



## Unity Bar Ignites Change

**S**JCL's 2nd floor hallway was jam-packed with judicial royalty for the Central Valley Unity Bar's celebration of annual award recipients. In addition, California Supreme Court Justice Martin Jenkins, Judicial Appointments Secretary to Governor Newsom Luis Cespedes, and Deputy Judicial Appointments Secretary to the Governor Adam Hofmann served as special guest speakers in honor of the occasion.

More than 40 judges from all over the state joined attorneys, Unity Bar members, and law students for an inspirational evening that illuminated the need to grow a legal community and bench that reflect the demographics of California's population.

Born of a vision "to promote equality and representation in the legal field," the Unity Bar is a coalition of diverse bar associations who are united by a shared

commitment to justice, inclusivity, and community. The Central Valley Unity Bar is an alliance of six local member organizations including the Black Lawyers of Central California (formerly Hugh Goodwin Bar Association), the Fresno County Women Lawyers, the Central California Asian Pacific American Bar Association, La Raza

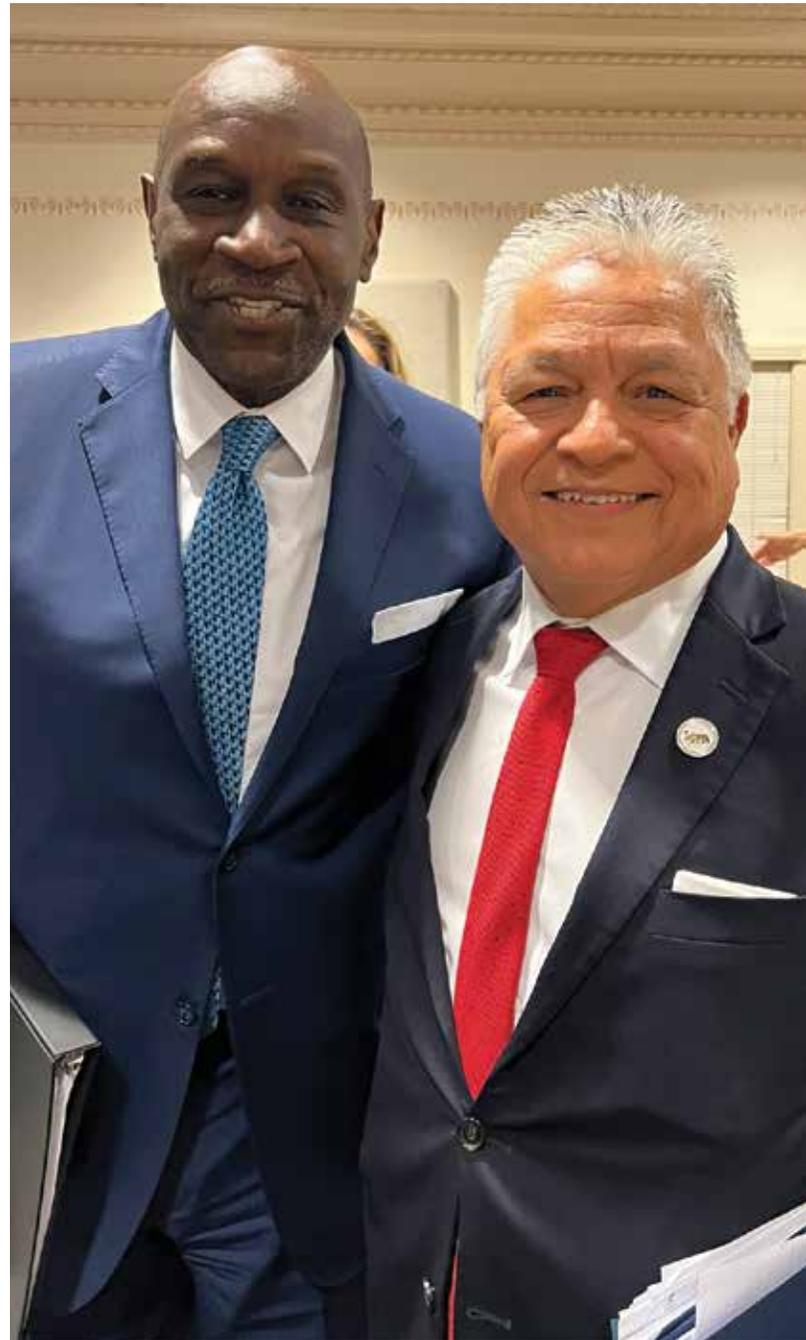
Lawyers Association, the South Asian Bar Association, and Pride Law. They welcome all bar associations to join their fold.

First organized in Sacramento, there are now Unity Bars all across the state, sharing the mission of promoting inclusive and equal legal representation, as well as the fair administration of justice for all.

In an atmosphere electric with the sense of community and goodwill, it was clear these goals are at the forefront of needed change within the legal system. Since Secretary Cespedes' selection as Judicial Appointments Secretary in 2020, the Governor's Office has appointed over 200 judges to the bench. In 2021 alone, the ad-

**"Unity is the antidote to divisiveness"**

– California Supreme Court Justice Martin Jenkins



California Supreme Court Justice **Martin Jenkins** (L) and Judicial Appointments Secretary **Luis Cespedes** served as special guest speakers at the Unity Bar's 2nd Annual Celebration in July.

# The Entering Class of 2025 is the Largest Since the Mid-1990'S

## Why did this happen? Only 72 had enrolled in fall of 2024.

Many factors were probably involved. First, the recent SJCL graduating classes performed outstandingly on the California bar exam. ABA Standards require that 75% of each graduating class must pass the bar exam within two years of graduation. The recent SJCL classes exceeded that Standard.

Class of 2020	80.00%
Class of 2021	81.82%
Class of 2022	94.44% (in one year)
Class of 2023	78.13%
Class of 2024	81.58% (in one year)

The Committee of Bar Examiners requires SJCL to report a Five Year Cumulative Pass rate each year. SJCL's current Cumulative Pass Rate is 85%.

Attending major law schools is increasingly expensive. SJCL's tuition and fees total is one-fourth to one-third that cost. As finances tighten, a lower cost option offering a solid education is increasingly attractive. Also, SJCL now has a synchronous program wherein students can attend remotely but still be in a live classroom.

Undergraduate options have expanded significantly for students in the San Joaquin Valley, specifically at CSUF, CSUB, and UC Merced. This puts more of them in a position to take the next step of attending law school. Plus, employment opportunities for lawyers are plentiful in the Valley.

Finally, whenever there is a significant change in the political atmosphere on the national level, there is an increase in enrollment at law schools. This happened to SJCL in the mid-1990's when EVERYONE wanted to go to law school.

