



The Refugee Who Became Mayor

BY DIANE SKOUTI BAIZA, ALUMNI LIAISON

The backstory of new Clovis Mayor Vong Mouanoutoua (Law '02) is fascinating, if not unlikely. The fact that he was elected Mayor of a town that has at times been associated with racial bias makes his win even more remarkable.

"Reputations are hard to shed," Vong said during a recent visit to his SJCL alma mater. A negative impression, he noted, can spring from just a few bad actions, regardless of the overwhelming presence of harmony we have here. "I think the great majority of those who live in Clovis don't feel that way," he said. "If they did, I wouldn't be here."

And besides, he noted, people with bias come in all colors. "My people have people with bias among them too," he added. But we really all value the same things: good schools, safe and clean communities, parks and trails, etc. While the population of Clovis is still largely white (57% in 2024) Vong says diversity here is steadily increasing by default.

Those who value what Clovis has to offer want to live here, regardless of who they are. The election of a Hmong man who started life as a refugee is proof enough that the times are indeed a changin'.

Vong was a boy of five when his family (he is one of 10 siblings) immigrated to the United States. In 1976 the kingdom of Laos had fallen to communist rule and had been heavily involved in secret operations and aiding American pilots. More than one third of the Hmong people perished during the conflict. The survivors were forced to leave a homeland that no longer welcomed them.

In Laos Vong's father had served as a Magistrate of the Court. He felt that America provided the best opportunities for a new and successful life for his family.

"The Hmong culture is rooted to the value of public service," Vong said. Additional role models in Laos had been Vong's grandfather - a businessman, and his uncle - the mayor of a province. Even after becoming established in the States, civic

New BREN Clinic Director Settles In

When Jodie Howard (Law '19) texted that the BREN Clinic was looking for a new program director, it felt like a good fit, except that my knowledge of special education law did not extend too far beyond what I have learned from my child's special education journey.

BY SHANNON WENTWORTH, BREN CLINIC DIRECTOR

Jodie literally wrote the book on special education ("A Parent Guide To Special Education Law & Proactive Advocacy") in law school while she was earning the top marks that would make her the valedictorian of our class. While we both graduated in 2019, our paths did not cross much until our last year of school because I was in the three-year program I started with a different cohort. I knew who she was, of course. She was the one getting all the Witkins. Also, our sons went to the same behavioral therapy center, so I saw Jodie's husband and her son, Bren, the clinic's namesake, most weekdays.

Jodie created the BREN Clinic in 2019 to train the next generation of attorneys in special education law while assisting caregivers navigating the special education morass.

Whoever replaced Jodie would have big shoes to fill. Metaphorically, of course. Her actual shoes would not make for a Cinderella ending.

I loved my time as a student at SJCL. So, naturally, after speaking with Jodie, and then the leadership team, I decided to take the leap. I began my role as Program Director in June 2024 by auditing Special Education Law and Administrative Law as well as familiarizing myself with the clinic's case management system and the extensive training guides Jodie created. In addition to being brilliant, Jodie is also meticulous, making my transition into this role relatively seamless.

The BREN Clinic serves seven valley counties from Kern to Mariposa. Since its inception, BREN has helped over 850 families. Additionally, the clinic offers a free 8-week advocacy class for caregivers each Spring. This year, we had over 300 people register for the class.

Prior to working in the BREN Clinic, I was a criminal defense attorney specializing in post-conviction relief at my solo practice (Wentworth Law Firm). Before going solo



Shannon Wentworth (Law '19) took over as Director of the BREN Clinic in August, 2024.

in 2022, I had the great fortune to work with SJCL alum David Mugridge (Law '85) as a law clerk and associate attorney in his busy practice. Most notably, I worked on the penalty phase of *People v. Johnson*, a death penalty case, where I learned the ins and outs of mitigation. In that case and my subsequent cases, I reviewed a large number of school records. I discovered that most of my clients had diagnosed — or undiagnosed — special needs as children. Nearly all of my long-term incarcerated clients had their first arrest between 11-13 years old for actions at school.

The BREN Clinic gives me the opportunity to get in front of the school-to-prison pipeline by helping children with special needs access support and resources at school. To that end, I've been reaching out to juvenile public defenders with the help of SJCL alum Laura Higareda-Chapa. Through that connection, the BREN Clinic was invited to give an MCLE presentation this summer for the California Office of the State Public Defender on criminalizing special needs.

Building on the outreach Jodie did, it is my hope to reach the most vulnerable

children through outreach to community organizations serving these families.

Language is a barrier for many families with special needs children. My first semester running the clinic, three of my four clerks spoke Spanish; however, this semester, I have no Spanish speaking clerks. Luckily, SJCL has a wonderful administrative assistant, Erika Rangel, who is working on a master's degree in Spanish at Fresno State. She has stepped in to translate for us this semester.

Our language void will be filled in the near term by a new grant from the Central California Women's Conference. This grant will allow us to hire translators on an ad hoc basis to accommodate any language. We will also use the grant to provide more content online in Spanish.

