

## Honorable Amy Guerra New Appellate Justice

*“All justices must be faithful to the law regardless of partisan interests, public clamor or fear of criticism.”*

– Code of Judicial Ethics

BY DIANE SKOUTI BAIZA, ALUMNI LIAISON

Tens of thousands of trial court decisions are appealed to the California Court of Appeal each year. With the exception of death penalty appeals or novel cases where questions of law are in dispute, the buck stops at the Court of Appeal.

The recent confirmation of Judge Amy Guerra (Law '07) to the 5th District Court of Appeal, Fresno, looks to be a perfect fit. Citing a deep love for legal research and writing, Judge Guerra says her undergrad studies in Cultural Anthropology (in addition to law school of course) provided good preparation for the tasks of an appellate justice. “Open-mindedness, observation without judgement, and understanding diverse perspectives” are cornerstones in that arena and have served her well throughout her law career.

An uncanny fortitude has also served her well. During her studies at SJCL, Judge Guerra had a 2-year-old, a 4-year-old, and a newborn baby at home! She was eight months pregnant when she took the bar exam.

Since her appointment by Governor Newsom in February of 2026, Judge Guerra has had plenty of time to ponder the magnitude of the job. Her early interest in law was cemented after college by her experience working with the AmeriCorps Vista service in West Fresno. She did com-



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# Inter Alia

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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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## Peltzer Named General Manager of Two Irrigation Boards

Alex Peltzer (Law '01) has been named the new general manager of the Board of Directors for the Lower Tule River and Pixley Irrigation Districts in Tulare County.

One of the largest irrigation districts in the state, the Lower Tule River covers more than 104,000 acres with more than 150 miles of canals. It plays an active role in local, state, and federal water policy. The Pixley District covers nearly 70,000 acres.

Alex is a 27-year veteran of the legal profession, where he has represented mostly public water districts and other public entities. He has worked with the two districts throughout the past 25 years and

has represented them in state and federal water litigation and policy development. Alex recently led the legal effort to develop Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) plans for the districts, which also formed their own groundwater agencies.

In addition to his legal practice, Alex worked as a congressional aide in Washington, D.C. and in the San Joaquin Valley, where he initially became involved in water policy issues. A Visalia native, he holds a B.A. degree from the University of Notre Dame and a master's from the University of Missouri. He graduated with highest honors from SJCL in 2001.



Alex Peltzer (Law '01) testifying before Water Resources Control Board in 2021.



## \$72,800 Given at Scholarship Gala

BY MARIELA ZAMORA-HERNANDEZ, SBA PRESIDENT

The 2026 Barrister's Ball was a night of "High Stakes & Elegance" as the student body, family members, staff, faculty, Board of Trustee members, and law community gathered to celebrate SJCL's annual scholarship gala hosted by the SJCL Student Bar Association. Held at the Palamino Event Center in downtown Fresno, the evening was filled with winners. Thanks to our generous scholarship donors, 57 scholarships were awarded to SJCL students totaling more than \$72,000.

In addition, attendees played and won big at this year's just-for-fun gaming tables. Dean's Atkinson and Tennerelli, and Professor Howard had the honor of announcing the scholarship winners. Following the awards, guests enjoyed dinner, a photobooth, casino gaming tables, and dancing.

The SBA could not have put the event together without the sponsorships of The Fresno County Bar Association, The Fresno County Prosecutors' Association, and Fitzgerald, Alvarez, and Ciummo. The SBA would also like to thank Professor Hanno Powell, Professor of Real Property at SJCL, for his generous donation to the event.