## How did this happen?

SJCL's WASC accreditation renewal Site Visit occurred in March of 2025. The Commission subsequently voted to renew SJCL's WASC accreditation for 8 years. WASC is always pushing higher education institutions to improve. During the Site Visit in March, the Site Team suggested SJCL use the extensive admissions data it had been collecting to develop a system to project fall enrollment more exactly. Director of Assessment and Community Engagement, Francisco "Javier" Rosas, immediately reviewed five years of admissions data including the number of partial applications begun, the number of completed

applications submitted, the number of acceptances offered, and the number students who enrolled. He created a formula based upon that data that predicted the enrollment for each of the five years with stunning accuracy.

This enabled SJCL to identify benchmarks of progress SJCL had to make throughout the year to achieve a goal enrollment. Based on what they had learned, the Admissions Team set an amazing goal of 100 first-year enrollees for fall of 2025. They were energized by the prospect of helping so many people achieve a life-changing goal. The numbers continuously exceeded the designated benchmarks throughout the year.

Team members Diane Steel, Javier Rosas, Darius Ibarra, and Joyce Morodomi, with assists by Jared Nelson, Mark Enns, Lisa Nilmeier, Erika Rangel, and Derron Wilkinson began contacting every prospective student to answer their questions about law school, guide them through the LSAT and application processes, take them on building tours, include them in events, and connect them to alumni in the students' areas of interest in law. Faculty led mock law classes and LSAT workshops, as well as met with interested applicants. It was a magnificent team effort.

## OH, so you want to know the outcome? 104 first year students enrolled for fall 2025!

Fortunately, the SJCL building has untapped capacity. Additional sections of some courses were created, and new adjunct faculty were hired, some of whom had long wanted to teach a specific subject. Although about one-fourth of the enrollees plan to attend virtually, it is exciting to see again so many students rushing about the halls at SJCL.

The entering class is extremely diverse, very close to representing the diversity of the general population of the counties from which SJCL attracts students. SJCL's untapped capacity puts it in an enviable position. SJCL does not have to deny admission to one individual in order to admit another. Any applicant demonstrating a reasonable prospect of success in law school and admission to the bar can be given the opportunity to undertake law school.

All of this is so exciting for the students, the school, and the San Joaquin Valley, I often have to restrain my instinct to jump up and down smiling. It will be equally exciting to see how all these people grow.

## A Message From Dean Pearson



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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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# Admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court Bar: A Personal Reflection

BY DAVID WEILAND (LAW '92), SJCL BOARD OF TRUSTEES MEMBER

The United States Supreme Court Bar was first established in 1790. Since that time, thousands of attorneys have had the honor of being admitted. As of June 5, 2025, I am proud and humbled to be counted among them.

This milestone carries a significance I had not fully grasped in my youth. As a child, I considered becoming a lawyer. I was accepted to UC Berkeley and then planned to enroll at any law school that would take me. Life charted me a different course. Years later, I returned to that early aspiration and enrolled in law school in 1988 - not as a young undergraduate, but as an experienced civil engineer ready to begin anew.

For my second act, I attended night classes at San Joaquin College of Law, then located on Shields Avenue near First Street. My journey was not glamorous, but it was

States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. It has been a career built not on spectacle, but on steady work, quiet discipline, and the belief that doing the job well is its own reward.

These three decades have affirmed what I already knew to be true: San Joaquin College of Law equips its graduates for meaningful and lasting careers in the legal profession. I am proud to count myself among its alumni. Admission to the California Bar opens many professional doors, including membership in the American Bar Association, which I joined in 1998. Through my involvement with the ABA's Senior Lawyers Division, I was given the opportunity to apply for admission to the United States Supreme Court Bar. With the generous sponsorship of Fresno attorneys Timothy Jones and Stephen Cornwell, my application was approved.

to pronounce their name properly. I gladly and politely explained that my last name is pronounced "WHY-land." Throughout the evening, I had the opportunity to speak with attorneys from across the country. Among them was Danielle Borel, President of the ABA Young Lawyers Division, whose warmth and graciousness stood out. She and Julia formed a fast bond over dinner, and that connection would matter the next day more than we realized.

The morning of the ceremony began early, at 7:30 a.m., on the steps of the United States Supreme Court. We had arrived early to take photos, even with scaffolding covering the stately facade. Security was extensive and thorough as attendees were escorted inside in groups of twenty through multiple screening stations. All electronics, wallets, purses, and keys were required to be locked away. We were warned that anyone found inside the chamber with any prohibited items would be detained at the local jail for twenty-four hours. We did not test the policy.

The ABA also hosted a buffet breakfast in one of the Court's large conference rooms. At approximately 9:30 a.m., Chief Justice John Roberts entered the room, preceded by a man wearing a bulletproof vest. Luckily, our table happened to be near the door. Chief Justice Roberts stood beside us and welcomed the group with brief remarks about what to expect. Without his robe, he appeared more like a cordial colleague than the leader of the highest court in the nation. That understated demeanor made his presence all the more powerful.

Shortly afterward, Clerk of the Court Scott Harris entered the room in full formal attire and provided a clear briefing on courtroom procedures. The ABA group was not the only one being sworn in that morning, and the courtroom, with space for only one hundred public guests, was already full. That was when we learned that guest attendance would be limited due to last-minute security changes. Without hesitation, Ms. Borel stepped in and ensured that Julia was allowed to enter. What might have seemed like a small kindness on her part had a lasting impact on our family.



David Weiland (Law '92) was admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court Bar in June. His family accompanied him to Washington D.C. for the swearing-in ceremony. David is a partner at Coleman & Horowitz, LLP, in Fresno.

intentional. I graduated in May 1992, passed the July bar exam, and secured my first client by December. That moment marked the beginning of a legal career that would prove to be deeply fulfilling. Over the next thirty-two years, I practiced in every California state court and appeared before the Eastern, Central, and Northern District federal courts. I successfully argued appeals before both the California Court of Appeal, Fifth District, and the United

I traveled to Washington, D.C., for the swearing-in, joined by my wife, Lillian, and our daughter, Julia.

The experience exceeded every expectation. On June 4, the ABA hosted a formal dinner for the applicants and their guests, offering us the chance to meet one another and hear stories from those who had practiced before the Court. Our host, who was responsible for sponsoring our group, took the time to ask each applicant how



## Moot Court Champions Crowned

Moot Court Coach Sasso and the judges for the final round had high praise for the winners of this year's Moot Court competition. The winning appellant was Bradley Rutledge, and the winning Appellee was Jagr Alindajao.