It is such an honor to run Jodie's clinic and help Central Valley children achieve according to their abilities. I could not ask for a better mentor or supervisor. And, after 10 months, it feels like the shoes are starting to fit.

Learn more about the BREN Clinic at sjcl.edu/BREN.

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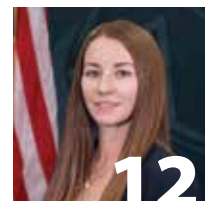
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Vision: *To be the premier provider of legal education, scholarship, and service in the San Joaquin Valley.*
Mission: *To educate and develop individuals to become highly skilled attorneys and problem solvers who will benefit their communities through public and private service. In seeking this vision and attaining this mission, SJCL shall embody the values of civility, excellence, integrity, intellectual inquiry, and service.*

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Alumni in the Land of Oz

Upon entering the Fresno offices of Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani (GRSM50 as it's known), one is greeted by a friendly receptionist who bolts from behind her desk to offer a warm welcome.

BY DIANE SKOUTI BAIZA, ALUMNI LIAISON

While Ellie is not fond of hugs, she is more than willing to offer a lick on the hand or some emotional support. As a colleague the attorneys call invaluable, Ellie is often joined at the office by other dogs, with the caveat they are familiar with office etiquette and can get along with co-workers!

In addition to a focus on the well-being and contentment of their employees, GRSM has built an almost Oz-like approach to job satisfaction. Especially when considering that the firm is among the top 15 largest in the nation. The firm was the first in the country to have an office in all 50 states, and employs over 1,700 attorneys.

In Fresno, seven of those attorneys, one paralegal, and a law clerk, are SJCL grads. They say working together at the firm is a pretty sweet deal. "It makes our work easier in many ways because we all have shared 'trauma bonds' from law school!" said Nathan Maltes (Law '24). Both Nathan and classmate Marisol Cruz Rodriguez (Law '24) are recent graduates, but they were both hired as associates soon after passing the bar.

Elizabeth Thomasian (Law '14) was recently named Managing Partner of the Fresno office, quite a triumph in a firm this large. The press release announcing her achievement describes Elizabeth as a natural-born leader who has the utmost respect of her colleagues and the local legal community. She says she is thrilled that so many fellow alumni have joined the firm. Like in any law firm, the hiring process is fairly intense. But it wasn't Elizabeth's recruitment of fellow alumni that sealed the deal. Each was hired on their own merit, and their ability to exceed the hiring requirements. (We don't mind saying it's a testament to the legal education at their shared alma mater!)

Mike Landers (Law '15) worked for a time with Elizabeth at the Law Office of Rayma Church (Law '91). Upon Rayma's retirement, Elizabeth moved to GRSM and eventually asked Mike to apply. Initially, Elizabeth worried about moving from a small boutique firm to a giant like GRSM. "The culture at Rayma's firm was family-like," Elizabeth said. "Rayma knew my husband's, and even my dog's name!" When Mike joined GRSM, he brought in his expertise in personal injury law.

Nathan says he met Elizabeth, Landon Sciacca (Law '22), and Jenna Halop (Law '21) at SJCL's Career Day in 2023. After interviewing at the On Campus Interviews the following week, he began a clerkship during his last semester. Then he passed the bar and became an associate.

Jenna and Landon attended SJCL around the same time and found themselves as colleagues at GRSM shortly after both passed the bar. Even though he is still a newer attorney, Landon has become somewhat of a superstar. He has helped the partners prep for trials, and he conducts expert discovery, among other high-level tasks, Elizabeth said.

Karan Nagra will graduate this May. He met Elizabeth at Career Day last Fall and began a clerkship in January.

Others of the group were unaware of fellow classmates at the firm, until after they were hired. "It certainly wasn't intended," Jenna said, "But it's really nice that [we all ended up here]. We have commonalities, regardless of our graduation year."

While many super-sized law firms seem rigid and single-minded, GRSM is the opposite. The firm's massive size provides more flexibility and opportunity than most. Attorneys are invited to pick and choose their own schedules. They are welcome to work from home whenever they like.

“Most businesses learned how to be remote during COVID,” Elizabeth said. “But GRSM was a remote platform before that.” Because of their vast, nationwide presence, eliminating overhead for some buildings and offices made sense, but their main reason was always the wellness and contentment of their employees. Having worked out the kinks long before anyone else, they discovered that flexible, remote work is the key to new age efficiency – for both attorneys and clients alike.

An interesting fun fact that highlights the firm’s culture: the Fresno group likes coming into the office! Elizabeth says they come in sometimes just to visit and have lunch. But they also like the flexibility to work from home when it’s more convenient. “We love the hybrid mentality of choice here,” Elizabeth said.

On the day of our visit, eight of the alumni were present and “dressed for court,” but that was just for show. Most dress for comfort on no-court days.

