ACROSS the BAR

2025 Midyear Review

Honoring Excellence Across Generations

Recognizing the distinguished service of the 2025 Law Day Award recipient and the promising contributions of the 2024 Outstanding New Lawyer Award honoree.

HONORABLE FRANK S. KIM

2025 Law Day Award Recipient





CRISTAL RUIZ

2024 Outstanding New Lawyer Award Recipient

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AN UPDATE FROM THE ATB COMMITTEE

As we hit the midpoint of 2025, the Across the Bar Committee wanted to take a moment to spotlight some of the San Joaquin County Bar Association's key milestones so far — and share what's just around the corner.

This spring brought standout moments for the San Joaquin County Bar Association, beginning with the New Lawyers Reception in March, hosted by the Bank of Stockton. Congratulations to Cristal Ruiz, honored as the Outstanding New Lawyer recipient. In May, the always-anticipated Law Day Luncheon took place, where the Honorable Frank S. Kim was recognized as the 2025 Law Day Award recipient. We also wrapped up our MCLE Masters Series, offering meaningful opportunities to learn, connect, and deepen our shared commitment to justice.

Looking ahead, we hope to see you at several big events on the horizon. In August, join us for Membership Appreciation Night at the Stockton Ports — a casual evening of baseball, food, and camaraderie. Then in September, we'll raise a glass at the Cheers to 85 Years! anniversary celebration … a tribute to the legacy and future of our incredible legal community. This special evening will also include recognition of both our new and retiring members of the judicial branch, honoring their service and welcoming the next chapter of leadership in our courts. Don't forget to save the date for our Annual Meeting and State of the Court happening in November.

The San Joaquin County Bar Association continues to be much more than a professional organization — it's a vibrant community where attorneys, judges, legal professionals, and supportive members from a wide range of backgrounds come together to learn, share ideas, and support one another. With free MCLE programs, social mixers, and special events happening year-round, there's always a way for everyone to get involved and grow.

Here's to the second half of 2025 — and to celebrating 85 years of connection, service, and progress!

— *The Across the Bar Committee*

This issue is brought to you by the dedicated members of the Across the Bar Committee:
Susan Bartman, SJCBA
Everly Inong, SJCBA
Patrick Piggott, SJCBA Board of Governors
Janette Rossell, SJCBA Board of Governors
Sandra Serrano, SJCBA

San Joaquin County Bar Association Turns 85 — And Still Has All Its Teeth (Mostly)

By an Overcaffeinated Bar Staffer Who's Been to Too Many Events (Susan Bartman)

MESSAGE FROM THE
Executive Director



Happy 85th Anniversary to the San Joaquin County Bar Association — still going strong, still classy, and still only mildly confused by Zoom (but no longer using dial-up).

That's right, folks. We're celebrating 85 years of legal excellence, community leadership, and strategically timed coffee breaks. Plans for a mid-year celebration are officially underway. Mark your calendars for September 17 - it's going to be fancier than your last deposition and (hopefully) feature fewer objections.

2025 Is in Full Swing — And Yes, It's Still Lit
We kicked off the year with a packed MCLE Masters Series in January and some major tech upgrades to our Court Assigned Counsel program. Farewell, ancient Excel sheets and mystery logins from the Windows XP era — we're moving on up.

We also celebrated Law Day in style with our annual luncheon, where we honored the incredible Honorable Frank S. Kim as our 2025 Law Day Award Recipient. The food was great, the crowd was better, and the speeches had just the right amount of heartfelt and humble brag. In other words, it was everything you'd expect from a room full of legal minds with good taste.

Next Up: Baseball
Coming this August: Membership Appreciation Night at the Stockton Ports. Think hot dogs, high-fives, and hanging out with your favorite fellow bar members — it's our way of saying thank you for being awesome (and for paying your dues).

Shoutout to Our Annual Sponsors: You're the Real MVPs
A huge thanks to our 2025 sponsors who keep this party going:

- Lance McHan Divorce Realtor – Because even when things fall apart, a good realtor and lawyer can help you move on. Literally.
- Judicate West – Bringing peaceful resolutions to even the spiciest disputes, minus the courtroom drama.
- CalBar Connect – Making legal life easier, one discount at a time.

ICYMI: Central Valley Latino Lawyers Section (CVLL) Is Here
Our newest section, Central Valley Latino Lawyers, is off and running. They launched with a Margarita Mixer in May, and the energy was everything. More events are coming soon, so stay tuned — and yes, clever law puns on name tags are still encouraged.

We Want to Hear From You
Got ideas? Suggestions? Wild dreams of hosting a CLE on courtroom karaoke or legal-themed trivia night? Don't hold back. We're always looking for new ways to serve you better — and if it includes snacks and laughs, even better.

Cheers to 85 years of meaningful connections, strong coffee, and a legal community that knows how to work hard and have fun doing it! We're just getting started.

Cheers,
Susan Bartman
Executive Director (and coffee-fueled cheerleader)
San Joaquin County Bar Association

San Joaquin County Bar Association

Law Day Luncheon

May 7, 2025

The Constitution's Promise: Out of Many, One

Celebrating Justice and Unity at the 2025 LAW DAY LUNCHEON

On May 7, 2025, the San Joaquin County Bar Association (SJCBA) hosted its annual Law Day Luncheon at the Hilton Stockton—welcoming a record-breaking crowd for an afternoon of celebration, recognition, and reflection. This year's event was especially meaningful, held during Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month and honoring retired Judge Frank S. Kim with the 2025 Law Day Award.

The luncheon, centered around the national theme "The Constitution's Promise: Out of Many, One," highlighted the power of law to unite a diverse nation through justice, inclusion, and community service. The program featured remarks from local leaders, past Law Day recipients, and bar association officers, all underscoring the importance of civic responsibility and equal access to justice.

Judge Kim, the first Asian American judge in San Joaquin County, was celebrated not only for his historic legal career but for his enduring influence in the community. His presence at the luncheon drew colleagues, mentees, and community members from across generations—many of whom credited Judge Kim for opening doors and setting an example of leadership with humility.

"This year's theme reflects the values Judge Kim has lived by for decades," said SJCBA Executive Director Susan Bartman. "His service to the bench, bar, and broader community exemplifies unity through justice."

In addition to the award presentation, the luncheon spotlighted the continued impact of community partnerships and supporters. SJCBA extended special thanks to its Premier Platinum Annual Partner Lance McHan, Titanium Annual Partner Judicate West, and sponsors including The Freeman Firm, Humphreys University, Villapudua & Somera, PC, and many others whose support made the event possible.

As attendees gathered for photos and shared memories, it was clear the 2025 Law Day Luncheon was more than a celebration—it was a moment of community, legacy, and a recommitment to the rule of law.



Honoring Justice and Legacy: *Judge Frank Kim's Lifelong Impact*









At the 2025 Law Day Luncheon on May 7, the San Joaquin County Bar Association (SJCBA) honored retired Judge Frank S. Kim with its highest recognition: the Law Day Award. The event, held during Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month, marked a historic milestone—Judge Kim is the first AAPI recipient of the award and a figure whose impact spans decades of judicial service, mentorship, and community leadership.

The award presentation was introduced by Judge Jayne Lee, who reflected on Judge Kim's career and legacy in front of a record-breaking audience at the Hilton Stockton. Her remarks underscored how deeply respected Judge Kim remains within the legal community and the broader public he has long served.

A Judicial Trailblazer

Judge Kim began his career in public service in 1960 after passing the California Bar. He became the first Asian American Deputy District Attorney in San Joaquin County and, in 1971, was appointed to the bench—becoming the first AAPI judge in the county's history.