Moot Court 2025 Finalists (L-R) Professor **Peggy Sasso**, **Bradley Rutledge** (4L), **Nancy Diaz** (3L), **Audrey Casillas** (3L), **Hon. Jonathan B. Conklin**, **Hon. Stanley A. Boone**, **Jagr Alindajao** (4L), **Santos (Chris) Valdez** (3L), and **Jonathan McKinney** (3L).

Guests were escorted into the courtroom first, leaving us, the soon-to-be inductees, to wait. Lillian and Julia later confided that their assigned seats were so squeaky they were afraid to move, lest they be escorted out. Soon, my fellow inductees and I were called to line up. Just ten feet from the chamber doors, we passed through two additional rounds of screening before being permitted to proceed.

We entered the courtroom, and I felt a deep sense of reverence. Our names were read aloud, state by state, and the room was nearly silent. The chamber was majestic. Towering columns rose from polished marble floors. A crimson velvet curtain framed the justices' bench. The formality, the scale, and the symbolism combined to produce a gravity that even thirty years of courtroom experience had not prepared me to absorb.

Just after ten o'clock, the nine justices entered the chamber. We rose to our feet.

The Chief Justice gave a subtle wave and smile, and we returned to our seats. Despite the warm smiles from several of the justices, the seriousness of the moment was unmistakable. Before the swearing-in began, six cases were announced. Associate justices read summaries of their majority opinions from the bench. It was a vivid reminder of where we were, and why we were there.

A few attorneys were admitted individually, including one nominated by his father. That gesture brought an unexpectedly personal note to an otherwise formal occasion. Then came the turn of our ABA group. As each name was read - and carefully pronounced - we stood. When the Clerk of the Court administered the oath, we affirmed our commitment to the Constitution of the United States.

The ceremony concluded within moments, but the weight of that moment will remain with me for the rest of my life.

Outside the courtroom, Lillian and Julia met me with hugs. The moment felt complete. We visited the gift shop, gathered a few souvenirs, and spent the rest of the day sightseeing in the city we love. A global parade was taking place that same afternoon. The contrast between the freedom celebrated in the streets and the solemnity experienced within the courtroom was striking, and it was not lost on us.

On the flight home, I considered what it might have been like to reach this milestone earlier in my career. I suspect it would not have held the same meaning. Some things are richer when they arrive later, shaped by time, perspective, and the people who matter most.

Thanks to San Joaquin College of Law, to the ABA, and to everyone who helped make this journey possible, I now carry a credential I long hoped for, briefly deferred, and will always be proud to hold.

# Alumni Career Paths Highlight What's Possible

BY DIANE SKOUTI BAIZA, ALUMNI LIAISON

The SJCL motto “One Degree, a World of Options,” is greatly exemplified by the legal career of 2009 graduate Sung Bae Park, who currently lives and works in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

In the 16 years since graduating from law school, Sung Bae has become the Legal Director of the Aljomaih Energy and Water Company, as well as a member of the Saudi Arabian Infrastructure Developer in the UAE. Born and raised in South Korea, Sung Bae found early inspiration in the engineering processes of modern society. “I recognized that everything (that is engineered and built) is subject to law and regulations,” he said. His interest in the systems of infrastructure eventually led him to law.

Sung Bae attended undergraduate school in China. He ordered books from the US to study for the LSAT exam. He says he lucked out when his law school

application landed in the hands of Dean Pearson and he was accepted at SJCL.

When he graduated, the US was mired in the financial crisis. Finding it difficult to land a job as an international student, Sung Bae returned to Korea with two



**Sung Bae Park** (Law '09)

goals: fulfill the South Korean requirement of mandatory military service, and find a good job. After three years of military service he became in-house council for a Korean construction company. Over the next 15 years he practiced law in the areas of construction, energy, and infrastructure.

In 2018 Sung Bae secured a position in International Arbitration in Abu Dhabi, UAE. His work there involved billion-dollar settlements, which opened even bigger doors of opportunity.

As an example of the heights one can reach with a JD, Sung Bae reflected on an international arbitration case involving \$500 million at the Court of International Arbitration in London, England. He said the proceedings were under UK British Law and that the opposing sides exchanged documents for two years prior to the four-week hearing. The teams (the opposition included attorneys from Paris, London and Singapore, and Sung Bae's team included

himself from South Korea, and attorneys from the Middle East and London), hailed from four major law firms. During the hearing more than 50 witnesses were called before the Queens Council of British Arbitrators. "It was an amazing experience," he said. There is no limit to what one can do as an attorney.

Joe Alindajao (Law '16) also joined the Career Panel discussion. Unlike Sung Bae, Joe never aspired to become a lawyer. He was, however, always involved in the civics of his hometown. Born and raised in Delano, Joe began his professional life by opening an insurance firm. Then, an experience involving his efforts to oppose a business that wanted to open in Delano inspired his interest in the law. After reaching out to advocates throughout the state and learning how the law upholds civic order and fairness, Joe realized his destiny.



**Joe Alindajao** (Law '16)

He lost that first battle - the opposed business did open - but he was inspired by the experience to turn his attention toward law school. He began his career as a law clerk in the Tulare County District Attorney's Office and then became a deputy D.A. In 2019 he returned to his roots in Kern County and became a prosecutor for the DA's office there. He is currently a City Council member and the former Mayor of Delano.

One of Joe's shining career moments was a gang-related shooting case that came under review on appeal. He and his team had won the conviction, but their work was reviewed in detail during the appeal process. When the 5th District Court of



**Catarina Benitez** (Law '06)

Appeal confirmed the conviction, Joe was thrilled his efforts had prevailed. Building a family legacy, Joe's eldest son will be a 3L at SJCL this fall.

Catarina Benitez (Law '06), another alumni panelist, is a partner at Lawvex, LLP, where she practices Estate Planning, Trusts, Probate and Business Law. Catarina says she knew in Jr. High she wanted to be an attorney. She attended undergrad at USC and then traveled after graduation. That's when she decided law school was now or never. She moved back in with her parents, enrolled in SJCL's 3-year law program, and worked part-time to make it through. After a post-bar stint as an associate, Catarina opened her own practice with a focus on bankruptcy and real estate law.

With the birth of her first child Catarina transitioned to a firm that was fully remote. Lawvex founder Gary Winter (Law '06) had embraced remote work even before the pandemic, and for Catarina the fit was perfect. Now in her 20th year of legal practice, Catarina says she loves the freedom of a firm that is hybrid and flexible. She noted that the SJCL network of alumni attorneys and judges is a huge help when one has questions or needs a resource. Her flexible work schedule enables Catarina to serve as the current president of the Fresno County Bar Association and a member of a fundraising Guild for Valley Children's Hospital, among other organizations.