For out-of-area appearances, colleagues at other branches can step in to avoid extensive travel. The digitalization of case

files has prevented the need for attorneys to spend long hours on the road for a short hearing, for example.

Elizabeth says this is the new model for forward thinking firms. “Theoretically, an attorney can have three different hearings happening in different cities all on the same day, with the use of Zoom and fel-

GRSM50

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low associates.” This provides cost benefits as well as helpful workarounds, Elizabeth added. If there is a downside to it all, it’s that things can move along pretty fast, but the attorneys say the phenomenal level of support they receive makes it work.

“From the associate colleagues to the IT department,” Paralegal Melissa Norwood (Law ’23) says, “there is a ton of support available at this firm.” Melissa said she was surprised to learn that even the high-level administrators know her name! Not only

is she a very recent graduate, she lives in Fresno and works remotely in Sacramento.

Erika Esqueda (Law ’22) has been at the firm for six months. She says the mentoring here is unique. “They teach new attorneys how to think like partners because they want everyone to [have the opportunity] to become a partner.”

With nearly every type of law in practice, attorneys here have the luxury of choice. Associates are welcome to explore areas of law they have never tried by collaborating with other branches. While Fresno doesn’t do much sports media law, Los Angeles does. If desired, an attorney in Fresno can work with the L.A. branch to train and try it out, without leaving home.

In addition to opportunity, industry change is a mainstay at GRSM. “My job interview was with a woman at the San Francisco office who was a partner, yet only in her 30s,” Jenna said. “It was inspiring to see that it’s possible to rise up the ranks that quickly.” For female attorney’s, becoming a partner in their 30’s is a shift in the traditional norm. Nathan concurred. His

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(L-R): Nathan Maltes, Mike Landers, Melissa Norwood, Jenna Halop, Landon Sciacca, Erika Esqueda, Ellie, Marisol Cruz Rodriguez, and Managing Partner Elizabeth Thomasian. Not pictured: Karan Nagra (Law ’25)



New MCLE Requirements Featured at:

In a surprise move by the California State Bar, the Minimum Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) compliance deadline was moved back this year from February to April 1, 2025. In addition, new categories have been added to the list of required credit hours.

Beyond the previous requirements of credit hours in Legal Ethics, Elimination of Bias, and Competency, there is now an additional hour of education required in each of the subject areas of Implicit Bias (Bias-Reducing Strategies), Competence/Wellness, Technology in the Practice of Law, and Civility in the Legal Profession.

What's a required compliance reporter to do? Got MCLE? 2025 to the rescue.

Some 60 local attorneys took advantage of the annual January event and found sessions on the newest requirements. Organized by the SJCL Alumni Association, the seminar offered one-hour sessions in four of the required subject areas. Topics included Data Security, the Rules of Professional Conduct, Civility, and Total Life Change.

Be sure to check the California State Bar website for next year's compliance reporting deadline as it may change again.

If you would like to be included on the emailing list or to serve as a presenter for next year's January session, please contact Diane Skouti at dskouti@sjcl.edu.