During his time on the bench, Judge Kim served in every judicial assignment, playing a particularly key role in raising the profile of family law within the court. His leadership helped ensure that family law was treated with the same seriousness and consistency as other areas of the judiciary.

Even in retirement, Judge Kim continues to be an active presence in the court community, attending nearly every judicial swearing-in ceremony and offering handwritten welcome notes to newly appointed judges. For years, each believed they were the only ones to receive such a note—until they discovered that this quiet tradition was part of his ongoing mentorship.

Champion of Mentorship and Representation

Judge Kim's influence extends far beyond his official titles. He has been a dedicated mentor, especially to attorneys from underrepresented backgrounds. His impact inspired the creation of the Frank Kim Section of the San Joaquin County Bar Association, named in his honor by local Asian Pacific American attorneys who saw in him not just a mentor, but a role model who had paved the way.

"Judge Kim has served the bench, the bar, and our community with unmatched dedication. He is not just a role model—he is our icon."

Deep Roots in Community Leadership

In addition to his judicial and professional service, Judge Kim has remained deeply connected to the AAPI community in San Joaquin County. He has opened every annual Stockton Chinese New Year's Day Celebration since the 1970s and has sworn in the boards of the Chinese Cultural Society of Stockton, the Chinese Benevolent Association, and the Central Valley Asian-American Chamber of Commerce.

He is recognized not only for his legal contributions, but for being a trusted and consistent community leader for more than five decades.

A Lasting Example

Judge Kim's story embodies the 2025 Law Day theme: "The Constitution's Promise: Out of Many, One." His life and legacy reflect the promise of justice through inclusion, unity, and public service.

His award at the 2025 Law Day Luncheon was more than a recognition—it was a celebration of the values he's upheld throughout his career. His presence continues to shape San Joaquin County's legal community, and his quiet, unwavering dedication serves as a guide for the next generation.

As the standing ovation at the luncheon made clear, Judge Frank Kim's legacy is one of humility, leadership, and service—an enduring example of what it means to dedicate a life to justice.

San Joaquin County Bar Association

Law Day Luncheon

May 7, 2025

The Constitution's Promise: Out of Many, One

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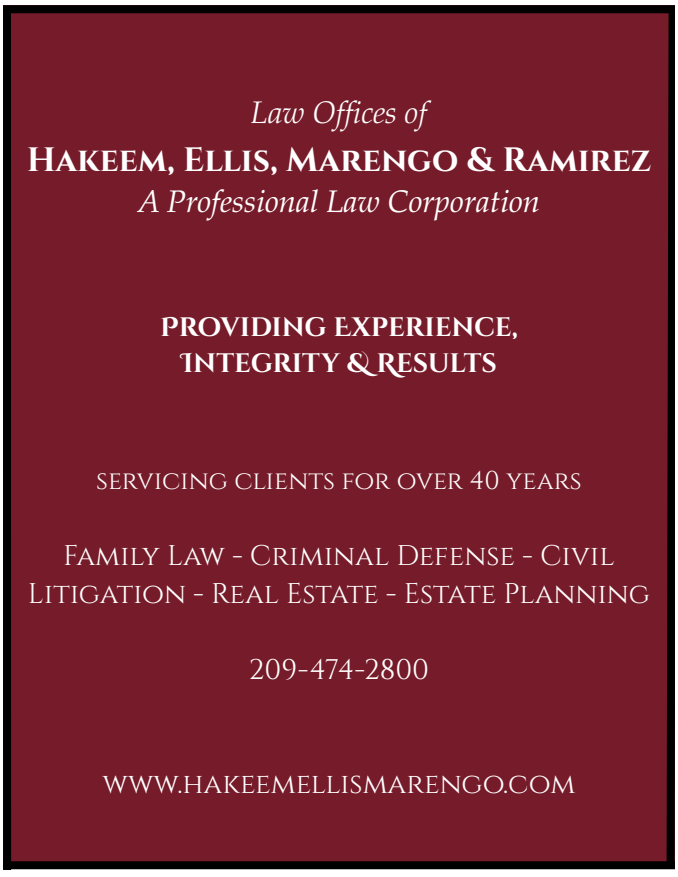
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UPCOMING EVENTS

August 21
Member Appreciation Night at the Ports

September 17
Cheers to 85 Years: Anniversary Celebration

November 5
Annual Meeting & State of the Court

Scan the QR code to learn more or visit sjcbar.org/events

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NEW LAWYERS RECEPTION

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Celebrating Community and Emerging Talent at the Annual New Lawyers Reception

Judges, dignitaries, and colleagues joined together for an evening hosted by Bank of Stockton to recognize new lawyers and the impact of rising leaders like Cristal Ruiz.

On Tuesday, March 4, 2025, the San Joaquin County Bar Association, in partnership with Bank of Stockton, hosted the annual New Lawyers Reception - a special evening dedicated to welcoming the newest members of the legal community and honoring exceptional emerging talent.

This year's event marked a change of venue from the Bank of Stockton's Downtown Headquarters, where the reception was held the previous year, to the Carson Oaks Branch Lobby across from Lincoln Center. The new setting offered a warm, elegant atmosphere for guests to connect and celebrate.

The reception brought together a wide range of attendees, including judges from San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties, local dignitaries, law school leadership, and members of the Bar Association. The event created a vibrant space for meaningful conversations, networking, and support for the next generation of legal professionals.

Guests enjoyed a selection of appetizers and cocktails, generously provided by Bank of Stockton, as they welcomed newly admitted attorneys and celebrated their entry into the legal profession.

A highlight of the evening was the presentation of the 2024 Outstanding New Lawyer Award to Cristal Ruiz, recognized for her remarkable commitment to justice, public service, and community engagement. Her recognition was not only well-deserved but also deeply inspiring to all in attendance.

Each year, the New Lawyers Reception serves as a reminder of the strength and cohesion within San Joaquin County's legal community. With this year's new location and continued tradition of honoring excellence, the event once again underscored the shared commitment to investing in the future of law.



Photos by: JACKSON 2020 MP and SJCBA.

Cristal Ruiz:
A Bright Future in Law and Community Service

Celebrating the 2024 Outstanding New Lawyer Award Recipient

Cristal Ruiz was honored with the Outstanding New Lawyer Award at the New Lawyers Reception on March 5, 2025, in recognition of her exceptional contributions to the legal field and her unwavering commitment to serving the community. Cristal's diverse legal background and dedication to making a meaningful difference in San Joaquin County set her apart as a leader both in the courtroom and beyond.

A Multifaceted Legal Career

Cristal's legal career began in personal injury, real estate, and business litigation, as well as estate planning. Her journey then led her to the San Joaquin District Attorney's office, where she brings a compassionate and thoughtful approach to criminal law. Cristal's perspective on justice is unique: she's not focused on the number of jury trials or convictions she achieves. Instead, she's committed to ensuring fairness in the criminal justice system by balancing punishment, rehabilitation, and deterrence. Cristal consistently asks, "Why did this person do what they did?" and "How can we help them never do this again?" Her goal is to make a positive, lasting impact on those she serves.

Beyond the Courtroom: A Dedication to Service

Cristal's commitment to the legal profession extends well beyond her practice. She is an active member of the San Joaquin County Bar Association (SJCBA), serving on the MCLE and Judicial Evaluation committees. Additionally, she has been involved with the Judge Consuelo Callahan Inns of Court, the SJCBA Women's Lawyer Section, and the Young Lawyer's Section. Cristal's work within these organizations highlights her desire to uplift the legal community and ensure the growth and development of new legal professionals.

