Some people see college as a direct route to a specific career. Others see more opportunity studying what truly interests them, regardless of job implications. Design firm owner Patti VanHeyde is firmly among the latter.

She has bachelor’s degrees in education, biology and chemistry. But Patti isn’t a teacher, chemist or biologist. She works full time building and selling attractive houses, with some of her work even being featured in her community Parade of Homes events. For her master’s degree, she felt right at home following an equally unconventional path.

Patti decided to enroll in the George Washington University’s Master’s degree in Paralegal Studies program. In her work, she frequently meets with lawyers to ensure her designs meet strict legal standards, and this requires a lot of research to prepare. These meetings helped her realize that she finds problem-solving personally gratifying.

“An example is building codes for renovating a home,” Patti said. “If you change a structural wall, it has to meet certain guidelines, so it’s constant research. Because I was always doing that and love looking things up and solving problems, I decided to go the route of paralegal studies because I felt like I already had a familiarity with it. And I thought if I was going to go to school, I was going to get the highest-level degree that I could get and also go to the best university that I could possibly get into.”

Coming from a Different Angle

Patti was pleased to learn she was not the only non-paralegal in her online program.

“You don’t have to be in the legal community to go through this program,” she said. “You can apply your knowledge in other ways. Within my design work is contract work, so there are lots of lawyers involved. I can draft a contract, present it to an attorney to fine-tune it, get it back and give it to the contractors who are going to order the building materials or doing the work. It reaches a lot of different people in a lot of different ways, this program at GW.”
An Education That Fits Her Lifestyle

As an active business owner involved in residential and commercial real estate, Patti doesn’t have a typical week. Every day demands something different, so the online format of the paralegal studies master’s degree was crucial to balance her work and home life with the education she craved.

“I’m a mom, and I run my own business,” Patti said. “I’m working seven days a week. So it fits into my schedule, because I can carve out time either in the morning, afternoon or whenever I have blocks of time to do this work, rather than get into a car and drive to campus and have a class that is at 7 p.m. or 5 p.m. every night. Because my schedule just doesn’t allow me to break away throughout the year, it offered a lot of flexibility.”

It’s All in the Details

In the program, Patti received the education she sought through courses on topics such as contracts, legal research and writing. She also gained broader insights into paralegal studies that she feels opened her career to broader opportunities. Like the beautiful homes she designs, her background is peppered with surprising details that draw the eye of potential employers she would never have considered before.

“It offers a lot of career opportunities because I am in a slot where I work with a lot of people in the legal industry, and they are constantly saying, ‘Wow, this is well-written. You should be working here,’” Patti said.

Visit [ParalegalStudiesMasters.online.gwu.edu](ParalegalStudiesMasters.online.gwu.edu) or call [1.888.989.7069](tel:1.888.989.7069) for more information about the George Washington University’s Master’s degree in Paralegal Studies online program.

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