

# Word for Word

## Court reporters are needed in Northwest Kansas courts

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Even before Chief Judge Glenn Braun took the bench in Ellis County District Court, he knew who the real star of his courtroom would be.

Back when Braun was still a practicing attorney, a visiting high school class made that clear. When the jury left to deliberate, the class was given the opportunity to ask Braun and the defense attorney questions. The first hand went up: “Can we come up and see what that lady does on that machine?”

Court reporter Lynelle Gottschalk fielded every question until the jury came back.

“She’s outstanding,” Braun said. “She does remarkable work, and we count on her a

lot here at the courthouse.”

Gottschalk, who has served the 23rd Judicial District in Ellis, Gove, Rooks and Trego counties for 29 years, is one of a handful of professional court reporters who create the permanent record of proceedings in Northwest Kansas courtrooms. Many judges in the area wish there were more people with Gottschalk’s skills. Often, they have had to rely on digital recorders instead.

“The recording equipment does have its place, but there’s always the danger that a microphone will fail, or the equipment didn’t stay on for different reasons,” said Coleen Boxberger, executive director of the Kansas Court Reporters Association. “For important hearings, we really like to have a reporter in the room.”

The court reporter produces transcripts of trials and hearings in area courts. A transcript is necessary if the verdict is appealed. The problem is few people are opting to pursue a career in court reporting. Many don’t understand the key role a court reporter plays.

“We are commonly known as the guardians of the record,” Boxberger said. “We’re a disinterested, unbiased third party. We have no dog in the hunt on either side.”

Many long-time court reporters are reaching retirement age. Marilyn Bailey retired in April after nearly 45 years as a court reporter for the 15th Judicial District serving seven counties in the Northwest corner of Kansas. She said her favorite part of the job was being in court and “watching the drama unfold.”

“This career, and actually the whole legal system, can be quite stressful at times, and we can have some

Before the software translates what Lynelle Gottschalk types into her steno machine, it is only readable by another court reporter. This says, “you should be able to read this.”



very emotional and tense moments,” she said. “It was very rewarding to me knowing that everyone is there to try to get through it and make the best of it by being professional and showing respect and compassion for all involved.”

Gottschalk said she’s enjoyed being a court reporter because she’s constantly learning.

“You just don’t know what the lawsuit’s going to be about,” she said. She said she’s heard a wide variety of testimony, including information about medical procedures, roof construction and even an albino tiger.

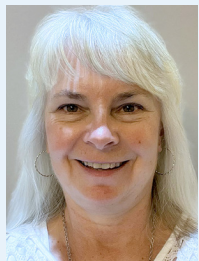
“I was like, ‘Can the tiger come and be an exhibit? I really want to see it,’” she said.

She said court cases often have memorable moments, like the time an elderly farmer in overalls testified that he and his neighbor sang karaoke in his barn every week. Or the time a woman tried to get her cat certified as a therapy animal.

“They tell you at school not to show any emotion,” she said. “If everybody laughs you can, but you have to try not to look sympathetic or roll your eyes.”

## The gold standard

Many people assume that recordings or artificial intelligence will replace court reporters. It hasn’t happened so far, and Boxberger said she doesn’t believe it will. She said having a court reporter in the room remains the “gold standard.”



COLEEN BOXBERGER

“We are very short of court reporters in Kansas,” Boxberger said in October. “Currently, there are 11 official reporter positions being advertised in the state, and I know there are many freelance firms looking for reporters also. There are positions in this area that would be available but are no longer being advertised because no one’s applying.”

She said an official district court reporter would be a state employee with a starting salary of \$55,000 or more and ranging up to more than \$70,000 with



Court reporter Lynelle Gottschalk, of Hays, has the longest tenure of anyone serving Ellis County District Court.

experience. Official court reporters are paid extra for producing transcripts, and freelance reporters can make more if they are willing to put in the hours, she said. She said some courts provide the necessary equipment, but if not, it

really a demand for court reporters all over the United States,” she said.

Boxberger took her first class in shorthand while a student at Hoxie High School. She learned Gregg shorthand, a pen writing theory. She loved the class and wanted to go to college to learn how to use a 22-key steno machine, but she ended up working in title insurance instead. However, after about 13 years, she went to Denver for court reporting school.

“People were telling me tape recorders were going to replace the court reporter’s job so I shouldn’t waste my time and money,” she said. “They’ve been saying that a really long time.”

Since becoming a certified court reporter, she has worked in the profession for 25 years, the first 10 as a freelancer covering depositions in attorneys’ offices, public hearings and conventions. More recently, she’s served in an official capacity with the 20th Judicial District, serving Russell, Ellsworth, Rice, Barton and Stafford counties.