Sarah McNabb (Law '15) is the Assistant Public Defender for the Tulare County Public Defender's Office. A small-town girl who grew up in Ivanhoe and Orosi, Sarah

became a single parent as a teen. She had a serious need to be successful in college and land a good paying job. Sarah earned a degree in psychology from Fresno State and worked for a number of years as a probation officer. She also spent ten years in upper management for a Foster Family agency. By the time her daughter was ready for college, Sarah realized she was ready for a change. She had always enjoyed her time in court as a probation officer, so she decided to tackle law school. She took out a loan, chose the accelerated day program, and quit her job to make law school her life.

On day-one of her first class she met who would be her future husband, Jarrett Rogers (Law '15), and they walked the law school tightrope together.

During her second year Sarah clerked at the Fresno County Public Defender's Office and says after two weeks she knew she had found her field. She has spent her entire career thus far in the public defender's office along with husband Jarrett, and says "I absolutely love it!"

Sarah said one of her favorite cases involved a post-conviction that she was able to obtain for a 30-year-old who was incarcerated at the age of 15. He had been present during a murder. Due to a change in a juvenile sentencing law, Sarah was able to help him get resentenced and he was released last fall. Said Sarah, "It was one of my best moments ever."



**Sarah McNabb** (Law '15)



# Dean's Welcome

The hallways were ringing once again with the excited voices of the newly enrolled as they attended the Dean's Reception & Welcome in late July. Fear of the unknown mingled with the excitement of introductions and survival tips provided by current students Navpreet Dhillon (2L), Yanavey McCloskey (4L), and Joe Vasquez (4L). In addition, alumna Kirsten Corey (Law '99), General Counsel for the State Center Community College District, shared her law school and career reflections with the group and their families.





# Legal Community Welcomes & Inspires Students

BY DEYCI NUNEZ GARCIA, LSCA PRESIDENT

I was honored to attend the fourth annual honorable Mikio Uchiyama Scholarship Banquet held by the Asian Pacific Bar Association. I'm grateful to the sponsors and for CCAPABA for making this event possible for SJCL students. We had amazing food and entertainment, celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander heritage month. The event theme, "We are all stronger when united," was presented by Fresno's City Attorney Andrew Janz. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Janz, as well as the Honorable Sylvia Hanna of the Tulare County Superior Court. Mr. Janz talked about the federal government's efforts to eliminate DEI by threatening to cut federal grants and funding, and his own efforts to protect them. "It isn't about left or right, republican or democrat, this is about right and wrong and following the law," he said.

Mr. Janz reminded attorneys of their oath to follow the law and defend the constitution. As a law student I understand the work that must be done to ensure our rights and freedoms. The Asian Pacific Bar Association provided perspective about issues affecting the legal profession. I would encourage fellow law students to attend such events and take advantage of the opportunities that are generously offered to us.



SJCL Students **Deyci Nunez Garcia** (2L) and **Victor Escarises** (3L) found inspiration and connection at the Asian Pacific American Bar Association Banquet. (L-R) **Deyci Nunez Garcia** (2L), **Hon. Pahoua Lor** (Law '08), **Victor Escarises** (3L), and **Hon. Sylvia Hannah**, Tulare County Superior Court.

## Building Bridges at CCAPABA Banquet

BY VICTOR ESCARISES, STUDENT

In an evening marked by reflection, inspiration, and community, the Central California Asian Pacific American Bar Association (CCAPABA) Honorable Mikio Uchiyama 2025 Annual Scholarship Banquet brought together legal professionals from across generations to honor progress and recommit to purpose.

Held in mid-May, the event gathered a vibrant mix of attorneys—both newly admitted and seasoned—alongside respected members of the judiciary, both retired and active. Named after Judge Mikio Uchi-

yama, a trailblazing figure in the Central Valley, the banquet served as a reminder of the power of legacy and the responsibility of lifting others as we rise.

Keynote speaker Andrew Janz, Fresno's City Attorney, offered powerful insight drawn from his own journey in public service.

Beyond the awards and speeches, the banquet underscored something greater: the strength of community. CCAPABA is not just an organization—it is a growing network where APA legal professionals

find mentorship, camaraderie, and support. These specialized bar associations are advancing the creation of support systems that uplift entire communities and serve as a model for others seeking representation in the law.

As the night drew to a close, I felt more than inspired—I felt connected. The experience was a powerful affirmation that when we build space for each other, we all rise.



Deborah Coe (Law '91) receives the Witkin Lifetime Achievement Award presented by the Honorable Robert Oliver.

## Deborah Coe Honored with Witkin Award for Lifetime Achievement

Our own Deborah Coe, Senior Counsel at Baker Manock & Jensen, was honored with the 2025 Witkin Lifetime Achievement Award at a special luncheon in June.

The namesake of the prestigious award, Bernard E. Witkin, was a prominent legal scholar and writer who is renowned for his influential work, including the Summary of California Law, which set a new standard for legal education and judicial ethics in California, and is still in use today. The award recognizes outstanding contributions to the legal profession. Deborah has contributed in abundance.

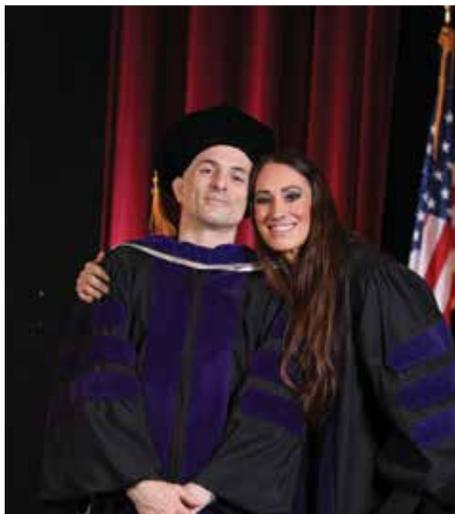
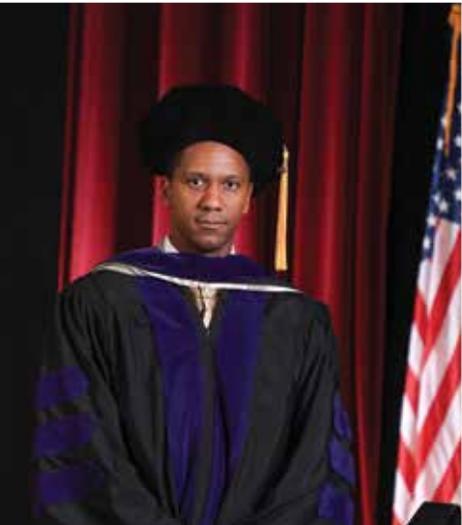
With an early respect for the legal system acquired from her mother, who worked as a clerk in the courthouse (and a love of dressing up in suits as a little girl!) Deborah excelled in law school by winning the Moot Court Best Brief, earning Outstanding Scholastic Achievement awards, and graduating with high honors. She served as valedictorian for her graduating class.