A Commitment to Stockton and San Joaquin County

Cristal's connection to Stockton and San Joaquin County is strong and personal. Although she studied in San Diego, Cristal always knew she would return home to make a difference. Her deep love for the area is evident in the time and energy she dedicates to improving the community.

One of Cristal's key contributions is her involvement with the "Just the Kids" program, which helps children of local farmworker families gain access to educational activities and mentorship from professionals in the legal field. Cristal's fluency in Spanish has made her an invaluable asset to this program, where many children speak Spanish as their first language.

Another program Cristal is passionate about is the "First Impressions" Program, which teaches local 5th graders about civics and allows them to take part in a mock trial in a real courtroom. Cristal's participation in this program is just one of many ways she demonstrates her commitment to fostering the next generation of leaders in her community.

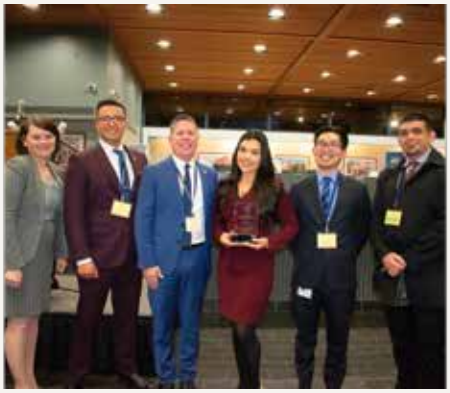
An Impactful Presence in the Community

Cristal's presence in the community is impactful and wide-reaching. She not only contributes to local events and initiatives but also uses her legal ability to educate and empower others. Her devotion to public service and her dedication to making Stockton and San Joaquin County a better place is clear in everything she does.

Cristal Ruiz's service to her community, coupled with her excellence as a legal professional, makes her a deserving recipient of the 2024 Outstanding New Lawyer Award. Her unwavering commitment to justice, fairness, and giving back to the community sets her apart as an inspiring role model for both current and future generations of legal professionals.

We celebrate Cristal Ruiz for her remarkable achievements in 2024 and look forward to seeing her continued impact on the legal profession and our community.











Photos by: JACKSON 2020 MP.

The Secret Court Investigative Branch: San Joaquin County's Civil Grand Jury

BY PATRICK L. PIGGOTT
SJCBA Board Member and Attorney at Law





Tucked away on an upper floor of the San Joaquin County Courthouse is a locked door leading to a little-known room accessible only to a select few. This is not the domain of ancient tribunals or secret societies—but rather an official and independent arm of the Superior Court: the Civil Grand Jury.

This body of 19 volunteers meets confidentially for a full year to investigate and report on the performance of local government agencies. Despite its critical role, the Civil Grand Jury is often unknown even within the legal community. Yet, it is a powerful and longstanding institution—one of the few of its kind remaining in the United States.

What Is the Civil Grand Jury?
Unlike a criminal grand jury, which deals with indictments and prosecutions, California's Civil Grand Jury focuses on oversight and accountability. It investigates local government operations, public prisons, special districts, and allegations of misconduct by public officials. Each final report includes findings and recommendations aimed at improving public service.

California is one of just a handful of states that maintain this separate, self-regulating entity, which operates independently from other branches of government.

The California Constitution mandates that every county must appoint a Civil Grand Jury each year, with further guidance provided by state statutes. But within those legal frameworks, each jury operates autonomously—choosing its investigations, setting procedures, and establishing its own internal structure.

Local Leadership and Legacy
In San Joaquin County, Judge George Abdullah has served as the Civil Grand Jury's supervising judge for more than two decades—a rare continuity among California counties. Initially appointed during his tenure as Presiding Judge in 2002–2003, Judge Abdullah continued in the role when his successor declined the added time commitment. His unwavering dedication to civic duty and public service has ensured consistency and strength in the jury's work over the years.

Judge Abdullah has also contributed to the statewide Guide for Judges Supervising the Civil Grand Jury, published by the Center for Judicial Education and Research, further underscoring his deep involvement in this area.

The Civil Ombudsman
While some countries employ an "ombudsman" to investigate citizen complaints about government departments, in California, the Civil Grand Jury often fulfills this role. Citizens can submit concerns to the jury about any aspect of county government. If at least 12 jurors deem a complaint worthy of investigation, a committee is formed. Witnesses may be called, testimony taken, and subpoenas issued if necessary. Any public observation or interviews must be conducted by at least two jurors to ensure fairness and documentation.

Confidential and Impactful Work
Jurors are required to maintain lifelong confidentiality about all proceedings, aside from what is publicly reported. This protects witnesses from retaliation, prevents bias, and encourages candid testimony. It also ensures that no one knows what others have said during an investigation, allowing for independent and unbiased accounts.

Final reports require approval from at least 12 of the 19 jurors and are reviewed by both County Counsel and the District Attorney's Office before submission to the supervising judge. Only Judge Abdullah has the authority to approve or deny publication, ensuring that all findings are fact-based, fair, and legally sound.
The public impact of these reports is significant. Agencies and individuals must respond—often publicly. Over the years, Civil Grand Jury findings have prompted reforms,

increased transparency, and held public officials accountable.

Becoming a Juror
Judge Abdullah encourages all eligible residents of San Joaquin County to apply. Applications are available on the Court's website and can also be submitted by nomination. Applicants are not evaluated for their political views but must demonstrate a commitment to civic responsibility, understand the time demands, and pass a background check. The jury term runs from July 1 to June 30, and members are selected at random from the qualified applicant pool.

Service is voluntary, though time-intensive—often amounting to 20 hours a week. Jurors receive the state-mandated compensation of $15 per day. Their financial disclosures and names are made public, in the interest of transparency.

Despite the modest compensation, many jurors describe the experience as deeply rewarding. The work fosters friendships, expands civic understanding, and connects individuals from diverse backgrounds in a shared mission of public service.

Supporting the Jury's Work
San Joaquin County stands out in its robust support of the Civil Grand Jury. The Court Administrator and the County provide funding for a secure facility, printing, supplies, parking, a website, and a part-time Court Clerk. This level of support is not universal among California counties, and it enhances the jury's ability to serve the public effectively.

A Call to Action
Every attorney should play a role in raising awareness about the Civil Grand Jury. Whether through client conversations, community engagement, or personal service, members of the legal profession are uniquely positioned to strengthen this vital institution.

Retired or semi-retired attorneys are especially encouraged to apply. Over the past four Grand Juries, six attorneys have served—alongside a wide range of other professionals including peace officers, teachers, librarians, artists, counselors, nurses, real estate agents, and businesspeople.

Well done to all who have served—and to those yet to answer the call.

For more information about the San Joaquin County Civil Grand Jury visit www.sjcourts.org/divisions/civil-grand-jury/

About the Author: Mr. Piggott is a local attorney and a current SJCBA Board Member. A former Dean of Drivon School of Law, Humphreys University, he is featured on page 28 in a special Board Buzz article offering an in-depth look at his career and serviceto the legal community.

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Build your network, grow your practice, and find your community through SJCBA's Affinity and Practice-Specific Sections.

Hon. Frank Kim Asian/Pacific Islanders Section

This Section creates space for connection and advocacy within the Asian Pacific Islander legal community. Members work together to address issues of concern, build relationships with community leaders, and expand access to legal resources — all while advancing the broader goals of the SJCBA. See updates and a photo recap from their latest event on page 20.

Justice William J. Murray Jr. Unity Bar Section

Open to all who support equity and inclusion, the Unity Bar Section promotes fairness and cultural understanding throughout our profession. Through educational programs and events that highlight diverse voices and experiences, this active group helps foster a more respectful and inclusive legal community. Check out the latest update by Co-Chairs Judge Barbara A. Kronlund and Elizabeth Kim on page 20.