## Awards & Scholarship Recipients

Faculty of the Year (Full-time) . . . . .	Justin Atkinson	Ibarra/Casillas LawSUIT Scholarship . . . . .	Alexis Lopez
Faculty of the Year (Adjunct) . . . . .	Jason Hamm		Alyssa Coles
Students of the Year . . . . .	Zackery Michaelson (1L)		Christina Saldivar
	Navpreet Dhillon (2L)	John Loomis Legacy Award . . . . .	Connor Goodnight
	Audrey Casillas (3L)	Kharazi Bar Study Scholarship . . . . .	Lacey Phillips
	Mariela Zamora-Hernandez (4L)	James C. Pell Memorial Scholarship . . . . .	Kelly George
American Board of Trial of Advocates. . . . .	Yanavey McCloskey	LSCA Community Advancement. . . . .	Rosa Nava Garcia
Albert Ramirez Bail Bond Scholarship . . . . .	Nancy Diaz	LSCA Outstanding Member . . . . .	Mariela ZamoraHernandez
Alumni Association – Carolyn T. Mirviss . . . . .	Alexa Garcia	LSCA Executive Board Leadership. . . . .	Ariana Prudente-Daza
Alumni Association – Judy Wiseman Memorial . . . . .	Navpreet Dhillon	LawSUIT Tolerance Scholarship. . . . .	Angelica Barragan
Alumni Association – Spirit of SJCL . . . . .	Noorjot Kaur		Destini Diaz
Andres Diaz Special Education Scholarship . . . . .	Sierra Ecker	Legal Edge Consumer Scholarship . . . . .	Rohini Randhawa
The Artist Tree Scholarship . . . . .	Rosa Nava Garcia	Peters Foundation Leadership Award . . . . .	Edna Villicana Madrigal
	Jatinderdeep Flynn		Thomas Delgado
Bertha & John Garabedian Military Scholarship . . . . .	Nicholas Carrillo		Benjamin Arcure
	Anthony Randell		Audrey Casillas
Cartier First Year Improvement . . . . .	Armann Brar		Jonathan McKinney
Central California Bankruptcy Association. . . . .	Alianna Garcia	Mike Rhodes Social Justice Scholarship . . . . .	Victor Escarries
	Angel Gutierrez Reyes	Notorious RBG Scholarship. . . . .	Kamaryn Maltes
	Ramiro Rivas Barraza	Jennifer Lynn Oleksa Scholarship. . . . .	Amanda Diaz
	Bradley Rutledge	Janice Pearson Scholarship . . . . .	Jordan Kemp
Clinton A. Cummins Memorial Scholarship . . . . .	Isaak Hoffman	Proctor Scholar of the Year . . . . .	Raegan Melfe
Darryl Freedman Bar Study Scholarship. . . . .	Rocio Lopez Martinez	Proper Defense Law Corporation	Employed Student
Delta Theta Phi – Most Participation. . . . .	Daniel Dougherty	Bar Study Scholarship . . . . .	Mariela ZamoraHernandez
	Anthony Randell	Public Service Scholarship . . . . .	Ariana Prudente-Daza
Delta Theta Phi – First Year . . . . .	Alan Nuno Pulido	Student Bar Association . . . . .	Josiah House
Elizabeth O’Neill Memorial Scholarship . . . . .	Deyci Nunez Garcia		Destini Diaz
Entrepreneurial Spirit Scholarship . . . . .	Santos Valdez		Jimmy Falaminiano
Founder’s Scholarship. . . . .	Sergio Lopez		Milton Ramirez
George J Vasquez Memorial Scholarship. . . . .	Bradley Rutledge	Trudi Gale Manfredo Memorial Scholarship . . . . .	Breana Fishinghawk
	Benjamin Arcure	Witherow First Generation Scholarship . . . . .	Milton Ramirez
	Sergio Lopez		
Hammerschmidt Law Corp Scholarship. . . . .	Brandon Parker		

# A Passion for the Practice

BY DIANE SKOUTI BAIZA, ALUMNI LIAISON

It's not news that to some, the thought of becoming a lawyer is daunting and out of reach. Besides the specter of law school and the dreaded bar exam, the plague of imposter syndrome and its nagging inner voice: "That's not for me, I could never..." can thwart the dream of becoming a sharp and suited legal professional. To combat this myth, four SJCL alumni attorneys visited Fresno State in February, to share their career path stories and assure interested students that they too could make it happen.

Among the panelists, Cindy Arredondo (Law '23), an associate attorney at Fitzgerald Alvarez & Ciummo practices criminal defense, while also maintaining her own solo practice. Even though she says she is a prosecutor at heart, Cindy feels her experience in criminal defense, unlawful detainers, family law, immigration, and breach of contract is hugely rewarding and makes a positive difference in the lives of her clients.

A dedicated over-organizer, Cindy is known for her practical and strategic approach. "I feel like I have a big presence when I walk into the courtroom, which I use to my client's advantage," she said. "A lot of young people make bad decisions and mistakes, but it doesn't mean they are bad people. Most have regret and want to relay their story to the court in a way that helps them take responsibility, but to also have the opportunity to learn and grow in the process." Cindy says she enjoys talking with the judges to get the best possible outcomes for her clients, for that reason.

Cindy says her secret is a one-hundred percent commitment to preparation. Since law school, she color-codes everything to ensure she is ready for any issue or question that comes up. This has also helped her combat imposter syndrome: Am I prepared? Do I know the answers? "Ensuring I'm prepared has always served me well and my confidence has grown with my experience," she added.

David Ibarra (Law '10) is the owner of Goldberg & Ibarra, A Professional Law

Corporation, where he practices Workers' Compensation, Social Security, and Personal Injury law. His desire to work in personal injury was, well, personal. "My dad was a farm worker. I was still in high school when he got injured on the job. Now I get to help people like my dad – the underdogs - who are injured and need representation to fight for their rights."