Thank You to the speakers and volunteers for Got MCLE? 2025

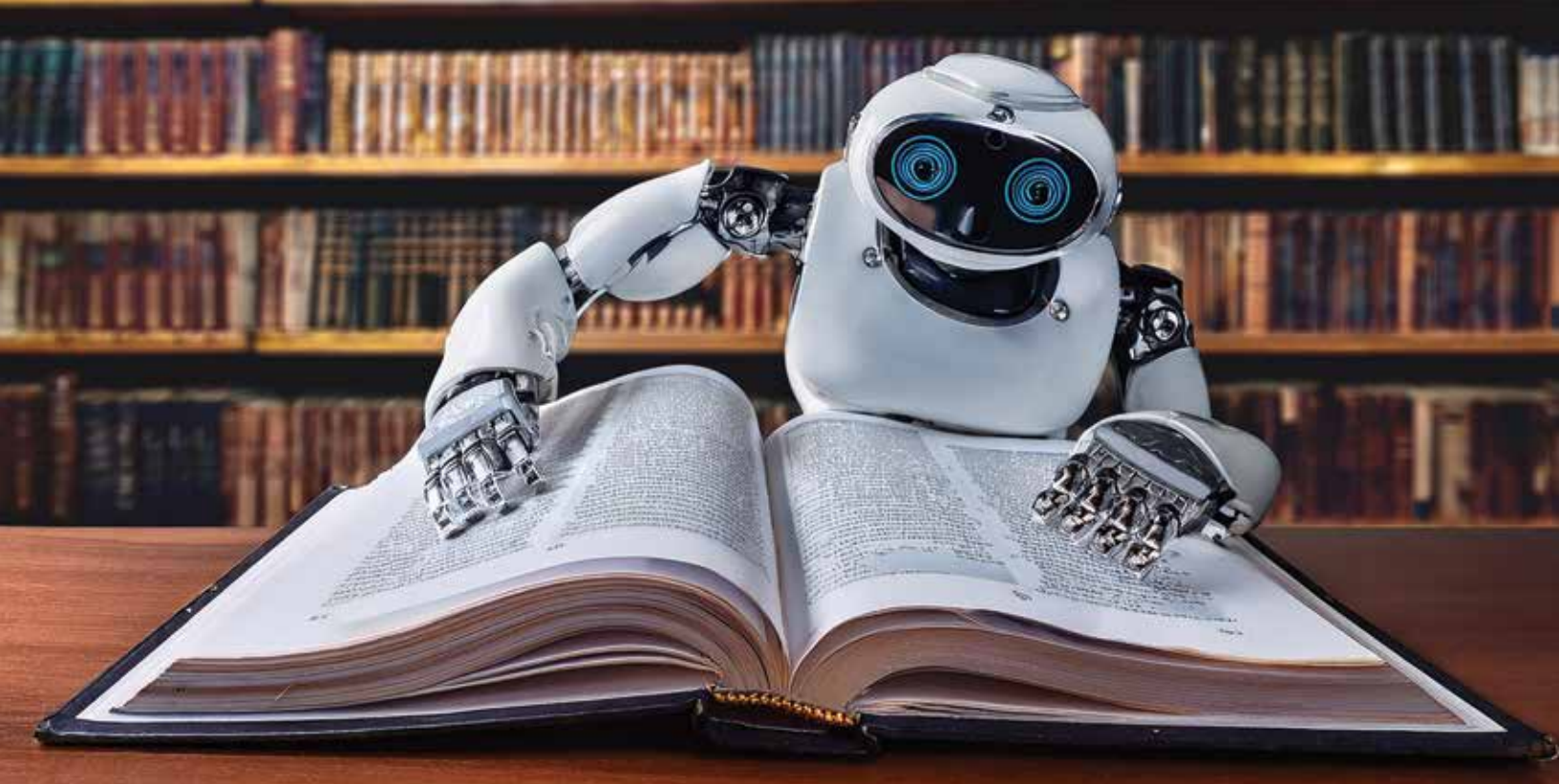
David Moeck (Law '98)
Civility Has Always Mattered

Tod Harris
Total Life Change

Jeramiah Henry
Data Solutions for Legal Professionals

Michael Farley
Professional Responsibility

Thank you to the attorneys and
volunteers from Central California
Legal Services and the SJCL students
who assisted.



Top Legal Trends for 2025

Can AI take your job?

Are you prepared for the legal revolution? Experts who predict trends and developments in the field are predicting sweeping transformations in the practice of law. The fortune tellers at Litera, a software company, expect the use of legal technology to re-write the way lawyers ply their trade.

The infiltration of AI, for one, is forcing law firms to adapt, according to Daniel Fisherman, Director of Litera's Generative AI & Innovation. To ensure they are responsive to the new landscape of legal practice, attorneys and law firms must now focus on the strategic integration of technology and data, with human expertise. Fisherman says it's the only way to stay competitive during this period of sea change.

As an augmentation to the work of legal teams, AI-driven legal assistants are expected to manage strategic analysis and more complex legal tasks in the coming year. Fisherman says these "AI-driven agents will find their way into everyday operational tasks, enabling firms to optimize their workflows and enhance client service."

It will be necessary for legal professionals to enhance their skills and interactions

with AI systems when document generation and contract review become routine tasks for AI. To accomplish this, law firms must develop AI teams to guide and train employees (the flesh and blood kind), on the ethical and efficient use of the tool.

The ability of AI to analyze legal precedents and suggest strategies has already become a vital tool for attorneys. While the potential for unprecedented accuracy exists with AI, misunderstandings are inevitable. That's why human oversight must remain a key component amid the technology.

A potential can of worms hinges on the quality of data that is used to train the AI tools. In all areas of industry, but especially the legal field, high-quality, bias-free data must be input to AI to prevent inaccurate and biased output. Toward that end, data lakes, or centralized repositories that enable seamless data storage, integration, and analysis, are being created by law firms to improve quality control and accessibility of accurate and unbiased data.

The Legal Recruiter Director in 2024 estimated that the market for global legal technology will exceed \$37 billion dollars by 2026, with firms employing AI to compute predictive analytics, perform legal research, and develop case strategies.

Another big issue, data security, has become a function of high tech in the practice of law. Private cloud storage that can keep records and sensitive client information is intended to provide high level security methods and protocols. With the rise of cybercrime, this technology is invaluable to law firms.

With the need for rigorous oversight of the technology-fueled law office, specialized new roles will ensure that the comingling of human mind and machine uphold the promise of the best possible service.

While previously predicted attorney shortages have limited the pool of legal professionals for hire, those who are tech-savvy are even more in demand. Many local firms are struggling to fill associate attorney positions, which makes the use of technology even more appealing.

What all this means is that new (and experienced) attorneys would be wise to incorporate a solid understanding of the latest legal technology into their skill set. Like so many others, the field of law is a rapidly changing profession in an even faster-changing world.