Women Lawyers Section

Dedicated to supporting women in the legal profession, this Section creates opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and professional growth. By offering networking events and programming focused on issues relevant to women attorneys, it promotes leadership and equity across the legal community. Learn more on page 21.

Young Lawyers Section

Designed for attorneys in their first 10 years of practice, the Young Lawyers Section is all about building a strong foundation. Members benefit from CLEs, mentorship opportunities, and social events — as well as the chance to give back through fundraising and community initiatives.

Central Valley Latino Lawyers Section (newest addition!)

We're thrilled to welcome the Central Valley Latino Lawyers Section to the SJCBA community! This new Affinity Section is forming a space for connection, advocacy, and support among Latino legal professionals. Full intro coming soon — stay tuned!



The San Joaquin County Bar Association (SJCBA) isn't just a network — it's a community. And one of the best ways to get involved is through our dynamic Sections.

In this issue of Across the Bar, we're spotlighting all of our current Sections — plus introducing the newest member of our Affinity family: the Central Valley Latino Lawyers Section! This vibrant group brings fresh energy and vital representation to our legal community, creating a space for connection, support, and engagement.

SJCBA Sections offer something for everyone.
Affinity Sections create space for members to build relationships, share experiences, and support one another in meaningful ways.
Practice-Specific Sections focus on specific areas of law, providing continuing education, networking opportunities, and professional development tailored to your legal interests.

Whether you're just starting out or well into your legal career, SJCBA Sections are a great way to connect with colleagues, strengthen your practice, and stay involved in the local legal community. Dive in and find the group that's right for you.

PRACTICE-SPECIFIC SECTIONS

Civil Litigation Section

The Civil Litigation Section offers valuable tools and connections for attorneys navigating civil practice. With CLEs, peer-led discussions, and opportunities to engage with local judges, this Section helps members strengthen their practice and stay connected to the broader legal landscape.

Criminal Law Section

From roundtable discussions to practical CLEs, the Criminal Law Section provides meaningful ways for members to sharpen their skills and build community. It's a space where attorneys practicing criminal law can exchange insights, stay informed, and support one another. *This issue also features an article by Criminal Law Section member Kevin Rooney, offering reflections on incarceration, empathy, and civic responsibility (page 23).*

Family Law Section

The Family Law Section unites attorneys and judicial officers to discuss the latest updates, best practices, and evolving courthouse procedures. Through quarterly meetings, educational programs, and social events, it promotes collaboration and ongoing learning within the family law community. See their detailed update on page 22.

Paralegal Section

Open to all nonlawyer legal professionals, the Paralegal Section is committed to strengthening professional integrity, promoting education, and building community. It's a welcoming space for paralegals to grow their skills, expand their networks, and advance the profession.

Trust & Estates Section

This Section supports attorneys working in probate, trust, and estate planning with relevant programming and opportunities for professional connection. Members benefit from forums, educational events, and open lines of communication with the Superior Court's Probate Department. Read more in their full submission on page 22.

Affinity Sections | Connecting Through Community

Discover what's new in these sections that unite members through shared backgrounds, experiences, and passions.

Honorable Frank Kim Asian/Pacific Islanders Section

Named after the first Asian American judge in San Joaquin County and recent Law Day Award Recipient, Judge Frank Kim, the Asian Pacific Islanders Bar Association Section welcomes anyone that is of API descent or those that are concerned with the issues in the API community. We have 9 executive committee members—all from different backgrounds and areas of law. Judge Lee and Judge Kronlund stopped by our recent Asian Persuasion Mixer event that our executive committee worked hard to plan at Seoul Soondubu on Miracle Way in Stockton. We currently have a scholarship application (named after one of our very own executive board members - Clarence Chan) open for high school, college, and law students who wish to pursue a career in law and give back to the API community in San Joaquin County. Our next event to look out for will be a joint event offering one hour of MCLE credit as well as being a mixer. If you love karaoke, fun, Asian food, and good company, consider joining our section!



Justice William J. Murray Jr. Unity Bar Update

By Judge Barbara A. Kronlund & Elizabeth Kim, Co-Chairs

The Unity Bar was formed in April of 2021. With the rise in Anti-Asian Violence that year, it became apparent we as a Bar needed to take a stand against divisiveness and foster unity and inclusiveness, celebrating our diversity and educating that difference should not be feared. With that mission in mind, the Unity Bar was created for everyone. Members of Affinity groups like Women Lawyers, Asian Pacific Islanders, and all the other groups who may not have enough members to have stand-alone sections, as well as people who do not fit within any affinity group, but who support fairness, inclusivity, and diversity in our profession, are all invited to join our Section.

Notably, San Joaquin County Bar Association Executive Director, Susan Bartman, along with then-Bar President, Anna Maples, were both extremely instrumental in assisting with our Section's formation. At the time, the Bar was in transition between executive directors, making it a particularly uncertain time to launch a new section. Nonetheless, both Susan and Anna worked diligently to ensure the success of the Unity Bar.

Justice Shama Mesiwala, co-founder of the South Asian Bar Association of Sacramento, served as a mentor to our Section during it's formation. Her encouragement and practical advice, drawn from her own experience, were invaluable in helping us streamline the process and launch the Unity Bar smoothly.

Our Executive Committee is comprised of Justice William J. Murray Jr. (Retired); Judge Barbara Kronlund, Elizabeth H. Kim, Partner with Leonardini, Despotes, Giannecchini, & Nims LLP; Lisa B. Jimenez, Partner with Neumiller and Beardslee; Jennifer "Kibbe" Day, Deputy District Attorney; Shafeeq Sadiq, Sole Practitioner; and Janette Rossell, Sole Practitioner, serving as the Board of Governors Liaison.

In our first two years as a Section, we hosted over sixteen Zoom educational programs. Topics during this time included the following: Muslims/Asian Pacific Islanders; LBGTQ; Hispanic Americans; African Americans; New AB 3070; Personal Discrimination Stories; Homelessness; Anti-Asian Violence; Depression & Anxiety; Veterans; Legal Practice with a Disability; Strategy of Shafeeq Sadiq in achieving county's highest single plaintiff verdict; and an in-person Women Leaders panel.

(Continued on page 21)

Over the following two years, we expanded our programming to cover a wide range of topics, including: Zoom presentations on Implicit Bias regarding jurors; Housing Discrimination; Conversation with Jewish Leaders; Health, Mental Health and Legal Concerns related to elders; Cultural implications of workplace investigations; Homelessness issues; Hate Crimes; Judicial Independence; Cross-Cultural Communication; Preventing gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace; Apology, Forgiveness, & Reconciliation; Impartiality and Justice dialogue with Distinguished Law Professor Michael Vitiello; and two tours covering Gospel Center Rescue Mission and Pride Center with corresponding presentations at each site. We also put on joint programs with other affinity Sections for in-person programs on Humanizing Immigration and Achieving Resolution through informal negotiation.

We remain an active and vibrant Section of the Bar Association, giving members many ongoing learning opportunities to receive their continuing legal education credit. Our next event is a June Mixer, scheduled for June 19, 2025 from 5:00pm-7:00pm at Mezzo Ristorante, with appetizers and drinks. This event is free for Unity Bar Section members and $10 for non-members. We are also planning a joint in-person event with the Women Lawyers Section for the fall.

Our Section is proudly named in honor of Justice William J. Murray Jr., whose lifelong commitment to diversity, fairness, and inclusion inspired its formation. Justice Murray first sought to establish a Unity Bar fifteen years before our current Section was formed, but his efforts were dismissed at the time as "unnecessary" in our County.