Deborah began her legal career as a paralegal, and then a law clerk at Parichan, Renberg, Crossman & Harvey. After law school she was promoted to associate attorney and later became a shareholder in the firm. She moved to Baker, Manock & Jensen in 1999 where she has garnered extensive litigation experience that includes high profile products liability cases, as well as business law, construction, crop insurance, premises liability, and personal injury.

Chief among her many accomplishments was the founding of Project First Step in 2005. With a desire to assist those who had suffered domestic violence, Deborah and colleagues Pam Kallsen, then Executive Director of the Marjaree Mason Center, Justice Kate Meehan, and various professional organizations, established the program to provide pro bono legal counsel to domestic violence survivors seeking restraining orders. As the program name implies, the goal was to legally assist anyone attempting to take the first steps toward a safer and better life.

The program just celebrated its 20th year. Deborah says the overwhelming support the founding committee received from the local legal community helped to get Project First Step off and running. The work the pro bono attorneys provide greatly impacts the success of domestic violence survivors. When a domestic violence survivor has legal representation, they are more successful in obtaining permanent restraining orders, and less likely to be victims of further violence.

Deborah serves additionally as a judge pro tem for Fresno County Small Claims Court and has served on the SJCL Board of Trustees for over 20 years. She is a member of numerous professional organizations and is a past president of the FCBA. Deborah says throughout her career she has strove for consistency in paying attention to the process of day-to-day practice in a manner that best served her clients' interests.





# CLASS OF 2025

SJCL congratulates the SJCL Class of 2025! The Valedictorian was Holly Gallo. The Honorable Ana de Alba, United States Circuit Judge, U. S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit gave the commencement address. Kelsey Schulteis, President of the SJCL Alumni Association welcomed the graduates to the alumni fold.





Judges, attorneys, law students, and more, came to San Joaquin College of Law for the *2nd Annual Unity Bar Celebration*.

## Unity Bar FROM PAGE 1

ministration made a record number of appointments, shifting the demographic makeup of the judiciary toward historically underrepresented communities. As of 2024, 41% of California Judges were women, 13% were Latino, 10% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 9% were Black.

Prior to the award presentations, Justice Jenkins held a Q&A session with attorneys and law students. He spoke about the effect of threats to the rule of law, and the need to overcome the challenges of the needless malady of impostor syndrome.

Among the Unity Bar awardees was a very humble, Honorable Cynthia Loo, a Kern County Superior Court Judge since 2016 who presides over family law, domestic violence, and child support matters.

In addition, the Honorable Renard Shepard (Ret.) of the Sacramento County Superior Court, Jerry Chong, a distinguished Sacramento attorney and U.S. Marine Corps veteran, and Judicial Appointments Secretary Cespedes were honored as the founders of California's first Unity Bar in the late 1980's. Their simple but revolutionary concept of alliance has grown into a statewide movement. By combining their respective bar associations in Sacramento they laid the foundation that continues to redefine the judiciary in California.

The Central Valley Unity Bar was formed in 2021 by a group of dedicated individuals from all sectors of the local legal field (including SJCL). The organization provides collaboration and support to its members, as well as volunteering at schools and mentoring, among other projects.





# Worker's Comp Defense: The New "It" Practice?



Seven of the ten SJCL Alumni Attorneys at the firm of Duncan Cassio Lucchesi Binkley and Van Doren. (L-R) **Brian Duncan, Shon Wilson, Lisa Madden, Brian Binkley, Darren Van Doren, Robrt Cassio, Lucia Gonzales.** Not pictured: **Candace Talbot, Jessica McClung, and Sara Tarasevic.**

BY **DIANE SKOUTI BAIZA**, ALUMNI LIAISON

It may not be a secret, but it's not common knowledge, either. When comparing legal practice areas for the best work/life balance, Worker's Compensation Law is a standout. According to those who know, it makes for a very pleasant career in law. As noted by the SJCL alumni team at Duncan Cassio Lucchesi Binkley and Van Doren, Worker's Comp defense is not mainly research, or mostly litigation, nor is it prone to weekend or after-hours OT. While its complexity and ever-changing rules are not for the faint of heart, the nature of employment and insurance defense allows attorneys to choose how they approach the practice. If they like to work through litigation, they can. If they prefer to avoid it, that's fine too.

During a visit with seven of the ten SJCL alumni attorneys at Duncan Cassio et al, it was apparent that this knowledge is a secret perk among insiders. Each of the alumni spoke fondly of the objectives of their firm, and the pleasant working conditions the field offers.

According to Robert Cassio (Law '99), and Lisa Madden (Law '09), shareholders at Duncan Cassio, Workers Comp Law is less adversarial, and more open to creative negotiation and resolution than most focus areas. "It's a good balance of skill," Lisa said. "You can litigate if you feel it's necessary, or you can negotiate solutions instead." Robert concurred, "It's a very complex system that requires counseling

and guiding clients through the [constantly changing landscape] of the Labor Code." The attorneys say the practice in particular impacts our communities as it seeks to avoid costly trials that may not guarantee the best outcomes.

A key focus of Duncan Cassio is to help communities thrive. When companies stay in business, people keep their jobs, which supports and strengthens the community. That's why they focus on the aggressive defense of both employers and insurance companies. It's a pro-business philosophy.

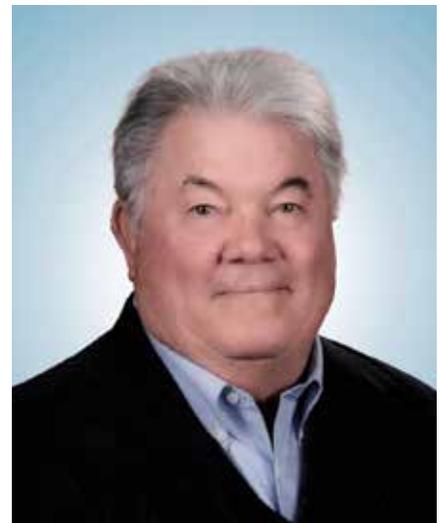
Lucia Gonzales (Law '13) defines the goal of the practice as ensuring employer compliance with labor laws. She said her interest in Employment Law came from her familiarity with attorneys and the legal system. Her father was a vocational expert who served as an expert witness in court, so she was exposed to attorneys and talk about the law early on.

Senior Firm Shareholder Brian Duncan (Law '98) agrees that the details within the practice of Worker's Comp defense are not commonly known. He said the firm has struggled in recent years to hire new attorneys. He says business is always brisk and that a perpetual "Associate Wanted" post has been up on SJCL's digital job board for years. The last four attorney hires have been non-SJCL grads, but not for lack of trying. Brian said the number of alumni at the firm is not necessarily by design but

added that they are desired commodities. "SJCL alumni more than hold their own against graduates of the bigger, more well-known law schools," he said.