Always determined to achieve, David graduated from Fresno State with a B.A. in Political Science and a minor in Philosophy. He was the recipient of the Maddy Institute Scholarship/Internship, which provided the opportunity to intern with the office of U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer. At SJCL he founded the student organization LawSUIT (Law Students United in Tolerance), which is still active on campus today. He and his wife, Jennell Casillas, founded

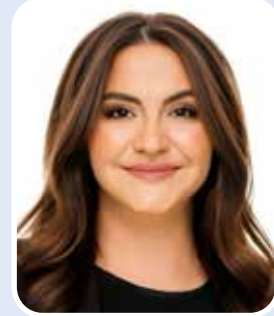
the Ibarra/Casillas Scholarship to support SJCL students. Having grown up loving the Karate Kid and Rocky movies, the underdog story has always been "where it's at for me," David said. Fighting for the little guy is extremely satisfying. David likes to share his own proverb about his love for his work: "My worst day as an attorney beats my best day (before I was an attorney)!"

Another SJCL graduate with serious passion for her practice is Tatevik Jennifer Auld (Law '23). Jennifer is an attorney at Andrade Auld Law, PC, where her focus is Immigration Law. She is compassionate about helping individuals and families navigate the complexities of U.S. Immigration Law, because she has walked in their shoes.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, her father brought their young family to



**Cindy Arredondo**  
Fitzgerald, Alvarez & Ciummo  
Defense Attorney



**Tatevik Jennifer Auld**  
Andrade Auld Law, PC  
Immigration Law



**David Ibarra**  
Goldberg & Ibarra  
A Professional Law Corporation



**Sumeet Kaur**  
Lozano Smith  
Associate Attorney

the U.S. in search of opportunity. The experience helped to shape her understanding of the immigrant journey, and it fuels her commitment to helping others pursue stability and a better future. “Immigrants get ripped off a lot because others, including misguided attorneys, take advantage of them. Being an ethical attorney and really helping those who are at a disadvantage is very satisfying,” she says. “Because of their status as immigrants, they don’t have the luxury of public defense and must pay out of pocket. I take it personally when other attorneys take advantage of them.” For Jennifer, representing the legal profession in a positive and just light is everything.

As a member of a cohort that began law school during COVID and the transition to online learning, Jennifer said the lifestyle changes needed for success were not easy, but that one can adjust.

Sumeet Kaur (Law ‘24) is an Associate Attorney at Lozano Smith, where she specializes in various areas of public agency law. With her more introverted personality, Sumeet loves the fact that she very rarely does trial work. Her forte is research and transactions, and she enjoys providing guidance to her clients directly. Much of Sumeet’s practice involves matters of labor and employment, and student and board governance.

She also works with the department of industrial relations, Cal HR, teacher dismissals, and the union to assist educators with retirement benefits and contracts. One of her favorite areas involves cold cases. “When a case is 20 - 30 years old, I like to go back and look into the records to try and find something useful.” Sumeet says she likes the variety within her practice. “Every day is different with something new to learn. This area of law is full of introverts, like me, which works out great when you don’t really enjoy going to trial!”

As they fielded numerous questions from the students, the panelists agreed that becoming an attorney was the best thing they ever did. Added Sumeet, once you get through law school, it seems like it wasn’t really that bad. Plus, there is a huge need for attorneys in the Central Valley, so you won’t have trouble finding a job.

## Celebrating a legacy: Honoring Professor Kerner’s Thirty-Six Years of Service

BY BETH PITCOCK, HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR

On May 22, 2026, SJCL faculty and administration gathered at The Old Spaghetti Factory in part to quietly celebrate Professor Kerner’s retirement after thirty-six years of service. Professor Kerner taught a myriad of subjects over the years: Legal Analysis, Legal Research & Writing, Civil Procedure, Professional Responsibility, and Community Property. We came together to honor her career defined by dedication, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to students.

For more than three decades, at two locations, Professor Kerner has been a steady presence at SJCL. Her influence reaches far beyond the classroom shaping generations of graduates, strengthening the institution, and leaving a legacy that will long endure.

Anyone who knows Professor Kerner knows that her passions extend beyond teaching. Sewing and fashion have always been her creative outlet. Her wardrobe, much of it intricately handmade, is a testament to her patience, artistry, and attention to detail. Students regularly stated that her incredible skills as a seamstress were also evident in her approach to teaching: thoughtful, precise, and crafted with patience and care.

Though she is stepping away from her professorship, it is difficult to imag-



ine SJCL without her. After thirty-six years, she is intricately woven into the fabric of SJCL’s history. Her contributions have helped shape its culture, strengthen its community, and touched the lives of countless students who carry her lessons forward into their careers and communities.

Spring is a time of renewal, growth, and new beginnings while summer exudes bold new adventures. It seems fitting that Professor Kerner is making the transition at the confluence of these two seasons. With gratitude and admiration, we wish all of these delights for you Professor Kerner in the next chapters of your life.

## Success Stories to Inspire

The Fresno State Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution Initiative, or AANAPISI for sort-of short, is a program dedicated to growing the number of students majoring in Criminology, who come from Asian American and Pacific Islander backgrounds.