Justice Murray was selected as the first Unity Bar award recipient to recognize and honor his enduring legacy. The award was presented at our first Annual Unity Bar Holiday Party Luncheon, which has since become one of our signature events and a favorite member benefit. The luncheon is always well-attended and continues to embody the spirit of unity that defines our Section.

Justice Murray began his legal career as a prosecutor in Brooklyn, New York, before returning to California in 1986 to join the San Joaquin County District Attorney's Office. From 1992 to 1995, he served as second in command at the office. In 1995, he was appointed to the San Joaquin County Superior Court, where he later served as Presiding Judge for two years. In 2010, he was appointed to the Third District Court of Appeal.

Justice Murray is widely known for his deep commitment to community outreach. He has participated in many youth outreach programs, served as a mentor for college and law school students, and has been involved in jail and prison outreach programs designed to curb recidivism and to motivate the children of incarcerated parents to succeed in life. He was chair of the Third District's Outreach Committee, coordinating the court's "Let Freedom Ring" program at the California State Fair, commemorating the 150-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 50-year anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream speech."

He has been active in the California Judicial Branch, including serving in various capacities with the California Judicial Council, California Judges Association, and the California State Bar.

Justice Murray serves on the Judicial Council's Criminal Law Advisory Committee, where in 2020, he chaired the A.B. 3070 (Batson/Wheeler Reform) and A.B. 2542 (California Racial Justice Act) working group subcommittees. He also serves on the Judicial Council Access and Fairness Advisory Committee, the CJER Judicial Branch Ethics, Access and Fairness Curriculum Committee, and the California Judges Association Eliminating Bias and Inequality Committee.

Since 2002, Justice Murray has served as an instructor for judicial education programs. He has been the author of and consultant on resource materials on jury issues used by judges statewide and in Unconscious Bias and Cultural Responsiveness programs. As a member of the Judge Consuelo M. Callahan Inn of Court in Stockton, California, he was the team leader for two programs that won highly competitive national "Outstanding Program Awards" from the American Inns of Court.

Among the honors Justice Murray has received are the following: 2019--California Judges Association Justice Bernard Jefferson Award for Excellence in Judicial Education; 2019--California Black Lawyers Association, Judicial Excellence Award; 2016--Placer County Bar Association Access to Justice Award; 2013--Stockton Branch NAACP Freedom Fighter Award; 2013--Wiley Manuel Bar Association Judge of the Year; 2011--California Black Lawyers Association, Judicial Section, Distinguished Judicial Officer Award; 2007 California Bench-Bar Coalition Judicial Officer of the Year; 2002--San Joaquin County Bar Association Law Day Award.

Justice Murray also received a Lifetime Achievement award in October, 2022, from Wiley Manuel Bar Association.

He graduated from Frostburg State College (now Frostburg State University) in Maryland with a double major in political science and economics and earned his law degree from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. in 1982.

After serving for 12 years on the Third District Court of Appeal, Justice Murray retired on January 27, 2022. Since retiring, he has remained deeply engaged in the legal community, regularly serving as an instructor and presenter for judicial education programs through the Center for Judicial Education and Research and the California Judges Association, as well as for Bar Associations across the state. His presentations focus on criminal law, juror issues, and housing discrimination.

Our Section's namesake remains one of our most inspiring and popular presenters. We are proud to call him "Ours."

If you have not already joined the Justice William J. Murray Jr. Unity Bar Section, we warmly invite you to become a member. Our Section offers valuable opportunities for networking, community building, and continuing legal education. As part of a statewide network of Unity Bars across California, our reach and impact extend far beyond our local community.

We thank all of our Section members for their continued support and fellowship. Together, let us continue learning, connecting, and growing together as we welcome another exciting year.

Women Lawyers Section Update

The Women Lawyers Section seeks to enhance the quality of life and culture of the legal community by encouraging and supporting women's participation in the profession, fostering cooperation between genders, and providing networking opportunities along with educational programs on topics relevant to its members.

Upcoming Events

- Pathways to the Bench Roundtable at Humphreys University Drivon School of Law - October 1, 2025.
- WL Section Annual Holiday Party - December 12, 2025.

(SJCBA Section Updates Continued on page 22)

Practice-Specific Sections

Focused on the Field
Get the latest updates from sections dedicated to specific areas of law and professional practice.

Family Law Section Update

The Family Law Section hosts quarterly noontime meetings of the family law bench and bar in Dept. 4A on the second Wednesday of March, June, September, and December. These meetings cover courthouse procedures, practice updates, custody mediations, and more. The Section also offers educational MCLE opportunities each fall and organizes mixers and a holiday party in December to foster community among family law professionals.

Upcoming Events

- MCLE in fall (Date TBD)
- Mixer - August 8, 2025 (tentative)
- FL Section Members Holiday Party - December 5, 2025.

All local Trust and Estates practitioners are ordered to show good cause as to why they should not join the San Joaquin County Bar Association Trust and Estates Section!

The Trust and Estates Section is comprised of nearly four dozen local attorneys and an eight person executive committee from a number of the communities law firms; including, Kroloff Belcher, Smart, Perry and Christopherson, P.C.; Diehl Law Firm, P.C.; Shore, McKinley & Conger, LLP; Allen-Garibaldi & Chong, Inc.; Leonardini, Despotes, Giannecchini, and Nims, P.C.; Clarence K. Chan, P.C.; and the Bank of Stockton.

The Trust and Estates Section, in coordination with Judge Sabrina Schneweis-Coe and Judge Erin Guy-Castillo, each who graciously gives up their lunch hour several times a year, hosts quarterly roundtable meetings to discuss pertinent probate policies, procedures, and other topics of interest. Roundtable meetings are held in person, in Department L2 (Lodi), and are open to all attorneys. The next roundtable meeting is calendared for August 12, 2025, with the last of the year scheduled for November 18, 2025. Meetings begin at 12:15 P.M.

The Trusts and Estates Section will also be hosting a CLE on Proposition 19. If you are unfamiliar with effects of Proposition 19 – CONGRATULATIONS. I aspire to live a life of such blissful ignorance. For those of us that are familiar with the effects of Proposition 19, and the massive migraines that its passage has caused, we will be inviting a representative from the assessor's office to give the section a presentation on the topic and answer any questions that we may have. Once a date is determined, it will be published by the Bar Association.

All work and no play certainly ruins the day! The Section will be hosting a social mixer, an informal gala of sorts, at Garlic Brothers, on Wednesday, October 22, 2025, from 5:15 to 7:15. Appetizers and Soft-Drinks to be paid for by the Committee. There will be no-host bar if you are so inclined to imbibe during happy hour. All local attorneys are welcome to join the section for this affair.

In the event you would like to join the section given our proclivities for education, enjoyment, and the betterment of the bar, you can do so for less than the cost of obtaining certified letters. Please contact Sandra Serrano at (209) 948-0125 to join this fantastic and productive section of the bar association.



What I Learned from Two (Half) Days in Prison & How I Hope It Helps Save My City

BY KEVIN ROONEY
Attorney
Law Office of Kevin J. Rooney





Editor's Note:
This article was originally published in 2019, but its reflections on incarceration, empathy, and civic responsibility remain deeply relevant today. As conversations around criminal justice reform and community engagement continue to evolve, the insights shared here still resonate in 2025.

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Even for the most skeptical participants, the idea that these visitors they were meeting for the first time were unfeeling monsters went away before lunch on the first day. Gradually, in ways no one new to this work could have imagined, walls came down, tears were shed, and hugs were exchanged, as were promises to write and to pray for one another.