While 70 words per minute or more is high speed for a typist, certification as a court reporter in Kansas requires 95

---

*“We’ve been trying to get the word out about what a good profession it is – a really flexible profession.”*

**COLEEN BOXBERGER** | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE KANSAS COURT REPORTERS ASSOCIATION

---

will cost about \$5,000 to \$7,000 for the stenography machine, computer and software needed.

“We’ve been trying to get the word out about what a good profession it is – a really flexible profession,” she said. “There are online programs where you don’t have to pick up and go to a brick-and-mortar school and can hopefully find a job not too far away.”

In addition to traditional court reporting jobs, trained professionals can go into closed captioning for television programs or provide assistance for hearing impaired students through Communication Access Real Time technology.

“While I would love for any reporter who went to school to stay here, there’s

percent accuracy at a minimum of 180 wpm on medical testimony and 225 wpm on ordinary testimony, Boxberger said. Most court reporters accomplish those speeds by using a shorthand language they type on the keyboard of a steno machine. An alternative method that is becoming more common is voice writing, in which the court reporter whispers into a steno mask what is said in court, along with code words for punctuation and formatting.

Court reporters take advantage of quite a few shortcuts. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury” becomes “laisgentjur” to a voice reporter. Steno machine reporters press a combination of keys at once to represent a single word or up to six words. Phrases

See **WORD**, page 22

**WORD**, from page 21

like “beyond a reasonable doubt” or “I don’t recall” are represented by quick strokes they’ve built into the steno machine’s software dictionary.

Much of the text they are producing could only be read by another court reporter, if not for computer-assisted translation software that converts it in real time to a rough draft. From time to time, an errant keystroke or misinterpreted word leaves the software unable to translate, so editing is required before the final transcript is ready.

### Play the piano? Try a steno machine

Steno machine reporters spend at least two years in college learning the skill before taking a test to become certified.

“It takes a self-disciplined, detail-oriented person – somebody with a precise type of thinking who likes words, language and grammar,” Boxberger said. “They used to say someone who likes playing piano would be a good court reporter.”

Boxberger said she had been one of two court reporters in her district, until Linda Rubio retired 2 ½ years ago. Now Boxberger works with the judges and attorneys to try and pick the cases with



Loretta Dorn, of Hays, recently became a Certified Verbatim Reporter. She speaks into the steno mask she is holding to produce a transcript of what is being said in court.

the highest probability of being appealed so she can attend those in person.

“It’s just much easier,” she said. “If I don’t understand something, I can stop a witness or an attorney and clarify what they said.”

She said she once asked a cardiologist with a heavy accent to repeat herself four times before determining the term

she was using was transesophageal echocardiography.

“If they say a word or term I’m unfamiliar with, or make up a word, I take it down phonetically during the proceeding. Then during the transcription process I research how the term should appear in the transcript,” she said.

“There’s always something new, something

**COFFEE**, from page 19

beings,” he said. “Whether it’s faith or what’s wrong with the political system, you aren’t going to fix it by just running your mouth online. You better go talk to people.”

### Finding hope

That’s what Jerod Brown decided to do. About two years ago, he was talking to the ministerial alliance about his and his wife’s plan to start a coffee shop with a private room for mental health counseling in WaKeeney. LeAnn had been suggesting that they open a coffee shop. He pushed back on the idea – until a young person they knew attempted suicide. He became convinced it was time

for a new approach.

Jerod and LeAnn understand some of the struggles people face. LeAnn is forthright in sharing her own fight with depression, anxiety, and self-doubt in a video on the home page of The Well’s website.

“I’ve been encouraged to share my story to let people know there’s hope, but that it’s also OK to ask for help, and there are resources in this area to be able to support you,” she said. “Our heart’s desire is that people are well. We want people to be well and to be able to have access to resources to get well.”

### Overcoming barriers

Some people need

medication and deeper counseling, but there can be barriers to getting that kind of treatment in rural areas, Jerod said. At The Well, the Browns offer a comfortable, private space where counselor Leslie Unrein keeps regular Friday hours, and other therapists have also seen clients.

“The coffee shop provides a place for us to connect with people and to have deeper conversations,” LeAnn said. “As we get to know them and hear their story, we can say, ‘We actually have a counselor that comes here every Friday. Maybe you can meet with her.’ We want to let people know that we’re here to support them.”