While many students begin their legal studies with a degree in Criminology, it's one of the largest majors at Fresno State with the lowest representation of Asian American and Pacific Islander students. The program helps support the academic success, persistence, and graduation of AAPI criminology students, while honoring their experiences, identities, and cultural connections. The aim is to broaden student horizons, boost earning potential, and foster upward mobility while creating future leaders who can enrich their communities.

With so many Criminology majors continuing on to law school, AANAPISI members visited SJCL in February, and heard from a student panel about their own law school pathways.

Law student Jimmy Falaminiano Jr. is a 4L who was born in San Diego but moved to the Philippines where he later earned a B.S. in Business Administration. He began law school in the Philippines as well but returned to the U.S. to better support his family. He is completing his legal education at SJCL. Jimmy works as a law clerk with the City Attorney's Office in Fresno. He is also a Voluntary Certified Law Clerk with the Fresno Public Defender's Office.

Noorjot "Noor" Kaur, a May graduate, embraced her Punjabi culture and traditions during a stint living in India. She applied the discipline of the Indian school system to her studies upon returning to the U.S. and completed the Law Pathways Program and an A.S. degree at Fresno City College, before transferring to Fresno State. She graduated from there as a Valedictorian, received the Dean's Medal and was recognized as an Outstanding Undergraduate finalist. During law school Noor gained



Student Panel (L-R) **Yanavey McCloskey** (Law '26), **Noorjot Kaur** (Law '26), **Kristine Sea** (Law '26), and **Jimmy Falaminiano Jr.** (4L) shared their law school journeys with members of the AANAPISI initiative.



practical experience at the Fresno District Attorney's Office and currently works as a Law Clerk at Sagaser, Watkins, & Wieland PC. Next on Noor's list is the bar exam.

Kristine Sea, also a May graduate, is the daughter of immigrant parents from Cambodia. She is a first-generation college graduate who was initially planning to pursue a career in medicine. While earning a B.S. in Biology at CSU, Fullerton, Kristine developed a strong interest in advocacy and the legal system, so she enrolled next at SJCL. During law school, Kristine worked as a law clerk at Sagaser, Watkins & Wieland PC, where she gained hands-

on experience in employment defense and business litigation.

Yanavey McCloskey, is another May graduate who is a first-generation Cambodian American. Yanavey's family immigrated to the U.S. as refugees, which encouraged her to pursue education as a way to gain opportunity, autonomy, and choice. Her accomplishments prior to law school include a B.S. in Psychology and dual master's degrees in Communications and Public Administration from Southern Utah University. In addition to completing law school, Yanavey teaches communications at Fresno State.

# SJCL Traynor Moot Court Team Brings Home Awards

BY **LOGAN TENNERELLI**, DEAN OF STUDENTS

Graduating students Sergio Lopez, Bradley Rutledge and 3L Benjamin Arcure represented San Joaquin College of Law with a stellar performance at the statewide 57th Annual Roger J. Traynor California Appellate Moot Court Competition. Both oral competitors – Mr. Arcure and Mr. Rutledge – earned an Individual Merit Award for Oral Argument, but their success was truly a team effort. They collaborated through every step of the process, from exchanging ideas and cases to offering each other personal support and encouragement. Countless hours of research, writing, strategizing, and advocacy boiled down to two intense rounds before judges on Saturday, March 7, 2026.

Across the board, the judges commended the team’s performance, noting their “solid command of the facts and the law” and “clear responses to difficult questions.” One judge compared them to “seasoned appellate attorneys” while another was “extremely impressed with the quality of the preparation.” We concur: Bradley, Sergio, and Benjamin embody SJCL’s spirit of camaraderie, integrity, and advocacy. SJCL thanks them for their outstanding work and congratulates them on their performance!



57th Annual Roger J. Traynor California Appellate Moot Court Competition Team (L-R) **Bradley Rutledge** (Law '26), **Benjamin Arcure** (3L) and **Sergio Lopez** (Law '26).



## New Attorneys Take the Oath

Jacqueline Amador-Bryan and Thalia Enriquez were joined by a non-SJCL grad too take the Attorney’s Oath with the **Honorable Jon Conklin** during a champagne reception after the February bar results were released.