They're not monsters, the men dressed in blue uniforms realized one by one, they're just prosecutors.

Background

Almost nine years ago, my wife and I moved three thousand miles away from our families and most of our friends so that I could start my career as a criminal prosecutor in the New York County (Manhattan) District Attorney's Office. It was far from easy (or cheap…), but we loved the people we worked with and met in New York, I loved my job, and if our family ties hadn't been as strong as they are, I probably would've stayed at DANY for the rest of my career.

But our family ties are strong, and in 2013, my family needed us home. My dad was sick and my three brothers had done more than their share to help him and my mom battle his illness. So we made the decision to move back to California to be closer to our families as soon as I finished my three-year commitment to the office.

As we did, I also assessed the health of my hometown of Stockton. In 2012, the same year the city became the largest municipality in the U.S. to declare bankruptcy, there were more homicides in Stockton (71) than there were in Manhattan (66). At the time, Stockton had around 300,000 residents. Manhattan had about 1.5 million on the books, and that doesn't count the millions of tourists, commuters, and other visitors who come to the island each year.

So I called a former supervisor and mentor at the San Joaquin County District Attorney's Office where I'd interned as a college student. I told her we were moving back and that I was looking for a job. Never one to beat around the bush, she told me, "You need to apply to our office. We're hiring and I'm running for DA." In 2014, Tori Verber Salazar was elected to serve as the county's first female district attorney. She was re-elected last year.

When people would ask why I was leaving New York to work in Stockton, I gave them my standard line: "I want to help get shooters off the streets." I thought it sounded good, and I thought it was what the community desperately needed.

I got plenty of opportunities to do just that almost immediately upon my return in 2013. In the past six years, I've prosecuted dozens of shootings, armed robberies, and homicides. Most of those cases ended with young men (overwhelmingly young men of color, as were their victims) being sentenced to prison terms, often for a very long time, and in some cases potentially for the rest of their lives.

And yet, despite getting all those shooters off the streets, Stockton is still one of the most violent cities in the nation. After a promising 2018 that saw a 40% drop in homicides and a similar drop in non-fatal shootings, Stockton is on pace for a year like 2012 after suffering its 21st homicide of the year last week.

The violence haunts me. The first thing I do when I wake up in the morning, even before my feet hit the floor, is check my e-mail on my phone. I hold my breath as it loads and pray that there won't be an email detailing another shooting or homicide that happened in the 4–6 hours I restlessly slept. When there is, it implants a pit deep in my stomach that stays there all day as I picture another mother burying her child or crying on my shoulder at her son's killer's sentencing hearing.

What I've realized in these six years is

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that while we can and must work with our law enforcement partners to investigate and prosecute crimes of violence where we have failed to intervene and prevent them, we cannot arrest, prosecute, and sentence our way to peace. We must find other solutions and to do so we must forge new partnerships, because we — the district attorney's office, law enforcement writ large, government — cannot do it alone.

It is with this search for solutions in mind that a large group of my colleagues in San Joaquin County and I jumped at a truly unique opportunity afforded us this past week by Restore: Justice (https://restorecal.org/), our forward-thinking District Attorney Verber Salazar, and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and its Office of Victims' Rights and Services. For the better part of two days spent inside a CDCR facility, in what Restore calls its Transformative Justice Symposium, we talked to, but, much more importantly, listened to, the stories of members of two groups: incarcerated men convicted of serious violent crimes (mostly homicides) and family members of homicide victims.

The following are some of the takeaways that I plan to share with anyone who will listen.

Restoring humanity to the system

Every couple of months, I have an opportunity to speak, in a small group setting, to young men in Stockton who have been identified as at risk of being involved in gun violence. Every time, I start the same way:

"My name is Kevin Rooney. I am a son, a father, a husband, a brother, and an uncle." Eventually I tell them that I work at the DA's Office, but I lead the way I do because I believe we need reminders of one another's humanity to really see and hear each other.

As prosecutors in an adversarial system like ours, it is rare that we get an opportunity to speak directly to someone after he or she is charged with a crime. Some prosecutors may not even ever look a defendant in the eye from arraignment through sentencing. In part, that stems from respect for the accused person's constitutional right to counsel. It may also be seen as upholding a high standard of professional and ethical conduct to carry oneself unemotionally so as not to let one's emotions cloud one's judgment regarding the pursuit of justice in any one case.

Similarly, of the men in blue in our circles last week, none had spoken to a prosecutor before the symposium. They had their own preconceived notions of who we were and how we looked at them. They were as surprised as anyone to see the tears streaming down our faces as they told their stories.

They are all sons, too, and many of them are fathers, brothers, husbands, and uncles as well. Some of them are even grandfathers. As we heard their stories, the rest of us around the circle stopped focusing on the crime each had committed and saw them for the people they were. People who made mistakes and, even more than that, people who had done some terrible things, but people deserving of love and forgiveness all the same.

In our circle, no one was more forgiving or understanding of the incarcerated men's stories than the moms. These were moms who lost their sons to violence. Their stories, and the stories of their lost loved ones, were eerily similar to those of the men in CDCR blue. The moms showed remarkable strength and unfathomable grace in sharing their stories, listening to the men's stories, and forgiving the men for the harm they had inflicted on their victims and their communities.

It is not a far leap from depersonalization to dehumanization. We — especially prosecutors — would all do well to remind ourselves of the humanity of everyone with whom we come into contact. Even, and probably especially, when that person doesn't look like us or anyone with whom we have ever had a close relationship. We must remember that when we argue or bargain for a prison term, a real person — not a "monster" or an "animal," but someone just like us and just like the men we embraced over those two days — will serve that sentence.

Understanding why we incarcerate

As part of the restorative and transformative justice processes, each incarcerated man admitted his crimes to us, named his victims, and expressed real remorse for his actions and all of the pain he had caused so many people. In our circle, all of the commitment crimes had been committed over ten years ago, and three of the four had been committed more than twenty years ago. As I listened, I thought of the defendants in my serious violent cases and why I often believe that incarceration is a central part of the right result. I thought in terms of something I heard recently on one podcast or another about how people we incarcerate almost always fall into one of two categories: people we're scared of and people we're mad at.

I have no doubt that the prosecutors and judges who handled the cases of the four men in our group in court believed that all four fit in the first category. When they committed their crimes, they were young, they were broken, and they violently victimized other members of their communities. Three of them took lives. Society was rightfully fearful that if not incapacitated, they would harm or kill again. We were scared of them.

But what about now? I'm almost thirty-seven. One of the men in our group has been in prison since the year after I was born. He's in his sixties. He told us that he has not had an incident of violence or aggression since he came to prison. If that is true, are we still scared of what he might do if released because of what he did forty years ago, or are we just still mad at him for his crime?

I'll be the first one to admit that there are people, statistically few as they are, who will present clear and present dangers to others until the day they die. Those people will never leave the "people we're scared of" category, and when we can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that one of them has committed a crime deserving of a life sentence, that's likely the appropriate result.

However, as a society, we should think very hard about the morality, let alone the economic wisdom, of locking up and keeping locked up people we're not scared of at all, or not scared of anymore, but merely mad at for what they've done. How long is long enough to show the offender and the community that we are mad at him, that we disapprove of his crime?

For prosecutors, this is more than theoretical. Members of the public often call for crimes,

particularly violent ones, to be prosecuted "to the fullest extent of the law." If we were to take that cry as our directive in each case, the incarceration rate we would see would dwarf the alarming rate we already see today. In reality, the overwhelming majority of cases are pled out and result in sentences far less than the maximums prescribed by our elected legislators. What this means is that we, the prosecutors, almost always decide how long is long enough for someone to be locked up and locked away from our community.

