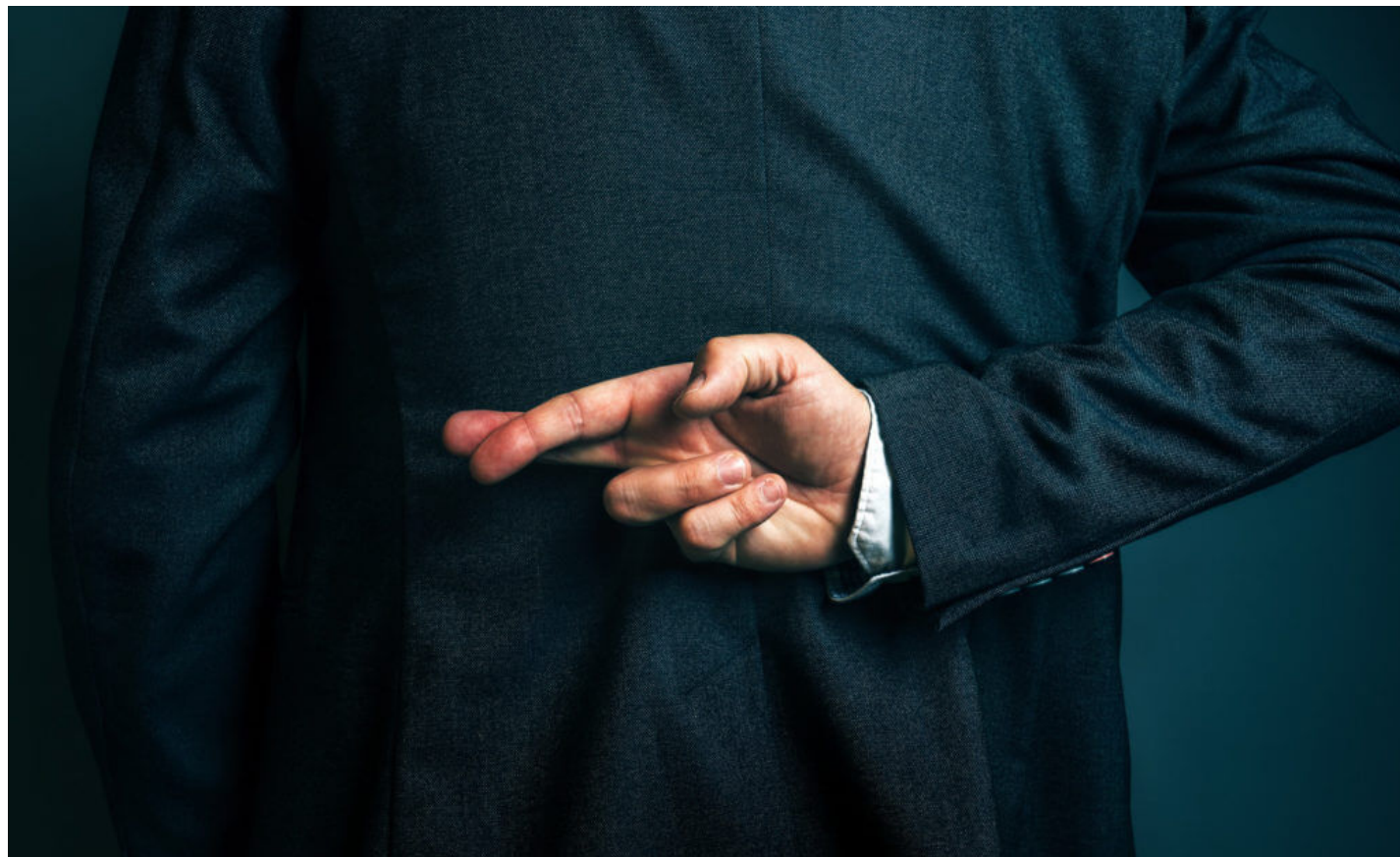


Is your lawyer really a lawyer? - AvvoStories

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Is your lawyer really a lawyer?

BIZARRE, CRIME, NAKEDLAW

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Everett McGill, the fast-talking con man sentenced for practicing law without a license in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* may be George Clooney's most charming role. The idea of printing up a fake license and practicing law seems so laughably unlikely, even in rural, Depression-era Mississippi, that it's easy to overlook Everett's moral shortcomings. The joke would be a lot less funny if your own lawyer turned out to be an Everett, but in fact, it has been done, and sometimes with surprising success.

[Beware the sham attorney](#)

It's not too big a stretch to imagine someone pretending to be an attorney at a cocktail party full of strangers, but law is complicated—that's why we hire attorneys—so it's hard to imagine a poser actually practicing law. Yet it's surprisingly easy to do.

The most famous fake attorney is con man **Frank Abagnale Jr.** (fictionalized in the movie *Catch Me If You Can*), who actually passed the Louisiana bar exam on his third try, although he never attended law school. Now working as a fraud consultant, Abagnale told [one interviewer](#), "As the lawyer, I found most of it was a matter of research ... and then basically persuading people that you're right and they're wrong. I found that the easiest of all the professions to impersonate."

In 2014, **Ronaldo Varelo Melo**, was arrested for [posing as an immigration lawyer](#) in Florida. Melo, himself an immigrant, had no qualifications and did not attempt to provide legal services for his clients. According to his arrest warrant, he "unlawfully misrepresented himself as an attorney in order to engage in theft by deception against aliens in Florida and engaged in extortionary tactics by demanding additional fees while threatening victims with violence and/or deportation." Melo collected about \$100,000 from his victims before he was caught attempting to flee the country.

More recently (March 2016), **Kimberly Kitchen** was [convicted](#) of forgery, unauthorized practice of law, and felony records tampering in Pennsylvania. Kitchen worked for 10 years as a specialist in estate planning. Her lawyer (she did not try to represent herself) says she plans to appeal, on the grounds that no harm was done. Her clients and her bosses were happy with her work. In fact, her firm had recently made her a partner when the state attorney general brought charges against her. It's easy to imagine the inheritance disputes that are now likely to result among the estates she worked on, though.

Even the courtrooms aren't safe from counterfeits. In 2014, **Karla Carbo** [was arrested](#) for practicing criminal law in Utah using another woman's name and bar number. She represented at least four clients in court before the real Karla Stirling (who had passed the Utah bar, but lived and practiced business law in California) was contacted by the court with a question about Carbo's most recent case. Carbo was charged with identity theft, forgery, and communications fraud. All of her cases had to be revisited, since technically, her clients' pleas had been submitted without access to an attorney.

In fact, fake lawyers make the news once or twice every year, which, in a country of 320 million people served by 1.3 million licensed attorneys, doesn't seem like many—unless you are one of the "clients" defrauded by a poser.

[Check your attorney's credentials](#)

Whether you're [making a will](#), [dealing with immigration](#), or facing criminal charges, [if you need an attorney](#), you already have enough stress without worrying about your lawyer's legitimacy. You can easily find peace of mind by verifying your attorney's credentials. Although the level of detail provided varies among states, every state but Delaware and Maine has [online directories](#) of all licensed attorneys. In many states, the directory also includes information about any disciplinary actions that the attorney may have been subjected to.

The [ABA National Lawyer Regulatory Data Bank](#) is the only national repository of information concerning public regulatory actions relating to lawyers throughout the United States—the Data Bank conducts name searches on request for the public, but recommends that you begin with the relevant [disciplinary agency](#) in your state. In most cases, you can verify that your attorney has a license and a clean record with just a few clicks of the mouse.

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