# *Congratulations to the CLASS OF 2026*



Commencement Speaker and Superior Court Judge **Pahoua C. Lor** (Law '08)



Valedictorian **Bradley A. Rutledge**



Board of Trustees greeting by City of Clovis Mayor **Vong Mouanoutoua** (Law '02)





# Class of 2026

## Valedictorian & High Honors

Bradley A. Rutledge

## High Honors

Connor Owen Goodnight

Sergio Lopez

## Honors

Ramiro Rivas Barraza

## Distinction

Alianna Samantha Garcia

Jagr Alindajao

Kayleigh Ann Benson

Angel Fernando Gutierrez-Reyes

Peter John Halajian

Isaak Thor Hoffman

Laiba Ijaz

Brayden Jayce Inchcliff

Noorjot Kaur

Rocio Lopez

Angela Lisbert Lopez-Villarreal

Kamaryn Allison Maltes

Brittany Nicole Mathews

Yanavey An McCloskey

Rosa Maria Nava Garcia

Daniela Ocegueda-Abarea

Lacey Aaron Phillips

Ariana Judith Prudente-Daza

Milton Argenis Ramirez

Kristine Kheav Sea

Andrew Dean Shute

Manpreet Singh

Joe Anthony Vasquez

Mariela Zamora-Hernandez





# Eliminate the Bar Exam? One State Said Yes

In November of 2023, the Oregon Supreme Court made a historic unanimous decision to approve an alternative method of attorney licensure, without the traditional bar exam. Having been at the forefront of both regional and national conversations about attorney licensure reform, Willamette University School of Law was instrumental in culminating years of work to bring about this significant shift in approach.

As the first state in the nation to make such a move, the Oregon Supervised Practice Portfolio Examination (SPPE) offers an alternative way for attorney candidates to prove their minimum competence to practice law. Upon successful completion of 675 hours of practice under the supervision of an experienced attorney, candidates for licensure must submit a portfolio of work to the Board of Bar Examiners for an independent proficiency evaluation. There is no need to take either the Uniform Bar or Model Professional Responsibility

Examinations (MPRE). The exams will still be an option for those preferring the traditional route, but the SPPE program offers an alternative that many feel provides a more accurate evaluation of proficiency.

The innovative approach has met with approval in legal academic circles. David Friedman, associate dean for Strategic Initiatives and a professor of law at Willamette, notes that the bar exam had long been a convenient testing route, but had gradually diverted from assessing the genuine knowledge and skills required by new lawyers. The development of the SPPE program is a confirmation that “skills matter” in the legal profession.

In California, the results of the disastrous July 2023 bar exam sparked debate after half of the examinees failed to pass. While it is obvious some form of change is needed, the idea of licensure without the bar exam has been met with opposition. The most common fear is that the proposal would “dumb down” the requirements to

become an attorney, which would in turn erode public protections. The California bar exam is widely recognized as one of the toughest in the nation. Factors contributing to its difficulty include the extensive breadth of legal subjects that are assessed, the numerous areas of law covered, and California-specific distinctions in areas like Community Property, Professional Responsibility, and Civil Procedure. The essay questions involve complex factual scenarios that demand precise legal analysis and the application of law from multiple subject areas.

While it is still too early to assess the success of the SPPE program in Oregon, it would seem to be a fair and appropriate path to licensing for new attorneys, and those who have already passed a bar in their home state and are thinking about moving to Oregon.

## Hon. Amy Guerra FROM PAGE 1

munity work that focused on economic development, access to financial institutions, and financial literacy for underserved communities.

She says after law school she entered criminal trial work “by accident.” She served as a chief defense attorney for the Fresno County Alternate Defense Office at Richard Ciummo and Associates, where they offered a good work-life balance that suited her young family. She practiced there for 11 years. Then in 2018 she was appointed trial judge by then Governor Jerry Brown and served on the Fresno County Superior Court until becoming a pro tem justice at the Court of Appeal in October of 2025. It was an experience she describes as “invaluable, meaningful, and formative.”

“I’m extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to better understand the responsibilities of the position before my appointment,” she says. “I value both the relationships and learning experience it brought.”

Judge Guerra joins nine other justices on the 5th District appellate bench and earns the distinction of being the first SJCL graduate to do so. Tasked mainly with ensuring that trial courts properly interpret the law and used correct procedures during original trials, appellate court justices must painstakingly scrutinize the written records of each trial. As noted in the Code of Judicial Ethics: “All justices must be faithful to the law regardless of partisan interests, public clamor or fear of criticism.”

In order to ensure cases are examined from several perspectives, each appeal is considered by a panel of three justices. The justices are assisted in their review by the parties’ written and oral arguments. A majority of the justices must agree on any decision. If they decide to reverse the trial court’s decision, the appellate court nearly always allows the trial court to rehear the case using the correct law and procedures.

The appellate justices of the 5th District cover a jurisdiction that spans nine counties throughout Central California.

They are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Commission on Judicial Appointments.

As a last resort for people who lose their case in trial, the appellate court is an important component in the accurate application of law. In Frank Cross’s book *Decision Making in the U.S. Courts of Appeals* (2007), Cross notes that the circuit courts are “much more important in setting and enforcing the law of the United States [than the Supreme Court].” With the Supreme Court deciding around 75 cases a year, the circuit courts resolve more than fifty thousand cases a year. “In large measure,” Cross continues, “It is the circuit courts that create U.S. law. They represent the true iceberg, of which the Supreme Court is but the most visible tip.”