The worst kept secret, of course, is that most of us are ill-equipped to make these determinations. We need help with that. In the absence of more and better information to inform those decisions, the best we can hope for is that similarly situated offenders are treated similarly and that factors that have zero to do with risk of recidivism — such as race and the personal feelings of the assigned prosecutor — do not impact plea offers and sentencing recommendations.

Putting the R in CDCR for all inmates

From our time with them, it was clear that the incarcerated men in our group had actively participated in counseling, therapy, and other rehabilitative programming while in prison. Some of them even lead counseling sessions and mentor others inside. Through those programs, they have gained insight into the things that led them to prison and built skills to help them cope and thrive both inside prison walls and if and when they are released back into the community.

What was also clear, however, was that in terms of programs and services, not all state facilities are created equally. The men we met had all spent time in multiple prisons since beginning their sentences. Each spoke of reaching a turning point in their lives through one of the programs offered at one facility or another, but also of the unavailability of quality programs at different stops along the way.

It is important to fund and support high quality rehabilitative programming for those serving long prison terms, but at least equally important to make sure such programming is accessible to short-termers and those spending months and even years in county jails. The last thing that anyone should want is for someone we feel needs to go to jail or prison to return to the community worse off than when he left. As prosecutors, we would likely be more comfortable with shorter prison terms if we were more confident in the rehabilitative potential of our prison system to return that person better off than it receives him.

Rejecting the myth of childhood resiliency

Near the end of our time together, one of the incarcerated men grabbed the microphone and shared a profound observation with the entire group. To paraphrase, he said, "People always say that children are resilient, but when you look around the room, you see men still suffering from the trauma of their childhood."

"Don't worry about it. Children are resilient." We hear it — and we say it — all the time, but I'm not sure that we really believe it, or that we should. We — parents, adults, society — tell ourselves that children are resilient because it helps us sleep at night knowing that there are children — in our own homes, our own neighborhoods, our own communities — who right now are suffering and who have suffered unimaginable harm at the hands, or from the mouths, of other people in their families, homes, neighborhoods, and communities. We want so desperately to believe that those adorable little boys and girls who endure abuse, neglect, abandonment, food and shelter insecurity, and who are often witnesses to and victims of serious violent crimes, will somehow miraculously overcome those traumatic beginnings to become happy, healthy, thriving, and law-abiding adults.

The men in those blue CDCR uniforms in our circles were once upon a time those adorable little boys who now, years and even decades later, have finally learned to cope with the damage done to them as children and young adults. Without betraying their confidences by sharing the details of their trauma, suffice to say that each man I met experienced things no child or young adult ever should. And each man turned somewhere, or to something, or to somebody in an attempt to escape their trauma, like drugs, gangs, and older people who preyed on and manipulated them. And each man's story of his life on the outside ended the same way: with an extremely long if not a lifetime prison sentence for committing a violent crime.

A plea for help

At the end of the day on Friday, our discussion turned to violence prevention. How do we prevent the harm these men and these moms suffered — and that the men ultimately inflicted? Without exception, all of the offered solutions started with how we care for our children. There was overwhelming consensus around the importance of protecting young people from trauma and, where we can't, helping them cope and recover in positive, pro-social, and peaceful ways.

The key to building a future for Stockton and San Joaquin County different from our violent past and present lies in investment in our youth. Ten years ago, the seventeen-year-old shooter driving around last night looking for his gang rivals was just a little boy of seven. It was not inevitable that he would end up in that car with that gun. Bad things happened to and around that seven-year-old child as he became a young man.

Let me be clear: the trauma he experienced does not excuse or justify his crimes, but it does explain how he came to believe what he was doing was okay, right, or even necessary. Along the way, he needed someone, anyone, to show him a different path and to equip him with the tools to navigate it. Instead, the probability is depressingly high that he'll catch a case or a bullet before he catches a break.

If you live in Stockton or a community like it, take ownership of its future. As we often hear after yet another mass shooting, thoughts and prayers are not enough. We need you. Our young people need you. They need your time, your talent, and your treasure. Don't wait for some politician or government agency to tell you how to help. Start with your neighbors. It costs nothing to invite the boy and girl next door to join you and your children or grandchildren at the park. Just show up and show them that they matter, that you care, and that they can depend on you. Then wake up and do it again.

If you do work in a government agency like a district attorney's office, think about how you interact with your community as a representative of that community — from victims and their families to defendants and theirs and everyone in between. Remember that they are all people deserving of respect, dignity, and opportunity.

In a time and in a country of unprecedented prosperity, people in cities like Stockton and Chicago are still dying in our streets and rotting in our jails and prisons at alarming rates. It doesn't have to be this way. We have enough — we are enough — to cure what ails us.

Now we just have to do it.

About the Author: Kevin Rooney served as a prosecutor in New York and California for a total of eleven years and last served as a Chief Deputy District Attorney in San Joaquin County before leaving for private practice in 2021. After working as a civil litigator at Downey Brand LLP for several years, he opened his own criminal defense firm in January 2025.

ADVENTURES *of a* NEW LAWYER

BY SUSAN BARTMAN
SJCBA Executive Director





"Believe in yourself. Fight the doubt. Becoming a lawyer is challenging but worth it."

Sofia De Guzman

New attorneys often face a daunting journey—filled with long hours, complex cases, and the weight of responsibility that comes with representing clients. Sofia De Guzman, a promising new lawyer, is embracing this challenge with passion and determination. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, and UC College of Law for her legal education, Sofia is now carving her own path in the legal profession under the mentorship of local attorney and SJCBA membe Clarence Chan. While she gains much needed experience in civil litigation and probate, she also has an interest in youth advocacy and guardianships.

Both of Sofia's parents were medical providers so it was an interesting turn of events that brought her to the legal field. A chance meeting with a family friend, a summer internship in a law firm and an aspiring lawyer was born.

Beyond her work, Sofia leads a vibrant life filled with adventure and cultural exploration. She is an avid traveler, finding joy in experiencing new places, with the Philippines and Hawaii holding special places in her heart. Her love for music festivals adds another layer to her dynamic personality, as she finds inspiration and relaxation in these events. She frequently attends music festivals with her mother, who is a K-Pop social media influencer on TikTok. Her other traveling companion is her corgi, Momo.

As Sofia builds her career, she has a message for new lawyers stepping into the profession: Believe in yourself. Fight the doubt. Becoming a lawyer is challenging but worth it.

With her passion, work ethic, and commitment to growth, Sofia De Guzman is undoubtedly a rising star in the legal field. As she continues her journey, she not only strengthens her own foundation but also inspires others to embrace the challenges of law with courage and self-belief.

Rising Stars in the Courtroom: 2025 San Joaquin County Mock Trial

Over 200 students from 13 high schools gathered in February for the 2025 San Joaquin County Mock Trial Competition—an inspiring display of legal acumen, teamwork, and civic engagement. Co-sponsored by the San Joaquin County Bar Association (SJCBA) and the San Joaquin County Office of Education (SJCOE), in partnership with Teach Democracy (formerly Constitutional Rights Foundation), the event gave students an immersive, firsthand experience of the legal system.

Stockton Early College Academy earned first place in the county-wide competition and a spot at the California State Mock Trial Competition, which took place in Los Angeles in March. **Tracy High School**, **Mountain House High School**, and **Venture Academy Family of Schools** placed second through fourth, respectively.