Family Famous

BY DIANE SKOUTI BAIZA, ALUMNI LIAISON

Among the span of options one can practice in law, it's a fact that some areas of legal focus rate higher on the thrill-o-meter than others. Without naming names (tax law - sorry) it is difficult to match the excitement of the more hip and interesting areas like Entertainment or Cannabis Law. For Courtney Caron (Law '07), a cool legal practice is but one of several claims to fame.

Caron founded her law firm, Adamant Law, PC, in 2018 – after the legalization of the commercial operation and use of recreational and medical cannabis. She saw opportunity in the need for legal interpretation of new and shifting regulations in the fledging industry. In the process, she found a practice area that was in demand, complex, and fascinating. Issues with business development, neighborhood compatibility, community benefit, licensing, and regulatory compliance, among others, had stymied would-be cannabis shop owners.

From her office on Ventura Blvd in Studio City, Caron dug deep into controversial and fast-changing compliance issues to educate herself and her clients, and she enjoyed the challenge. She built her practice by adding Business Transactions and Music and Entertainment Law, which moved the needle on her occupational thrill-o-meter, higher still.

For most, such success might provide enough excitement. Not Caron. In July,



Courtney Caron's son Pier Peters as "Charlie" in the "100th Day Episode" of Abbott Elementary.



Courtney Caron (Law '07) with her sons, will compete with Team USA in the BMX Racing World Championships in Copenhagen, Denmark this July.

she will join Team USA in Copenhagen, Denmark, for the BMX Racing World Championships.

More commonly a young person's sport, Caron was 41 when she agreed to learn to ride. Her twin sister was reclaiming her lifelong hobby of racing BMX bikes after a 20-year absence. Having watched her siblings and father race the bikes as a youngster, Caron figured it was finally time to try it herself, if nothing else, for the exercise.

She began with an old loaner bike but soon graduated to a custom built (by her sister) as she learned and trained. From beginner clinics to advanced tracks with former Olympian coaches, Caron found that she loved the sport and, like her sister, was good at it! She rides and trains at least three days a week. Her children, (she has three) have become BMX riders too, and they train and travel the country together for both State and National Race Series.

Beyond the thrill of BMX riding and competition, Caron says the sport has

made her a better parent and a better lawyer. "It provides the opportunity to clear the mind, to exercise, to learn new skills, and to meet and build extended family," she says. She now finds herself working even harder on the job so she can gain more riding time. Spending time with her kiddos in the sport, however, is the ultimate prize.

And speaking of her kids, Caron's eldest son, Pier, now eight, just wrapped his first season of playing "Charlie" on the hit TV show, Abbott Elementary. "Since he was four, Peir wanted to grow up and be Spiderman," Caron said. "When we told him Spiderman was an actor, he decided he would be an actor too!" A few acting classes later, Pier has found fame in the big time. Caron says her son has thoroughly enjoyed the experience, but like his mom, he is also very much into BMX bikes.

What's next for this fame-freckled family? Stay tuned – we're sure there is plenty more to come.



In Evening Under the Stars

This year's Barrister's Ball celebrated SJCL scholarship winners with a springtime "Evening Under the Stars" at the Buena Vista Event Center in Madera. Two new scholarships: the Clinton A. Cummins Memorial Scholarship and the Hammerschmidt Law Corp Scholarship, were added to last year's lineup of 56, to increase the total amount awarded to \$75,450.

SJCL is so very grateful to all our scholarship donors for providing financial support opportunities for our students. In addition to the excitement of the award announcements, the evening offered memorable dabbling in the four D's – Drinks, Dinner, Desert, & Dancing!







Scholarship Recipients

Albert Ramirez Bail Bond Scholarship

Christopher Abuhamdeh

Alumni Association

Carolyn T. Mirviss Scholarship

Santos Christopher Valdez

Spirit of SJCL Scholarship

Alyssa Coles

Alumni Association Judy Wiseman Memorial Scholarship

Jatinderdeep "J.D." Flynn

American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA)

