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Who Needs College to Pass Bar?

By Liz Valsamis

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Since accessing his Bar Exam results Friday evening, 35-year-old paralegal and ex-Marine Michael Ehline has been in a state of euphoria that has bordered on shock.

Ehline is one of 1,180 of the 4,520 State Bar applicants to pass the notoriously difficult three-day test given in February.

But the odds against him were stacked even higher because Ehline hasn't completed law school and never graduated from college.

"It shows that, with perseverance, even if you're not the smartest guy or have had other setbacks, you can pass this thing," he said.

Although he plans to complete law school in December, Ehline said passing the bar without a college degree was a personal goal that he wanted to complete to prove it wasn't impossible.

"Going to school at night, working sometimes 60 hours a week and studying for the Bar Exam is a major butt kicker," he said.

After graduating Anaheim Hill's Canyon High School in 1986, Ehline enlisted in the Marine Corps. His dream of a military career was cut short when he suffered a knee injury during a training exercise the following year.

He tried a variety of professions after leaving the military. He worked for a trucking company and ran a limousine business. He also

took a job as a paralegal.

Ehline didn't set his sights on becoming a lawyer until 1999, when he took a job as an apprentice law clerk with Brentwood sole practitioner Jeff Dominic Price, who handles habeas corpus petitions.

Price said he was "not surprised" that Ehline passed the Bar Exam.

"I am anxious to see how he uses this opportunity in practicing as an attorney," he said.

Price was the person who told Ehline about a program that would put him on a fast track to becoming an attorney.

Under a State Bar program, people can study law as an apprentice to a lawyer or a judge.

To participate in the four-year program, a person must first pass the First Year Law Students Exam. Usually called the "baby bar," the exam has an 18 percent pass rate.

Ehline passed the baby bar in 2000.

During his four years in the program, Ehline worked as a paralegal for several lawyers, including his current job with a Santa Monica personal-injury firm, the Law Offices of Otto L. Haselhoff.

"I wasn't surprised that he passed," Haselhoff said. "But it's shocking to think that anyone could pass without finishing law school or even going to college, for that matter."

"He's an extremely bright, dedicated, hard worker. His legal mind and his edge is something I've never seen in any-

body else."

After passing the baby bar, Ehline enrolled at the University of West Los Angeles, where he is a fourth-year student.

He credits his success to Los Angeles County Deputy District Attorney Paul Pfau, who runs a program called Cal Bar Tutorial Review.

Pfau was like a Marine Corps drill sergeant, who would call him day and night to make sure he was studying, Ehline said.

"It's all about dedication and staying motivated and believing in yourself and surrounding yourself with people who believe in you," Ehline said.

Last summer, Ehline worked as an extern for 2nd District Court of Appeals Justice J. Gary Hastings, who plans to swear him in to the bar on Thursday.

"He's a very tenacious individual," Hastings said. "He's really been working toward this for a good period of time, and I knew he had the desire to get passed."

Even though he's passed the bar, Ehline plans to graduate from law school in December.

He plans to write a book about passing the bar without a completing college or law school and will open a law practice handling real estate and personal-injury matters, he said.

"Why climb Mt. Everest?" he said of his experience. "Because it's there and that's what I did."