We congratulate Justice Amy Guerra on this significant accomplishment and the new and essential role she fulfills.

# Central Valley Hero: Laura Higareda-Chapa ('22)

BY SHANNON WENTWORTH, BREN CLINIC DIRECTOR

Laura Higareda-Chapa is no stranger to advocacy. As a former Congressional staffer for Congressman Cal Dooley and District Director for U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein from 1993 to 2001, Higareda-Chapa has been turning her advocacy into action.

The Red Cross honored her work as the first education attorney in the Juvenile Unit of the Fresno County Public Defender's Office with a Central Valley Hero Award for Education for advocating for students "pushed out of classrooms when they need support the most."



**Laura Higareda-Chapa** (Law '22) receives the Red Cross Central Valley Hero Award for Education and her husband Tim.

Higareda-Chapa knows firsthand that the justice system can become a revolving door for juveniles as they mature because her brother has been caught in that cycle since he was a child. It was that desire to advocate for youth that brought her to San Joaquin College of Law.

Higareda-Chapa grew up in Porterville and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy from UC Santa Cruz before marrying her best friend and husband of 28 years Tim Chapa with whom she has 3 children (23, 24, and 27). She shifted gears from stay-at-home mom to full-time law student in 2018. She was drawn to SJCL because of its high Bar passage rate for women.

She appreciates that SJCL encouraged the exploration of different areas of practice. She arrived certain that she would pursue criminal law. However, she took advantage of the opportunity to explore other areas, finding Professor Jodie Howard's nascent special education law class. Now, she works in the Fresno Public Defender's office at the intersection of criminal and special education law.

"My experience in special education law with Professor Howard sparked a particular interest," she said. "Learning about the significant discrimination students with disabilities faced in the past – and how federal legislation has improved conditions – was eye-opening. Despite the progress many students with disabilities continue to encounter challenges in schools today, but the law provides meaningful ways to advocate and support them."

She honed her skills working as a law clerk in SJCL's BREN Special Education Legal Clinic, where she discovered, "Education is not just a privilege, but a right worth defending."

She notes that the intersection of special needs and criminal law is backed by U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics' 2016 study that showed 24 percent of inmates nationally participated in special education classes. "This statistic underscored for me how critical early advocacy for students with disabilities can be," Higareda-Chapa said. "Personally, as I reflected on my own brother's experience with the criminal justice system, I could not help but wonder whether he, too, struggled with undiagnosed learning disabilities following the traumatic brain injury he sustained at age six. This realization has made my work feel more meaningful than ever."

The intersection of education and criminal justice does not end with special education advocacy; it also encompasses the defense against exclusionary discipline. Zero-tolerance for violence policies in the wake of 1996-1997 school shootings were adopted by roughly 79 percent of schools, according to the Vera Institute. "A generation later, statistics consistently show these policies have not made schools safer," she said. "They have only succeeded in increasing exclusion and disengagement. Further, these policies disproportionately impact already marginalized students."

The Fresno County Public Defender's office has long understood this connection, culminating in the hiring of Higareda-Chapa as the office's first education attorney. "Our goal is to collaborate with schools to keep students engaged, supported, and safe through tailored solutions that prevent exclusionary discipline and address each student's unique needs," she said.

Having an education attorney at the Public Defender's Office is fairly novel in California, with only a few other counties in the state employing them. To date, Higareda-Chapa has directly and indirectly assisted roughly 100 students during her tenure on everything from expulsions to qualifying for services. She also advises parents on IEP / 504 advocacy.

"The objective is to get more schools to consider alternative means of correction in lieu of exclusionary discipline, consistent with the State's legislative intent underlying the Education Code governing student discipline," she added. "This will help ensure students receive timely, appropriate support and rehabilitation that keeps them engaged in school, on track academically, and on a path toward success."

"I am honored to fill this position and to continue to collaborate with the schools to ensure every youth has an opportunity to obtain an education and future success," she said. "I want to continue to build this program, add more education attorneys, support other youth defenders, and increase representation in schools."

# NALC Changing Lives: A Case in Point

BY JESSICA JARAMILLO PEREZ, INTERIM NALC DIRECTOR

“Jane Doe” came to the United States in June 2023 seeking asylum after fleeing severe persecution in her home country. She and her two children were subsequently placed in removal proceedings and filed an application for asylum in June 2024. Prior to fleeing, she had been married for several years to a lawful permanent resident, but financial barriers prevented the family from pursuing consular processing before she was forced to flee.

Before coming to the United States, “Jane” endured years of abuse and harassment at the hands of a former partner. Even after she re-married, the former partner refused to leave her alone. He repeatedly stalked and threatened her because she would not reconcile with him. His behavior escalated over time and resulted in a horrific incident in which he slit his wrists in front of her and attempted to kill her. “Jane” ultimately came to believe that he was involved in organizing a subsequent armed assault.