As a law student, Lucia said her classes with Judges Conklin and Chittick provided great insight into what judges want in court. "They set the expectations so we would know what to do, and how to do it correctly," she said.

Our visit uncovered some interesting career paths among the alumni. Lisa Madden was working as a blackjack dealer when she decided to focus on a long-term career. She completed the paralegal program at Fresno City College and then a philosophy



Original firm founder **Dan Yohman** (Law '77)



Bar Passers (L-R): **Jaime Gomez**, **Brittany Hieng**, **Travis Childress**, **Elisa Knott**, and **James Proctor**

## Triumph Over February Bar Debacle

Congratulations to SJCL's newest Bar Passers!

- **Travis Childress**
- **Martha Figueroa**
- **Jaime Gomez**
- **Brittany Hieng**
- **Elisa Knott**
- **Gabriel Lara**
- **Robert Luna**
- **Darrienne Mendonca**
- **James Proctor**
- **Alice Uribe**
- **Jacquelyn Morelos**

Several of the alumni who passed the February Bar Exam were celebrated with the traditional Champagne Reception and sworn to the bar by the Honorable Stanley Boone here on campus after the results were announced in early May.

law program at Fresno State. Upon enrolling at SJCL, Lisa's paralegal knowledge was a valuable asset.

Shon Wilson (Law '09) began his career at the firm as a billing clerk. He says his job experience in billing helped with general legal knowledge, and he learned about professionalism and best practices during law school and Moot Court.

Rob Cassio says his dad, Bob Cassio (Law '93) advised against following his footsteps as an attorney, though Rob was never sure if he was serious. Originally a history major, Rob decided he wanted to do more than teach history, so he enrolled at SJCL.

Shareholder Darren Van Doren (Law '04) and his wife Cynthia graduated from law school together. Darren originally earned a BA in Finance at Fresno State but said good business jobs were limited just prior to the 2005 recession. He wanted a career with greater options, where he could really use his brain and work under his own discretion.

Shareholder Brian Binkley (Law '06) began at Duncan Cassio as a file clerk in

1997. He also served as the firm controller prior to completing law school at night. Brian's wife provided the impetus for law school with her assertions of his argumentative nature. A self-described skeptic, Brian was drawn to the study of law after completing a business degree in finance.

Many of the current firm's namesakes were encouraged to become lawyers or were hired fresh from law school by the original founder of the firm, Daniel Yohman (Law '77), who is now 79 and retired.

Originally intent on becoming a priest, Daniel entered the seminary at the age of 14. He attended Ryan College, a year at St. Johns in Los Angeles, and then finished a degree in philosophy at Fresno State before deciding he could have more options with a degree in law.

Daniel was part of SJCL's very first class after the law school opened its doors. After passing the bar he worked for a time as an associate but eventually decided to build his own firm. He started with 50 client files and his mom as a receptionist!

Daniel's first hire, Dennis Nard (Law '95) was a paralegal who Daniel directed

to law school and SJCL. He hired others who had the potential to become, or were already good attorneys and Yohman, Parker, Kern and Nard was born. Later, Wenzel was added to the team.

A forward-thinking attorney and employer who was ahead of his time, Daniel disliked the pervasive culture of pressure and soul-sacrificing billable hours. Instead, he hired a consultant who focused on the job satisfaction of the attorneys. "I didn't want (a career in law) to eat people up," he said. "I wanted the firm to be more than just a job, and our people to be the best they could be." Among the curated offerings that built the firm's culture, Daniel arranged trips for his staff and their families, and provided training on interpersonal communication and well-being. "We were the envy of other law firms at the time because our people were happy!" he added.

Today's incarnation of the firm remains a stalwart of Daniel Yohman's vision. As proof, Brian noted that turnover at Duncan Cassio is quite low. Said Brian, "Of those who have left for one reason or another, 75% have approached us to come back again!"



BY DEYCI NUNEZ GARCIA

# Yoga in the Park

Law students take some time to chill with Yoga in the park.

BY DEYCI NUNEZ GARCIA, LSCA PRESIDENT

As the President of SJCL's Law Students for Community Advancement (LSCA), I was committed this year to offering events to support the needs of students, and specifically mental wellness and community connection. LSCA's main event for Spring 2025 was a community yoga session that I believed would greatly benefit SJCL students.

I met Yoga instructor Chris Ray during a yoga class one Sunday at River Park. He agreed to provide a session for our students at Woodward Park last spring.

It came at a perfect time: after finals and the end of the spring semester. I want to thank everyone who took the time to be part of our yoga class. I especially want to thank Raquel Busani (Law '18), the founder of LSCA and current member of SJCL's Board of Trustees, and our own Dean of Students Logan Tennerelli for joining us. It meant a lot. Thank you also to Chris Ray for serving as our yoga instructor. It was great to have his support, and we look forward to working with him again for future events.



## Alumni Honored as Outstanding Pro Bono Attorneys

Two SJCL alumni were recognized as outstanding pro bono panelists at the 20th Anniversary celebration of Project First Step in late July. Carey Haydon (Law '15) and Shannon Wentworth (Law '19) received the honor, along with Fresno attorney Harry Drandell, at a catered reception for their pro bono work with numerous domestic violence survivors over the past year.

**F**ounded by our own Deborah Coe (Law '91) and colleagues Hon. Kathleen Meehan (5th Circuit Court of Appeal), Karen Lynch (McCormick Barstow), and Victoria Bernhardt (DeMaria Law Firm) among others in 2005, Project First Step assists survivors of domestic violence in obtaining permanent restraining orders by pairing them with pro bono attorneys. The effort is a collaboration between 10 assistance agencies who provide services to victims. Included among them are the Fresno County Women Lawyers, Fresno County Bar Association Pro Bono Services Committee, Marjaree Mason Center, Centro La Familia Advocacy Services, Central California Legal Services, California Hmong Advocates Network, Central California Family Crisis Center, and Family Services of Tulare County.

