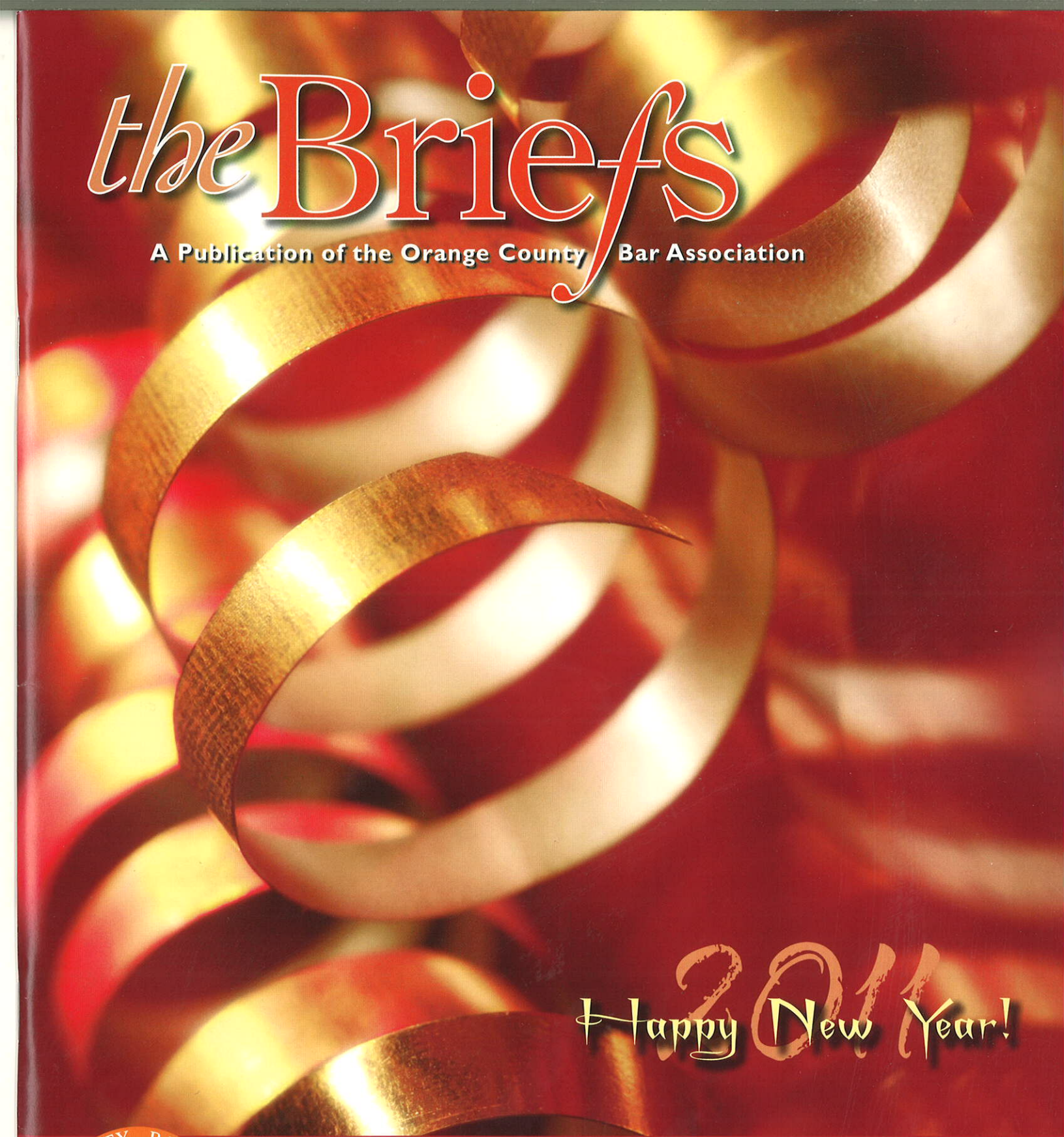
the Briefs

A Publication of the Orange County Bar Association



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If the deadline falls on a weekend or holiday, the deadline is the next business day.

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PARALEGAL post

Paralegal Membership in Local Bar Associations

Linda McGrath Cruz, FRP, ACP

The American Bar Association endorsed the use of paralegals in 1967. Since then, the paralegal profession as a whole has struggled to advance its position and gain a much-deserved level of professionalism and respect in the legal community. It is an exciting time for paralegals in Florida. While some attorneys still expect us to make their coffee and pick up their dry cleaning, many of us have been able to take huge steps forward in our careers. There are opportunities today that were not available to us even five years ago, such as the opportunity to become a Florida Registered Paralegal with The Florida Bar and to become an active member of our local bar associations.

The Orange County Bar Association (OCBA) was founded in 1933 and several years ago started accepting paralegal members, giving us many of the same opportunities afforded to attorney members. We take great pride and feel much accomplishment in becoming part of an organization that has been around for more than three-quarters of a century. Joining the OCBA is a dynamic way for us to highlight our accomplishments and professionalism and invest in our future.

It is much more common today to find local bar associations that accept paralegal members than it has been in the past. For example, the Dade County Bar Association (DCBA) took this significant step forward in April 2010, when it created a Florida Registered Paralegal Committee. The DCBA FRP Committee is dedicated to providing the same opportunities to its members as we do. Based on our own experiences, members of the OCBA Paralegal Section are in a position to serve as a source of information and encouragement for other bars throughout the state that are interested in creating their own paralegal group.

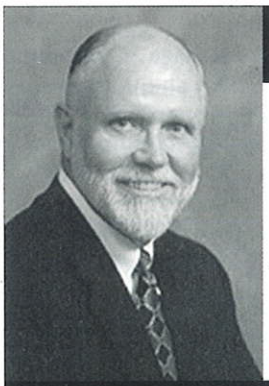
There are several key benefits available to paralegals who join their local bar associations. One is the ease and frequency with which we can access a variety of educational events. While it is always necessary to reach particular CLE goals, paralegals who join their local bar association gain a higher level of professionalism not only by meeting fellow paralegals but by learning from knowledgeable speakers and interacting with community leaders at every opportunity. As we attend CLE courses, we can interact with others in the field and stay up to date with current events, changes in paralegal regulations, new laws and court procedures, educational trends, and so much more.

The opportunity to network is another significant benefit for paralegals who belong to a local bar association. It's one of the best ways for us to land our dream job and is a much better method of job seeking than cold calling or browsing the classifieds. Even if you aren't in the market for a new job, you may be surprised at how networking can further your career. We can enjoy the camaraderie of fellow paralegals and learn from their personal and professional experiences, as well as gain valuable insight from the attorneys, judges, administrators, and other legal professionals who attend events or seminars.

In addition, attorneys and paralegals need to come together to support the local legal community. While we need to seize this rich opportunity by becoming proactive in promoting our firms, we also need attorneys to support our educational and professional goals.

We can advocate for paralegals and obtain these benefits by getting out, being involved, and becoming more than nameless faces in the paralegal crowd. The rewards are too great to pass up. If you are not a member of the OCBA, join now! If you have colleagues who are not members, please encourage them to join and become involved in our great bar and fantastic Paralegal Section!

Linda McGrath Cruz is a Florida Registered Paralegal with the law firm of Arnstein & Lehr, LLP and the Vice-Chair of the DCBA FRP Committee. She has been a member of the OCBA since 2010.



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