breathe and relax, after six weeks that becomes the normal

response when tension emerges. That is, if I almost get hit by a car when I'm driving but it just misses me and I continue driving, my normal response will be to take some slow, deep breaths rather than hold my breath and get tighter.

As we all know, if we are feeling relaxed, more flexible, breathing more deeply, our reactions are much more positive for all concerned. When we are feeling tense and tight and holding our breath, we tend to overreact to situations anyway. So, really, the best prescription for diminishing the stress response in all situations is to limit our stimulant intake, which would be caffeine, coffee and sugar. And periodically during the day, take a few moments to stretch, take some deep breaths, and affirm that when tension comes up, I'm going to stop and breathe before I react.

And you will find if you do this over time, there will be more and more situations where you'll be able to respond in a more centered, balanced way, rather than from stress and anxiety.

Relaxation recordings for test-taking anxiety, created by Jeffrey Migdow, M.D., for the New York State Court Reporters Association, are available for purchase through NYSCRA website. Contact nyscra@bowermanagement.com for more information or visit nyscra.com.



Jeff is a holistic medicine specialist in Lenox, MA. He graduated from University of Illinois College of Medicine Chicago and combines over 30 years of expertise in yoga with his background as a holistic physician and general medicine practitioner. He is the former director of the Kripalu Yoga Teacher

Training Program, and he writes about and teaches yoga, holistic health, and medicine. He is the coauthor of "Breathe In, Breathe Out: Inhale Energy and Exhale Stress by Guiding and Controlling Your Breathing."

How Realtime Center For Learning, Inc. Adjusted to Providing Court Reporting Classes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Harriet Brenner-Gettleman, CMRS, CRI

Since the school building that housed the Realtime Center For Learning, Inc. closed on March 12, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had to adjust the way we teach our students. Dealing with coursework that has always been challenging for the students, it was important to be able to give the student an ongoing experience that would enable them to participate during class, take tests, complete required academic requirements, and progress with speed-building. As some of the students got closer to graduation, they were going to need a way to fulfill the 40 hours of internship requirements as well.

In my initial research as to what other schools were quickly putting together, they were using Zoom to conduct classes. I had participated in a few Zoom meetings and had observed a lag time that existed between the video image and the speakers' voices; I was thinking this may not be the best way for me to conduct classes. I was also told that sometimes the students got kicked off and had to sign in again. Other forms of virtual meetings

were developing, but all had the same issue.

Considering I had a very small student body, I decided to have each student attend a class separately designed for that student's speed goals. A telephonic class on speaker phone would address the student individually. Each of our students writes in realtime but is required to read back from their notes. Even though we could not see them, they were conditioned to follow these habits of learning. The teachers were amenable to working with one student at a time in their speed range. The following week we started classes using this concept. I encouraged the students to double up on their homework so they could take advantage of the extra time of staying home.

After completing our spring quarter, I surveyed the students to determine whether they were getting the training they needed. On June 22, I sent the following seven questions to the students:

1. **Do you feel you are getting enough dictation for each week's homework and speed-building?**
2. **Are you having any issues with**

scheduling enough time to get in your homework hours?

3. **If so, what can we do to help you create a plan for studying?**
4. **Has your progress been affected by not being able to attend onsite classes?**
5. **Have you had access to staff at times when you may feel you have needed extra help or advice?**
6. **Do you have any suggestions for what you think would be a better outcome?**
7. **Would you like a session on how to conduct a Zoom deposition?**

I received the following answers:

1. Yes.
 2. No.
 3. N/A.
 4. *Honestly, I don't think there was an impact.*
 5. Yes.
 6. Not now.
 7. N/A
-
1. *More couldn't hurt, but it is fine as it is.*
 2. *I have been averaging 20 hours a week but will be starting work. I should still be able to get a decent amount.*
 3. N/A

4. No.
5. Yes.
6. Not at this time.
7. Yes.

1. Yes, I am getting enough dictations especially because I focus on one thing at a time, and I like to incorporate Speed Plus as well as other practice materials, so it is not too overwhelming right now.

2. Yes, I was having difficulty managing my time to get enough practice hours in. I am trying to prioritize school as my first priority as we speak.