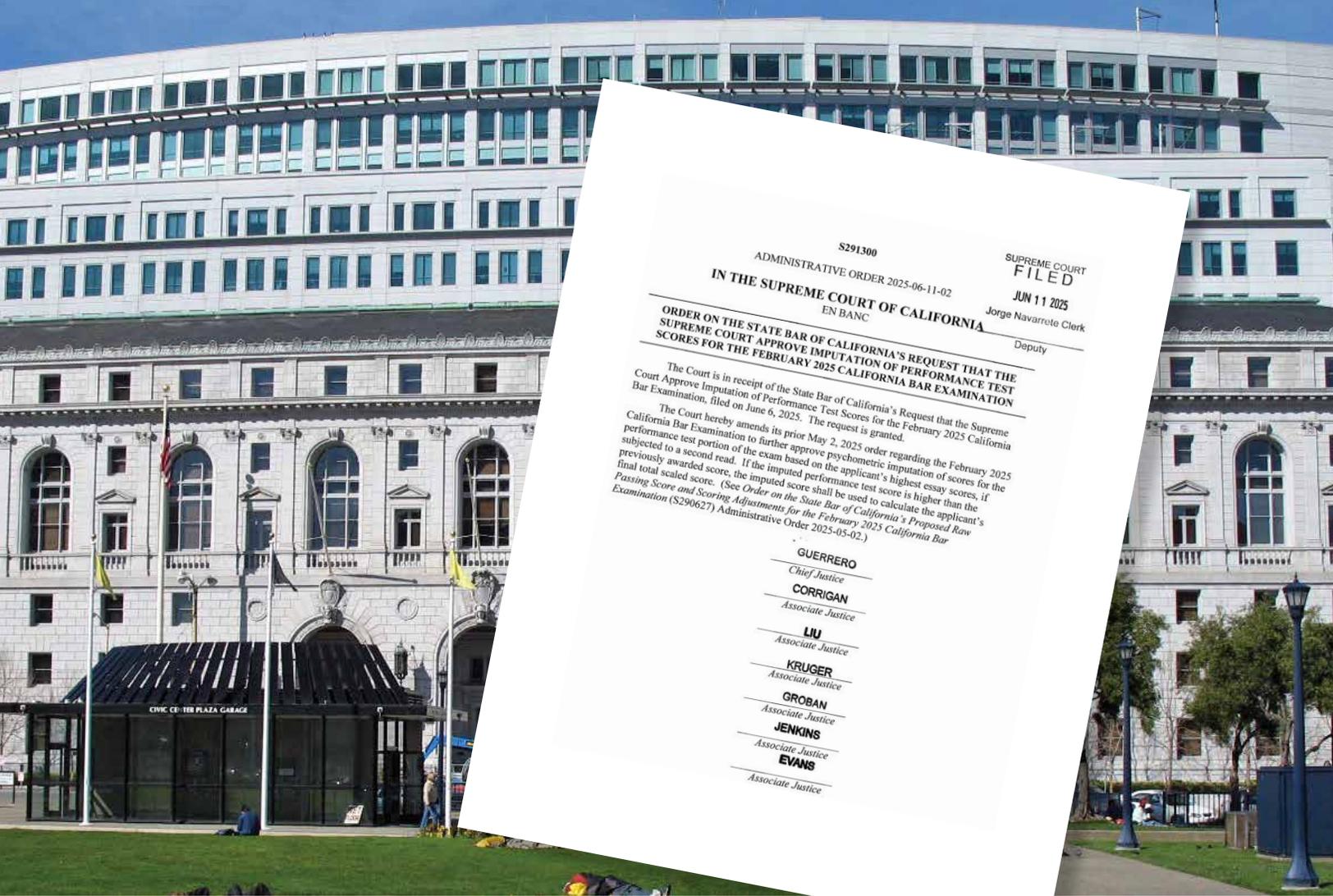
Guest Speaker District Attorney Lisa Smittcamp (Law '95) provided sobering statistics about the wide-spread danger domestic violence poses in our community, and she lauded the efforts of the volunteer attorneys who assist.



Project First Step Co-founder **Deborah Coe** (Law '91) with the Outstanding Pro Bono Attorney awardees.



Outstanding Pro Bono Attorney honorees received recognition for serving the most clients through Project First Step in 2025. (L-R) **Shawn Joost**, Director of Pro Bono and Strategic Partnerships CCLS, **Shannon Wentworth** (Law '19) SJCL Director BREN Clinic, **Carey Haydon** (Law '15) Haydon Law, Fresno attorney **Harry Drandell**, and FCBA President **Catarina Benitez** (Law '06).



S291300  
ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER 2025-06-11-02  
IN THE SUPREME COURT OF CALIFORNIA  
EN BANC  
JUN 11 2025  
Jorge Navarrete Clerk  
Deputy

**ORDER ON THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA'S REQUEST THAT THE SUPREME COURT APPROVE IMPUTATION OF PERFORMANCE TEST SCORES FOR THE FEBRUARY 2025 CALIFORNIA BAR EXAMINATION**

The Court is in receipt of the State Bar of California's Request that the Supreme Court Approve Imputation of Performance Test Scores for the February 2025 California Bar Examination, filed on June 6, 2025. The request is granted.

The Court hereby amends its prior May 2, 2025 order regarding the February 2025 California Bar Examination to further approve psychometric imputation of scores for the performance test portion of the exam based on the applicant's highest essay scores, if subjected to a second read. If the imputed performance test score is higher than the previously awarded score, the imputed score shall be used to calculate the applicant's final total scaled score. (See *Order on the State Bar of California's Proposed Raw Passing Score and Scoring Adjustments for the February 2025 California Bar Examination* (S290627) Administrative Order 2025-05-02.)

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Chief Justice

**CORRIGAN**  
Associate Justice

**LIU**  
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**GROBAN**  
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Associate Justice

## When Things Go Awry

Due to what was deemed the “massive fail” of the administration of the February 2025 California Bar exam, some purportedly unsuccessful exam takers received notice more than a month after the results, that they had passed the bar after all.

While the exam had been touted by the state bar’s executive director, Leah Wilson, as a new and improved version, significant technical issues and questions about the integrity and quality of the exam caused major issues for many February examinees. Ms. Wilson quietly stepped down from her position in early June.

Some test scores were revised after the California Supreme Court modified a prior order that would allow imputation of performance scores for the exam. In the court’s words: “Due to significant technological disruptions affecting the performance test portion of the exam, the court approved

the use of applicants’ essay scores to impute their performance scores.”

The hybrid exam included remote and in-person components that were administered over two days. There was no trace of the national bar exam questions that were used for decades by the California Bar.

With the goal of improving the state’s attorney licensure process, the retooled exam was expected to save over \$3 million annually, due in part to its remote components. Instead, the July exam is now expected to cost over \$2 million more, to correct the issues that negatively impacted thousands of February test takers

In their ruling the California Supreme Court also approved an expansion of the Provisional License Program to include the February exam applicants, but with limited eligibility to first-time takers who either failed the exam or withdrew from it. These applicants are able to practice law under a

provisional license, provided they are supervised by an eligible California attorney.

The July bar exam was to be administered entirely in person over two days at designated testing sites throughout the state. In place of the exam given in February, the State Bar will use the Multistate Bar Examination (MBE), that was created by the National Conference of Bar Examiners.