The traumatic incident occurred while “Jane” was driving her son to school. Armed men forced her out of her truck at gunpoint and pressed a firearm against her stomach while her son remained inside the vehicle. “Jane” feared the men would drive away with her son. Fortunately, they allowed her to remove him from the vehicle before driving off. The incident left her and her son deeply traumatized and drove her decision to flee.

After arriving in the United States, NALC assisted her husband in obtaining U.S. citizenship. We then assisted him in filing petitions for “Jane” and her two children, and pursuing adjustment of status for the family. With substantial support from one of our recent graduates (Thalia Enriquez ’25), we sought termination of the family’s removal proceedings. Although termination was denied, the Immigration Judge granted administrative closure instead.

While administrative closure provided temporary relief, it did not fully end the proceedings. The case remained pending without a future hearing date, requiring additional future litigation to re-calendar the



matter and seek actual termination. This uncertainty became another significant source of stress and anxiety for the family throughout the process.

In addition, “Jane” was required to attend regular ICE check-ins while her case remained pending. Despite repeated reassurance from her NALC advocates, these appointments caused her severe emotional distress. She often arrived for the check-ins terrified that she could be detained or separated from her children.

NALC represented the family at their adjustment interview in July 2025, and the interviewing officer initially indicated that the case was approvable. As a result, the family felt an enormous sense of relief and hope that the years of uncertainty were finally ending. However, the matter took an unexpected turn when the family received a Notice of Intent to Deny in October 2025. The notice was devastating for “Jane,” her husband, and the children, particularly after they had been led to believe the applications would be approved. The possibility that she and her children could still face removal weighed heavily on the entire family.

But our team rose to the challenge. Through tireless advocacy, strategic legal work, and collaborative effort, we prepared and submitted a compelling response addressing the government’s concerns. Just two months later, “Jane” and her children were granted lawful permanent residence.

Throughout the process, “Jane” continued to struggle with trauma stemming from the persecution she experienced in her home country. This was compounded by the uncertainty and stress of the immigration process, despite being referred to therapy.

We are particularly proud of this case because it reflects strong teamwork, persistence, and zealous advocacy in overcoming unexpected obstacles to secure a positive outcome for a vulnerable family. “Jane” and her children are now living safely in the United States, free from fear of immigration enforcement and with the stability to begin rebuilding their lives together as a family.

This outcome is truly worth celebrating and reflects the high-quality legal services NALC provides; while also highlighting the meaningful role our students play in

# Alumni Association Offers Cake (and Inspo) Before Finals

The 2026 Alumni Association Board of Directors is passionate about strengthening the SJCL Alumni/Student network and plans to go big this year. Besides providing the traditional quarterly goodies at the start and end of each term, they plan to sponsor mixers, fun activities, and fundraising events in addition to their annual events

like the Senior Citizen's Law Day, the Marjaree Mason Children's Christmas party, and Got MCLE?

In order to reach out and share support with current students, board members Nancy Leon and Tiffany Pack manned the snack table during their Cake Before Finals event and chatted with students over shared goals.



Cake Before Finals Day, sponsored by the SJCL Alumni Association.



**Nancy Leon** (Law '22) shares her passion about life after law school with proctor **Paul Salas**. She is the new Vice President of the 2026 Alumni Association Board of Directors.

## Act 1

**The Scene:** Downstairs hallway across from the elevator, one week before finals, 10:30am.

**Enter Protagonist #1 - Nancy Leon** (Law '22) Alumni Association Board member: *"Hi I'm Nancy! I'm with the SJCL Alumni Association. We want you to know there really is life after law school! We brought some goodies today to help you study for finals!"*

**Character #2 - SJCL Student** looking surprised and hungry: *"Hi - thank you! One of my classmates just texted that there are snacks in the hallway! It's so nice to meet you!"*

Like an ambassador of extremely goodwill, Nancy Leon oozes with sincerity when she talks to law students about making it through law school, conquering the bar, and coming out the other side with relief and joy. Now four years out from her own days-o-law school, Nancy says her current life may as well be somebody else's, for all the change she's experienced since then.

"It's so hard to imagine that you will get through it and have a great life afterward, when you're still in the trench," she said as she took some time from her work schedule to meet and greet students on a chilly morning in April. It's easy to believe that the tornado of law school and the bar will just morph into a law practice that is equally intense, but it doesn't have to be, she added.

Nancy said she loves her position as an Associate Attorney at Tyson & Mendes where she practices personal injury defense. She is grateful to be able to work many of her hours from home, where she also has time to spend with her children and their activities. Prior to COVID, the option of working from home with that kind of balance was impossible. Now it's become common place for firms to offer the choice, and it makes the practice of law more pleasant.