Civil Trial Lawyer Scholarship - San Joaquin Valley Chapter

Karen Lopez Peña

Andres Diaz Special Education Scholarship

Laiba Ijaz

The Artist Tree Scholarship

Rocio Lopez Martinez

Lacey Phillips

The Bertha and John Garabedian Military Service Scholarship

Peter Halajian

Booker Senatore

Cartier First Year Improvement Scholarship

Jonathan McKinney

Central California Bankruptcy Association Scholarship

Ramiro Rivas Barraza

Yanavey McCloskey

Raegan Melfe

Isidro Barragan Sanchez

Clinton A. Cummins Memorial Scholarship

Kelly George

Darryl B. Freedman Bar Study Support Scholarship

Maranee Forsyth

Delta Theta Phi (DTP) Scholarship

Rebeca Delgado Mendez

Cherry Thomas

Delta Theta Phi First Year Scholarship

Emily Henderson Carr

Elizabeth O'Neill Memorial Scholarship

Angelica Barragan

Entrepreneurial Spirit Scholarship

Angela Lopez Villareal

Ernest S. Kinney Trial Lawyer Scholarship

Cherry Thomas

First Generation Student Scholarship

Rosa Nava Garcia

The Founder's Scholarship

Gabriel Sanchez

George J. Vasquez Memorial Scholarship

Robert Demelo

Hammerschmidt Law Corp Scholarship

Benjamin Arcure

Ibarra/Casillas LawSUIT Scholarship

Brayden Inchcliff

Maribel Flores

Blanca Delgado Mendez

James C. Pell Memorial Scholarship

Audrey Gunlund

The Janice Pearson Scholarship

Breana Fishinghawk

Angel Gutierrez Reyes

The Jennifer Lynn Oleksa Scholarship

Bradley Rutledge

John Loomis Legacy Award

Jenna Sharma

Kharazi Bar Study Support Scholarship

Christy Her

Law Students United in Tolerance (LawSUIT) Scholarship

Jordan Kemp

Yolanda Valencia

Law Students for Community Advancement (LSCA)

Community Action Scholarship

Audrey Gunlund

Executive Council Leadership

Ariana Prudente Daza

Outstanding Member

Christy Her

Legal Edge Consumer Scholarship

Alexa Garcia

Leon S. Peters Foundation Leadership Awards

Ariana Prudente Daza

Sierra Ecker

Noorjot Kaur

Rebeca Delgado Mendez

Milton Ramirez

Mike Rhodes Social Justice Scholarship

Geovanna Waters

Notorious RBG Scholarship

Edna Villicana Madrigal

Proctor Scholar of the Year

Robert Demelo

Proper Defense Law Corporation

Employed Student Bar Study Scholarship

Vanessa Fayad

Public Service Scholarship

Milton Ramirez

SJCL Student Bar Association (SBA) Scholarships

Thomas Delgado (1L)

Audrey Gunlund (2L)

Angela Lopez Villareal (3L)

Shannon Milligan (Graduating)

Soroptimist International of Clovis Woman's

Advocate Award Scholarship

Kamryn Shurtiff

Trudi Gale Manfredo Memorial Scholarship

Shannon Milligan

Year Awards

Full-Time Faculty of the Year

Christine Goodrich

Adjunct Faculty of the Year

Joseph Barton

4L Student of the Year

Rebeca Delgado Mendez

3L Student of the Year

Lacey Phillips

Mariela Zamora-Hernandez

2L Student of the Year

Bradley Rutledge

1L Student of the Year

Ashley Rivera-Garcia

NALC Outstanding Student Advocate

Thalia Enriquez

NALC Outstanding Student Advocate

Gabriel Sanchez



Newly appointed Chief Deputy District Attorney of Tulare County, **Jessica Weatherly** (Law '10)

Life is But a Dream

Jessica Weatherly (Law '10) achieved a dream she had held since middle school when she was promoted to Chief Deputy District Attorney of the Tulare County District Attorney's Office, in November. A native of Exeter, Jessica graduated from CSU San Diego with a degree in Biology prior to attending SJCL. Her parents had advised her to have a backup plan with a flexible major in case her interests changed. But Jessica never wavered from her passion to help victims find justice.

First hired as a law clerk in 2008, Jessica began her career by assisting now District Attorney Tim Ward on the prosecution of

a death penalty homicide case. She became a deputy district attorney two years later.

Jessica's tenure at the D.A.'s office has included assignments in general felony, juvenile, crimes against children, trial team, south county Porterville, and misdemeanor divisions. She has prosecuted high profile gang and homicide cases, as well as attempted murders on peace officers. In 2016, Jessica received the Valley Hero Award, and in 2017, the Porterville Exchange Club Attorney of the Year Award. Jessica worked for five years as Assistant District Attorney prior to her current promotion.

Gordon & Rees FROM PAGE 5

fiancé is currently a 3L at SJCL. He says he likes working for a firm that supports the kind of career path she too, is hoping to follow.

Marisol Cruz Rodriguez relayed another traditional norm that is changing. "As an attorney who is just starting her career, and happens to be pregnant, I have received much support and grace here." She added that (managing partner) Elizabeth has helped her to feel at ease about her new, dual careers, both as an attorney, and a soon-to-be new mom. Marisol says she has been connected with people in the firm who can assist with navigating all of it.

For all of their intentionality, GRSM has a good retention rate for lateral partners. Within the highly fluid legal field, their retention rate of 88% is rare. By cultivating an environment where attorneys can integrate easily and establish long-term careers, the firm has gained inclusion in U.S. News & World Report's Best Companies to Work For: Law Firm Edition, 2025.



San Joaquin College of Law's Career Day with **Elizabeth Thomasian** (Law '14), **Nate Maltes** (Law '24), and **Landon Sciacca** (Law '22).

The group had to admit that sometimes they too are surprised by the sheer awesomeness of their jobs. In a profession that is known for its strict adherence to traditional norms, the alumni at GRSM seem to have found their way over the rain-

bow. The oft quoted advice about making connections and networking with fellow graduates is sound, but it is also good to find an office that loves dogs!