3. For right now, I think you all have been wonderful and patient with me. I think it's more internal for me, and I have to be a bit more disciplined in order to help myself with this dilemma.

4. No, my progress isn't being hindered at all. It benefits me more because I am at the comfort of my own home, and I feel like the one-on-one-sessions have always helped me out since the beginning.

5. Yes, communication with the staff is not a problem when I need advice or help with something.

6. No, I do not have any suggestions at the moment.

7. Yes! I would like a session on how to do a Zoom Deposition!!!

1. I think I am getting enough dictations to work on, and I feel that it is comparable to the amount we were getting in person.

2. I'm not having trouble finding

hours to practice. It was definitely a little challenging at first since everybody was home, but I have found ways to make it work and ignore the distractions around me.

3. N/A

4. I think my progress has been affected by doing the distance learning. I like being in person, and I think that is part of the reason I'm not going up in speed and just maintaining the same speed.

5. I have had access to you and Mindy. I cannot stress enough how much that has helped me. Every time I speak to both of you, you both have been able to calm me down and come up with different techniques to help move forward. I greatly appreciate both of you being so understanding and helpful during this time.

6. I think and I hope that once we return back to in person, that I will start to move along again and that it will help me.

7. I think a session to understand the Zoom depositions would be very interesting and I would love to attend if you decide to have it.

Two students summarized their experiences as follows:

I'm not really sure how the current situation has impacted my ability to progress. I would have thought that it would have changed for the better as I had more time to practice, but that doesn't seem to be the case. I can

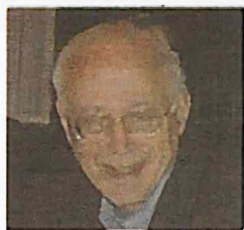
say that 1.5 hours to transcribe a test is definitely not enough time for me, and I know there were a few tests that, if I had more time, I would have been able to figure them out and probably would have passed them. I also don't always feel that I have material for the following week's tests. For instance, if I practiced for three tests this week and then took those tests during class, we often go over those same practices just before the tests, and then I don't have anything new to practice for the following week. That's not always the case, but it does happen from time to time. Finally, I wouldn't be against a Zoom class.

I don't think I have been affected by not having class in person. As far as my individual practice goes, I wish I had a little more time in my schedule to practice. Everyone has been very helpful; Joan is great, and thank you for always sending so much information. I would definitely be interested in a session on how to conduct a Zoom deposition as I believe that life will go that way for quite a while.

After reviewing the responses, I have made some adjustments for the summer quarter to give each of the students what they feel they would like to see changed or to remain the same. We are in unfamiliar territory here, and their feedback is very valuable to me.

William Cohen

November 14, 1923-
July 28, 2020



COHEN- William It is with sadness and love that we announce the passing of William Cohen, 96, of Chelsea, New York on July 28, 2020. William and his identical twin brother, Arnold, were both well-known court reporters who each won National Speed Contests in the '50s. William worked for 28 years in the Southern District Federal Court and 23 years in State Supreme Court in Mineola prior to that. He also worked as a judge advocate's stenographer during World WarII and reported War Crimes Trials after the war. William never married but he had a large extended family whom he saw often and cared for deeply. His second family would be the large network of stenographers he would go on to mentor, encourage, and embolden. He was an emblematic professional, a generous uncle, and an altruistic educator.

As this issue of *The Transcript* was about to be published, we learned that our beloved Bill Cohen had passed away, three months after twin Arnold.

Bill was a true icon of our profession and remained active in NYS CRA as recently as 2016.

An appropriate retrospective will appear in our next publication.

Remembering Arnold Cohen

(modified since originally published)

By Dominick M. Tursi



He Had a Masterful Touch - with a Touch of Grace

He was my mentor, my professional role model – and, for a time, my boss.

If the name is curiously familiar, you might be thinking of his twin. Bill Cohen was continuously visible in reporting, attending 58 continuous NCRA conventions and chairing the speed contest for four decades. Perhaps you met the twins when I interviewed them during the Premier Session of the 2015 NCRA convention in New York. (Video available at GalleryofShorthand.org/videos)

Amazingly, the reporting achievements and careers of the twins paralleled each other so closely, it is not easy to separate one from the other. But I had the opportunity to share a two-person office with Arnold for several years, so this respectful retrospective will share some insights that may be surprising. A brief history of how they found reporting is an important starting point.