Day 1 included five one-hour essay questions and one 90-minute Performance Test (PT). Day 2 featured the Multistate Bar Examination (MBE) with 200 multiple-choice questions.

With so much riding on an applicant’s pass or fail of the exam, both for would-be attorneys and the future of California’s legal profession, state bar administrators are working to resolve these on-going issues in order to present a licensing exam that is fair and illustrative of the requirements of sound legal practice.

# Criminalizing Special Needs

BY SHANNON WENTWORTH, BREN PROGRAM DIRECTOR

In June, I had the opportunity to present an MCLE with the Office of the State Public Defender addressing the intersection between special needs and crime. As a criminal defense attorney, I saw that most of my long-term incarcerated clients had their initial arrest at school with many of those stemming from behaviors associated with special needs (diagnosed and undiagnosed).

Now, with law enforcement on campus to protect children from gun violence, there's an increased likelihood that a child having behaviors related to their disability will be met with the law, rather than trained special educators who understand how to address those behaviors.

Children with special needs have necessary supports identified in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). The child's IEP team is tasked with keeping detailed notes on behavior, so they can identify triggers and create supports around those triggers. Children with special needs are often overwhelmed by transitions, changes to schedule, and loud noises (like school bells and the cacophony of the cafeteria). Supports for that might look like putting on noise cancelling earmuffs or having a quiet space for the child to decompress or having the paraprofessional take the child for a walk prior to a transition (so the chaos of all the children moving around and talking between activities does not bother him or her). With an IEP, there is always a preventative plan tailored to the child's unique needs. Everyone involved with the child should be trained to execute the plan. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

A 2021 UCLA report, "Disabling Inequity: The Urgent Need for Race-Conscious Resource Remedies," found that children of color with disabilities are less likely to have their needs recognized and met, and often face harsh discipline measures as a result.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, in the 2011-12 school year, students with disabilities served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) represented 12 percent of the overall student population, yet they represented 25 percent of students arrested and referred to law enforcement. Students with disabilities were also found to be more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than students without disabilities. This level of disproportionate punishment and criminal justice involvement mirrors the high incarceration of adults with disabilities.

U.S. Department of Justice reports 2 in 5 state and federal prisoners with disabilities. (2016) That's 40 percent of the prison population.

Children with special needs exhibit behaviors that are often misinterpreted or lead to injury to themselves or others. An overwhelmed child on the spectrum may strike or bite a caregiver or fellow student. A child with ADHD may not be able to self-soothe, so it may take a lot of time to restore equilibrium.

Children with special needs (diagnosed or otherwise) experience bullying at a greater rate. I have clients who were injured while being bullied for a disability, resulting in an additional disability, like head injuries, seizures, or PTSD.



A person's disability can be used as a factor in mitigation at all phases of a criminal case to assess guilt and determine an appropriate sentence. Defense attorneys can present evidence of how the defendant's disability impacts behavior and decision making. The question is: What part of the offense is related to the child's disability?

School districts have an obligation under the law to identify all children with disabilities within their district boundaries as well as provide services to ensure a free appropriate public education. This includes unhoused children, foster children and migratory children. Identifying and appropriately serving these children will go a long way to preventing their future incarceration.



**Jacqueline Andrade** (Law '23) and Tatevik Jenn Auld (Law '23) have opened Andrade Auld Law in Clovis. They specialize in Immigration Law.

**Daisy Castro** (Law '12) has opened the boutique law firm Legal Daisy. Her practice consists of Worker's Compensation defense for insurers, public agencies and third-party administrators.

**Travis Childress** (Law '24) is now an attorney with the Law Office of Philip M. Flanigan in Fresno.

**Rachelle Golden** (Law '13) is now a Director in the Business Litigation practice group at Fennemore Craig, P.C. in Fresno.

**Alison (De Young) Koralewski** (Law '15) is now Senior Counsel at the San Diego office of Tyson & Mendes as a member of the Law & Motion team. Her practice focuses primarily on appeals, writs, and law and motion matters in general liability litigation.

**Jun G. Payoyo** (Law '00) is the Presiding Conciliator in the State Mediation & Conciliation Service at the Public Employment Relations Board in Sacramento.

**Jesse Molina** (Law '13) is the founder of Valley Business & Tech Law, a boutique, cloud-based law firm based on Tech, AI, and Data Privacy Law and Business and Corporate Law.

**Ambra (Dorsey) O'Connor** (Law '08) is the Chief of Staff for the Fresno County School District.

**Jordan Ott** (Law '19) has been promoted to Supervising Attorney at Albert and Mackenzie. His specialties are Workers' Compensation Defense on behalf of employers, insurers and third-party administrators.

**Kelsey Schulteis** (Law '21) is now an associate at Whitney Thompson Jeffcoach in Fresno.

**Jim Trevino** (Law '99) has been appointed by Governor Gavin Newsom to the Kings County Superior Court bench.

## In Memoriam



### Andrew Flanigan

SJCL notes with sadness the passing of Andrew Flanigan (Law '92), in February of 2023. Andrew was an attorney in Fresno, and also co-owner of Vonda's Gifts with his wife Vonda of 65 years. Andrew was 88 years old.

### Norman Fletcher

SJCL notes with sadness the passing of an early SJCL adjunct professor, Norman Fletcher. A graduate of Hastings Law School, Norman began his law career in the Fresno County District Attorney's office. A few years later he and fellow attorney Eric Fogderude opened the law firm Fletcher & Fogderude, which lasted for more than 40 years. Dean Jan Pearson recalls that Norman was serving as an adjunct professor teaching torts at SJCL when she joined the faculty in the 1970's.



### Pamela Jo (Espinosa) McFarland

SJCL notes with sadness the passing of Pamela Jo (Espinosa) McFarland, (Law '85), in February of 2024. Born and raised in Iowa, Pamela earned a Master's degree from the University of Iowa, prior to relocating to Fresno and graduating from SJCL. Pamela's legal practice (the Law Office of Pamela J. McFarland) focused on Family Law, and she served in that area for nearly 40 years. In addition, she taught law classes at Fresno State, and in 2018 received certification as a Lawyer of Distinction. An avid traveler, Pamela and her husband took many trips overseas, but she returned to her home state of Iowa twice a year to visit family and friends.

# Thank you FOR YOUR SUPPORT

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Stephen E. Wright ('96)

### Other

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Adam Balakian ('24)  
Magdalena Barrera Garcia  
Lauren Davis  
Gustavo Flores Colin  
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Ramona Rushing-Junior  
Hon. Houry Sanderson ('87)  
Rafaela Vallejo Orrosquieta  
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