Jerod and LeAnn Brown

both grew up in WaKeeney. They lived in Portland, Ore., for 13 years. In 2010 they returned home, when LeAnn accepted an opportunity to teach at FHSU. Jerod continued in ministry. They opened The Well on Nov. 8, 2022, after having spent a year renovating the building and a month learning how to make coffee. McGinnis and others helped with that.

For those who need professional help, the Browns want to simplify the process, eliminate stigma, and protect their privacy. Contributions of \$25 or more a month received through the Coffee Club or Friends of The Well are used not only to support the operations of the coffee

different. Just when you think you've seen about everything there's something that makes you scratch your head."

### Don't wake the baby!

Voice writing is becoming more popular because it only requires one year to 18 months of schooling to learn. In September, Loretta Dorn, of Hays, passed the national certification test to become a Certified Verbatim Reporter. She'd completed online classes through the College of Court Reporting in Hobart, Ind.

Dorn has been completing transcripts from digital recordings of court proceedings. She said that experience has given her confidence that court reporters will continue to be in demand.

Microphones sometimes pick up things that are not part of the official record, such as attorney-client discussions at the defense table, she said. Then something like the air conditioner kicking on can make voices inaudible, she said.

Dorn has a doctorate in chemistry and taught organic chemistry at Fort Hays State University for 30 years before deciding she was ready to try something new. She had long been fascinated with court reporting.

"I love learning new things, and I think that's why I finally wanted to give this a shot because I just wanted to challenge myself with something completely different," she said.

Dorn said voice writing is a form of simultaneous translation. She chose it over steno machine writing because she believed it would be easier for her to learn, and the equipment cost less than a steno machine.

"I have such respect for people who can do machine steno at speed," she said. "I've played around with it, so I know the rudiments of what's involved. Your brain has to completely rewire to be able to do that."

She said voice reporters are instructed to "speak as though there's a baby in the room that you don't want to wake up." The steno mask she speaks into seals around her mouth, so that the sound goes toward the sensitive microphone inside the mask. Other people can't hear her saying "peerk" for period, "quexco" for

question mark or any of the other odd sounding code words for punctuation.

"If you're speaking correctly, no one can hear what you're saying," she said. "In

fact, that's one of the requirements to becoming certified. They test you on this. If someone is standing two feet away, you should not be audible."

Dorn said she uses professional voice recognition software, as well as

transcription preparation software. She said it's important to learn how to use the software to be able to produce a finished transcript, and a school that doesn't teach about the software is not worth the money.

Dorn said no matter if a court reporter uses a steno machine or a steno mask, the final result is a transcript that becomes an official court record.

"It's different approaches to the same end, so why not?" she said. "I figure if I get my certification, I got it because I can do the job." ■

### THINKING OF BECOMING A COURT REPORTER?

Anyone interested in stenography machine court reporting can try it out for free by signing up for the National Court Reporters Association's six-week A to Z program. The online program covers the basics of steno machine shorthand. Machines are available for rental, or participants can practice on an iPad app. Learn more at <https://www.ncra.org/discoversteno/discoversteno-home/ncra-a-to-z-online-program>

shop but to help anyone who needs help with the expense of counseling. Jerod said as of September, a total of about \$1,500 had been given to offset counseling costs.

"We all need help. We all need somebody to talk to," he said. "It could be that we're having a bad day and the thoughts we're having about what's going on aren't true, and we just need somebody to bring a little different perspective. We've all run into that."

### A place to work it out

Jerod emphasized that The Well is not simply a suicide prevention effort. He sees it as a place where people find support to live life fully. Not

everyone needs professional counseling. Some people just need a caring person to talk to, and some people just want good coffee, and those are also fine reasons to come, he said.

"Soon after we opened was the Christmas tree lighting in town, which is a big day in WaKeeney," he said. "That was our first really busy day. It was a wall-to-wall, elbow-to-elbow line out the door. Somebody said they would pay for the first 200 hot chocolates. We served over 600 drinks that day."

Since then, coffee sales and community support have exceeded his expectations. Groups come in for Bible study. Travelers come in off



Lorey and Gene Dreiling are members of the Coffee Club at Breathe Coffee House in Hays. "It's a really good place - welcoming, comfortable, great staff and a great idea," Lorey said.

Interstate 70. One day, two moms brought their junior high daughters in. The girls, who were not getting along, used the private room in back to work things out while their moms drank coffee and chatted.

"Sometimes I'm overwhelmed in awe and sometimes I'm overwhelmed in work," Jerod said. "I do feel like we've made a difference in this community. I'm very thankful we did it. I have no regrets at all." ■