To provide for his family during The Great Depression, attorney Louis Cohen turned to teaching typing and shorthand. He taught each of his four sons – Ephraim, Jerome, and twins Arnold and William – to write Gregg Shorthand at or near verbatim speeds.

Ephraim, the oldest, developed arthritis, so his career went in a different direction. In the 1930s, believing that machine shorthand was the future of verbatim reporting, older brother Jerry turned in his pen for a machine, and then taught the basics to the twins.

Arnold and Bill entered the US Army in 1942, and until 1946 were stationed together, assigned to the Judge Advocate General's office. They saw this as an opportunity to improve their writing skills, so they spent hours each day dictating to each other. In other words, they taught themselves; they never attended a reporting school.

Upon discharge, they reported the Japanese War Crimes Tribunal in Manila and then worked for the United Nations. In 1949, they became Official Court Reporters for the NYS Supreme Court in Mineola, New York. After older brother Jerry Collins left his reporting job with the United Nations, he joined the Mineola staff. Today, Jerry's grandson Noah is a NYS official reporter in Queens.

With this background, let me introduce you to one of the greatest reporters of all time, whose keen intellect and humility engendered the respect of colleagues and judges.

A Master of his Craft

Arnold was bested only twice in competitive reporting events. And, in those, he placed second. 1949 was the year of the infamous 1949 NYS Supreme Court Test, where the witness was a naturopath and practiced the alto recorder for diversion. 816 candidates failed this exam. Arnold Cohen placed 2nd, with Bill right behind him.

Until the early to mid-1950s, there was another national reporting organization. As NCRA had done until the 25-year hiatus began in 1927, the Associated Stenotypists of America (ASA) conducted annual speed contests. The twins decided to enter. Their 1952 ASA competition results would become a defining moment for Arnold.

You see, brother Bill defeated him in the 1952 ASA championship. Many years later, Bill would reveal to this writer – with the pride that only a loving brother could have for his older-by-5-minutes sibling – why Arnold would never again allow himself to be defeated. "You see," Bill confided, "Arnold became so angry with himself that he found a way to convert that anger into speed."

When NCRA resumed speed contests in 1952, the twins entered. (Remember, Bill had just won the ASA contest.) Their dominating performances sent

shockwaves through the reporting world and would begin the era of machine shorthand supremacy, even as the Cohens would engrave themselves into speed contest lore. You see, when the results were tallied, Arnold set a new record on the 220 wpm Literary: 1 error! But that would only set the stage for more Cohen history.

On the 1953 NCRA speed contest, the results were so amazing that no similar precedent had ever occurred and, in the words of the committee chair, "nor is it likely that they will ever again be repeated." That prediction remains true! The Cohen Twins had tied for first place – with 99.86 percent accuracy – committing the same number of total errors (though different) on each take. Not having lost, Arnold retained the championship trophy won the year before.

Bill did not enter the 1954 contest, which Arnold won, but went on to win the next three years in a row. It was his consistent extraordinary accuracy on the 260 wpm Jury Charges that led to replacing it with a 230 Legal Opinion for all future tests.

He Had a Gentle Touch

Arnold Cohen retired from full-time reporting in 2005 after 55 years, serving as Chief Reporter for 32 of those. His leadership manner was unpretentious, yet knowledgeable; stoic, yet compassionate. He was humble and led by example. He was eloquent at a podium and graceful as a human being. He was gifted and intelligent.

Respected by the Judiciary

This did not go unnoticed by the judiciary. On April 26, 2006, the judges of our court honored him when he became the only nonjudicial person to have his portrait hung among 77 former justices of the Nassau County Supreme Court.

It is with a very heavy heart that I pen these remembrances of Arnold Cohen. He was an empathetic and gracious human being, who respected all and taught by example. I am thankful I knew him. Arnold died, of natural causes, on April 19, 2020. He was 96.

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