## 2026 Alumni Association Board of Directors

A go-getter from the start, Nancy worked as an office administrator and case manager at a plaintiff's personal injury law firm for more than 10 years prior to joining Tyson et al. Although she worked full-time during law school, she was also an active member of Law Students for Community Advancement (LSCA), Delta Theta Phi, and LawSUIT. In addition, she participated in local record expungement clinics and assisted low-income migrants to obtain pro bono representation. Nancy recently joined the Alumni Association Board of Directors, jumping in headfirst as an officer. "I felt it was time to come back to SJCL and help the students and new graduates see the light at the end of the tunnel, like I did," she said.

### Act 2

Scene #2: Downstairs hallway, 5:30pm, evening class rush.

Enter Protagonist #2 - Tiffany Pack (Law '18), Alumni Association Board member.

Tiffany spots a harried-looking student hastening through the hall. "Hey, how about a cupcake?" she calls out. "That sounds great!" the student says.

"I'm with the Alumni Association. We brought treats today to help you study," Tiffany says. "You know, you can definitely do this - I mean finals and all. I did it - and so can you!"

The Alumni Association can seem like a faceless entity, mostly out of sight, yet offering helpful opportunities like mixers and networking opportunities to alumni and students alike. In this era of fast paced personal lives, many organizations and alumni associations have been in decline. We are proud to note that the SJCL Alumni Association is the exception and has maintained steady growth through the years. If you haven't joined yet, check out the Alumni page on the sjcl.edu website. We are here to serve all our grads and we look forward to your input and participation!



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**Tiffany Pack (Law '18)**

*Independent contractor with Pack Law featuring Criminal Law. Also Judge Pro Tem for small claims*

# On the Move



**Erika Esqueda** (Law '22) is now an Associate at Tyson & Mendes in Fresno.

**Deanna Fernandez** (Law '24) is now the Principal Contract Manager for Pacific Gas and Electric Company in Auberry, California.

**Hon. Amy Guerra** (Law '07) is now a Justice of the 5th District Court of Appeals in Fresno.

**Laura Higareda-Chapa** (Law '22) is the first Education Attorney in the Juvenile Unit of the Fresno County Public Defender's Office.

**Aimee Perez** (Law '21) is now an Associate Attorney practicing workers compensation defense at SBH Legal in Portland, Oregon. She is also completing the Supervised practice and portfolio examination (SPPE) program so she can be licensed to practice in Oregon.

**Alex Peltzer** (Law '01) is now the General Manager of the Boards of Directors of the lower Tule River and Pixley Irrigation Districts in Tulare County.

**David Piercy** (Law '21) is now an associate counsel at the Law Office of Michael J. Aed in Fresno.

**Tomas Ross** (Law '13) now practices Personal and Catastrophic Injury law at Morgan and Morgan in Fresno.

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Please keep us in your loop by completing the form at [www.sjcl.edu/onthemove](http://www.sjcl.edu/onthemove). Emails and phone calls are welcome too. Contact Diane Skouti at [dskouti@sjcl.edu](mailto:dskouti@sjcl.edu) or (559) 326-1463 to share your news!

## *In Memoriam*

**Gerald Ray Lewis** (Law '81)  
SJCL notes with sadness the passing of Gerald Ray Lewis in November of 2025. Gerald was a sole practitioner from 1982 – 2003 when he accepted a staff counsel position with the California Department of Corrections. He finished his legal career as a Deputy Commissioner with the California Board of Parole Hearings before his retirement in 2007.

**Timothy Bennett** (Law '06)  
SJCL is sad to note the passing of Tim Bennett on May 14, 2026. Tim worked for the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA).

**James Binion** (Law '05)  
SJCL notes with sadness the passing of James Binion in January of 2026. James was a dedicated public servant and passionate advocate. At the time of his passing, he was employed by the Fresno County Public Defender's Office. He previously served with distinction at the Kings County District Attorneys' Office, and FAC. Throughout his legal career, James was known for his unwavering commitment to justice, and his firm belief that every client deserved the strongest defense possible. He was also known for his trademark cowboy attire in court, his quick wit, and larger than life personality.

**Janet "Jan" Paquette** (Dayhoff)  
SJCL notes with sadness the passing of Jan Paquette in April of 2026. Jan graduated from the Paralegal Program during the early years of SJCL. She worked as an independent paralegal.

**Dr. Stanley R. Surabian** (Law '92) SJCL notes with sadness the passing of Dr. Stanley R. Surabian in June of 2026

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It's time to submit your nomination for the 2026 Class of Inductees to the SJCL Alumni Hall of Fame! Do you know of a classmate or colleague who has demonstrated an exemplary dedication to the field of law and profoundly impacted the community?

Nominate them for induction into the San Joaquin College of Law Hall of Fame! The nomination form can be found at [sjcl.edu](http://sjcl.edu) > alumni > Hall of Fame or send an email including their name, your reasons for nomination, and your contact information to: [dskouti@sjcl.edu](mailto:dskouti@sjcl.edu) before July 30, 2026.



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