A Message from Your Alumni Association

BY **MARLA GARCIA**, BOARD MEMBER

The SJCL Alumni Association Board is happy to welcome Kelsey Schulteis, Tiffany Pack, Fabian Perez, and Zena Sin-Zaragoza to the Board of Directors! One of the great aspects of our alumni is the close-knit community that we have. The Board has seen and heard so many great stories of the benefits of staying connected with our fellow graduates and alma mater (new job opportunities, community involvement, case referrals, friendships, etc.). We are excited to be part of this community and excited to provide opportunities for alumni to network with fellow alumni and colleagues, as well as to meet new local practitioners! Please keep an eye out for announcements on upcoming events, including the always fun Alumni Association Mixers, and join in on the fun!

New Alumni Association Board Members



Kelsey Schulteis (Law '22)
Wilkins Drolshagen & Czesinski LLP



Zena Sin-Zaragoza (Law '20)
Chapman Law, P.C.



Fabian Perez (Law '19)
Hernandez Law



Tiffany Pack (Law '18)
Fitzgerald Alvarez & Ciummo

Alumni Share Bar Tips

Members of the Alumni Association Board paid a visit to Professor Hamm's Remedies class in early March to share their bar prep and exam experiences. As the students near the end of their law school journey, the alumni offer tips and support for the mother-of-all-challenges ahead.



Josh Hernandez (Law '18)



Tiffany Pack (Law '18)

Mentors Make a Difference

San Joaquin College of Law, in conjunction with the Fresno County Bar Association, is once again seeking attorneys to serve as attorney mentors to current law students and recent law school graduates.

The time commitment is minimal, but the difference you can make has no limit.

For more information or to sign up, please contact :

Diane Skouti
dskouti@sjcl.edu



Clovis Mayor **Vong Mouanoutoua** and Mayor Pro Tem **Diane Pearce** were sworn to their new posts by Councilmember **Lynne Ashbeck** in December.

Clovis Mayor FROM PAGE 1

engagement and academic achievement were highly encouraged in Vong's family.

With his formative years spent in southern California, an interest in pharmacology led Vong to UCLA on a medical track. Then a math professor told him that his respectful, but constant line of questioning on the whys and hows of calculus might signal that he would make a better attorney than pharmacist!

In 1996 Vong's family relocated to Clovis. "My father had looked at a lot of homes in the area due to the large Hmong community," Vong said. "He had no knowledge of the particulars, but he found a home he liked that happened to be in Clovis. He felt comfortable here, liked the strong connections people had to the land, and to civic duty." Eventually Vong took his professor's advice and enrolled at SJCL.

The ingrained honor and prestige of civic duty fueled Vong's drive to become involved in local government. For him, the pinnacle of service was the city council. "I see it as sacred," he said. "There are thousands of people relying on us (councilmembers) to make the best decisions for them." What we do impacts those who live next door, he said.

After law school Vong volunteered on local political campaigns and participated in a civil service academy for which he received a scholarship. A well-written thank you note served as his introduction to the Clovis City Planning Commission and launched his public service career. Vong saw it as a perfect fit. "America is a nation of laws. The planning commission is bound by land use laws and every decision must be based on a rule or document that came before. It's our duty to understand what

consequences result from each decision we make," he said.

Vong was next elected to the City Council where he served for seven years. In a city-wide vote last fall he was elected Mayor. With a "soft mayor," or co-management system, all council members, including the mayor, are equals, Vong explained. The only real distinction between a councilmember and the mayor is that the mayor runs the council meetings and attends a whole lot of events. But the voting power and influence of all council members is the same.

It's one reason Vong likes local government. "It's less partisan," he said, "We are creating, establishing, and passing our work along to the next generations." Without setting the example of cooperative and honorable civic service, the next generation could struggle, he added.

Mayor Mouanoutoua says the current state of affairs at the federal and state levels makes any further political aspiration undesirable. He doesn't like the partisanship, or the huge stumbling blocks it creates.

For now, engaging young people with the lure of civic duty is at the top of Vong's to do list. "We must be intentional in showing our citizens - and especially our young people - by our actions, that positive change can happen when people get involved and do their jobs well."

Vong's other goals include responsible city growth, public safety, and the family-friendly way of life Clovis is known for.

Vong's other job, his day job, while also large and complex, is complementary to his efforts on the city council. As the Director of External Relations and Project Development for Community Medical Centers, he

works to share the vision of the hospitals and how they can best meet the needs of the community. A recent accomplishment was securing \$30 million in donations for a new Neurosciences Institute at Clovis Community Hospital. "We want to have the best medical facilities so we can attract the best doctors from all over the country," he said. These are the ways we can ensure the greater good for the community, he added.

Vong additionally teaches a class in Hmong at Fresno State, and serves on several boards and committees, including the SJCL Board of Trustees.

Of his leadership style, Vong says helping people to trust government is a priority. One way he accomplishes this is to treat every call, email, and request as the most important thing in his day. Whenever possible, he answers calls and emails on the spot. An avid "penciller-in," Vong will find an open date and pencil in requests in real time. That way he ensures a quick follow-up. Instead of saying "let's meet for lunch someday," Vong picks a date and schedules it. "We all have to eat every day - if you set the date, you can make sure it happens," he said.

In addition to his jobs and volunteer activities, Vong shares the pick-up/drop-off duties, along with everything else for their five children, with his wife, who works for the City of Fresno. Epitomizing the family culture of community involvement, one of Vong's daughters will sing the National Anthem at this year's Clovis Rodeo.

In each of his roles, it's Vong's sincerity that is most apparent. The sincerity of a Hmong boy from Laos who truly believes in the power of civic duty and makes it his mission to serve well.

In Memoriam



Professor Phil Cherney

SJCL has lost a beloved instructor and friend with the passing of Professor Phillip Cherney on January 31, 2025. He was 75. Professor Cherney began teaching Criminal Law at SJCL in 2014. He impressed upon his students his passion for the protection of individual rights, the defense of death row clients, and the pursuit of justice, always with an eye toward human compassion.

A well-respected attorney in the legal community with over four decades of trial

and appellate experience, Professor Cherney focused his entire career on criminal defense.

His law career began in Palo Alto in 1977. Ten years later he moved to Visalia and worked as a Tulare County Deputy Public Defender, overseeing felony trials. He went into private practice in 1994. Over the next 25 years, he worked on many notable cases, including the murder trial of Richard Allen Davis. Davis' criminal record was instrumental in the implementation of California's "three-strikes law."

After retiring from active practice in 2019, Professor Cherney worked as a consultant to public defender agencies and private counsel in death penalty litigation. He also testified as an expert witness on professional standards and practices for defense counsel. He published scholarly articles on select topics in criminal law.

Both Professor Cherney's legal career and teaching style were driven by his belief that justice and "truth in sentencing" be equally applied to all within the criminal justice system.

"Unequal justice in this country is rampant in capital cases as it is throughout the criminal justice system, and most of the time the capital defendant is a person of color, indigent, struggling with "high risk" factors, such as severe childhood trauma, poverty, addiction, and mental health problems," he had said.

Professor Cherney made many friends at SJCL and will be sorely missed. His family is planning a memorial in the spring.



Paul Jacobsen

SJCL notes with sadness the passing of Paul Robert Jacobsen (Tax Law '92) after a two-year battle with brain cancer, on February 14, 2025, in Boise, Idaho. Paul obtained a degree in accounting from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and worked for several years as a CPA prior to earning a Masters in Taxation from SJCL. He later moved to Visalia where he continued his career in public accounting until his retirement in December of 2022. In addition to a successful 40-year career in accounting, Paul was also an accomplished musician and played guitar in numerous bands.

On the Move

Jessica Weatherly (Law '10) was promoted to Chief Deputy District Attorney at the Tulare County District Attorney's Office in November of 2024.

Juliana Gmur (Law '93) is now the Executive Director for the Commission on State Mandates in Sacramento.

Vong Mouanoutoua (Law '02) has been elected Mayor of Clovis, as well as serving as a Clovis City Councilmember.

Joseph Good (Law '19) is now a Deputy District Attorney at the Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office.

Amreet Badesha (Law '22) is now an Associate Attorney at Peterson Bradford Burkwitz Gregoria Burkwitz & Su in Burbank, California

Raquel H. Chavez (Law '24) is now an Associate Attorney at Sierra Litigation of Fresno. Raquel's focus is in Consumer Protection, Lemon Law, and Dealer and Contractor Fraud.

Sandra Marie Oseguera (Law '23) is now an Attorney II with the Stanislaus County Office of the Public Defender.

Elizabeth Thomasian is now the Managing Partner of Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani, Fresno Office.



Please share your milestones with us: new job, new city, marriage, new baby, etc! We want to hear your news. Send an email to Diane Skouti at dskouti@sjcl.edu or scan the QR code.



SJCL congratulates alumni **Eric LiCalsi** (Law '13) for becoming the 10th active judge in Madera County. His appointment is history making for two reasons: he was sworn in by his father, the **Honorable Ernest J. LiCalsi** (R), and both father and son are serving as Madera Superior Court judges at the same time.



In the previous IA, we celebrated the pending arrival of Baby Barreto. We are super excited to announce that in December, Professor and Managing Director of NALC **Linda Barreto** and her family received the most precious gift of all, a healthy beautiful 7.5-pound baby boy, **Alexander Ramon Barreto**.

Thank you FOR YOUR SUPPORT

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Only \$50 per year makes you a member (\$125 for three years) and only \$25 for the First Year for new attorneys.

Scan the QR code and join now. Your membership is vital to the Alumni Association's endeavors to strengthen alumni connections and provide support to current students, graduates, the law school, and the community.