This year's case, *People v. Gold*, centered on the fictional kidnapping of a political candidate in a small mountain town—challenging students to present persuasive arguments, examine evidence, and perform under pressure. Roles included attorneys, witnesses, clerks, bailiffs, courtroom artists, and journalists, giving participants a full range of trial experience.

Awards and Recognition
Several students were recognized for their outstanding individual performances. The Honorable John F. Cruikshank, Jr. Spirit Award, funded by the San Joaquin County Bar Association, provided $500 each to Carson Bishop from ABLE Charter Schools and Devika Vithalani of Mountain House High School. Additionally, the Pacific Summer High School Institute Award, valued at $3,500 and provided by the University of the Pacific, was awarded to the same students. Numerous other top honors recognized exceptional achievement in categories such as pre-trial advocacy, overall attorney and witness performance, and courtroom journalism, with strong showings from Merlo Institute, Tracy High, Stockton Early College Academy, and others.

The competition would not be possible without the commitment of judges, attorneys, and community members who volunteered their time to support these emerging legal minds.

Interested in volunteering next year or want to get involved? Keep an eye out for the call for volunteers for the 2026 competition—a rewarding opportunity to engage with local students and support civic education in action.

Photos courtesy of San Joaquin County Office of Education.













Jury Duty:
Word Search Challenge

V	C	R	I	M	I	N	A	L	E	J	D	E	O	Y	Q	A	T
D	T	Y	B	G	Q	P	G	O	S	B	E	A	D	K	T	W	M
F	R	K	S	G	W	B	A	L	O	O	U	D	X	T	P	R	Q
C	I	E	Q	Z	T	N	M	P	O	G	M	O	O	E	K	W	Z
L	A	N	T	F	K	E	N	A	P	J	S	R	I	R	C	N	M
P	L	D	I	L	K	X	J	Y	W	E	N	G	N	F	X	K	E
Y	H	C	U	P	U	A	R	I	N	E	A	Z	N	L	L	O	U
O	M	J	Q	D	E	K	U	Q	Y	F	D	L	O	A	C	C	X
Y	H	V	C	Y	Q	D	N	Z	Q	H	H	W	C	J	O	K	K
O	R	T	A	U	U	P	C	B	D	T	G	G	E	G	U	S	A
W	P	T	N	X	I	N	O	A	V	A	E	B	N	U	R	S	F
U	P	S	W	T	T	J	D	I	Q	O	Q	F	T	I	T	E	B
J	K	B	H	C	Y	D	Q	L	V	U	S	C	D	L	F	N	O
U	Y	X	G	I	B	C	I	F	Z	E	E	P	O	T	P	T	U
R	K	N	A	D	W	A	M	M	P	V	N	Q	F	Y	L	I	C
Y	J	J	N	R	X	I	M	I	A	L	C	P	Y	V	K	W	M
H	V	Z	Q	E	V	H	V	I	N	T	S	E	R	R	A	V	O
E	A	B	F	V	I	L	O	Y	I	T	X	W	H	B	Q	V	R

CRIMINAL	ACQUIT	BAIL	GUILTY
CLAIM	APPEAL	EQUITY	VERDICT
JURY	WITNESS	TRIAL	ARREST
OATH	INNOCENT	COURT	ATTORNEY

SJCBA Board Buzz Q and A

To celebrate SJCBA's 85th Anniversary, this issue features Q&A interviews with current Board members and a special profile on Mr. Patrick Piggott's impactful legal career.

MEET BOARD MEMBER JANETTE L. ROSSELL ...



Where did you grow up? If you're not from here, what brought you to Stockton, California?
I was born in Memphis, Tennessee. My Father was a Shop Steward in his Union, and there was a strike. When the strike ended, my Father was laid off by his employer. We were forced to sell our home and move to California, where family lived and my Father had job opportunities. Just a week before we left, some men in suits came to our house to talk to my Father about returning to work. However, it was too late. I arrived in Stockton, California on my 11th birthday. So, my early years were in Memphis, Tennessee. I have lived in Stockton, California ever since.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in your field?
Growing up I watched Perry Mason and I thought his secretary, Della Street, was so composed, clever and competent. I wanted to be like her. Then one day, after I was a bit older, I began to consider that I could be like Perry Mason. I loved the unraveling of the story, the collecting of facts and information that led to truth and justice. I just had to work out a few obstacles before I could go to law school. My goal has always been to be of service to my clients. I find satisfaction in helping them resolve their problem and find peace in moving forward.

What has been your biggest professional achievement?
Those who do Misdemeanor Appeal work will understand this more than most. It is a rare misdemeanor case that will succeed on appeal. It's not always an easy thing to find something to hang an argument on. The decisions from our three-judge panel are generally not going to go in our favor. However, I once was the beneficiary of a lengthy dissent by Judge Morgan. He argued in favor of my client's appeal. Receiving that dissenting opinion was like a gold star!

Are you a morning person or a night owl?
Well, everyone that really knows me is aware that owls are my spirit animal. I am not really a morning person. The fact that I show up in court at an early hour is just a testament to my dedication to my chosen profession. It helps that I spend the evening before preparing to work in the morning.

If you could compete in any event in the Olympics and had the skill to do so, what event would it be?

I have actually thought about this several times and I settled on Recurve Archery. I like the calm focus and technical precision of the sport.

MEET BOARD MEMBER MELISSA C. GIANNECCHINI...



Where do you work?
I am a partner with Leonardini, Despotes, Giannecchini & Nims, LLP. I practice primarily in estate planning, probate, trust administration, business, and agriculture.

What do you love the most about your job?
It is a tie between two things – I love being able to help people and who I work with.

Do you have any hobbies or creative outlets?
I am not sure if you'd call it a hobby, but I spend a lot of time watching my daughter play fastpitch softball and my son play baseball.

Fun fact that people probably don't know about you.
I love airplanes.

Describe what a perfect day outside of work would look like.
A perfect day would be waking up at the beach and enjoying a cup of coffee while watching the ocean and listening to the waves, and spending the rest of the day with my husband, our two children (11 and 13), and our two red labrador retrievers doing anything, as long as we are together.





Getting Acquainted with Your Board of Governors: *MR. PATRICK PIGGOTT*

Mr. Patrick Piggott has been a part of California's legal landscape for decades. Now retired and serving on the Board of Governors, he brings a deep wealth of personal experience shaped by public service, international work, and long legal battles that defined his career.

Career Change in Washington, D.C.
Before entering law, Mr. Piggott served as a naval officer. One of his assignments was as liaison officer to senior foreign naval officers attending the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. While at Hastings College of Law in San Francisco, he helped found the Dickinson Society of International Law. In 1969, he was offered a position as Assistant General Counsel in the Navy Department's Office of General Counsel in Washington, D.C., and was on a path toward a government career in international water issues.

During that time, Mr. Piggott and his wife — a Swedish citizen — were involved with the Swedish Embassy. One of his supervisors, Paul Neiderman, had been an assistant prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Trials. One Monday morning, Mr. Neiderman showed him a letter from the White House to the Military Sealift Command, which said simply: "Fire the Jew." It stemmed from accusations that Mr. Neiderman had criticized President Nixon at an embassy party. Around the same time, Leon Panetta had resigned as Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity and published an open letter denouncing the Nixon Administration's actions. Mr. Neiderman agreed with Panetta's position — as did Mr. Piggott, who, like them, had been a young Republican from California.

"That day, Paul retired, and within a year, I moved back to California and gave up my government career for good."

Mr. Neiderman retired that day, and Mr. Piggott soon left Washington as well, returning to Monterey and becoming a Deputy District Attorney. He also changed his party affiliation to Democrat and permanently set aside his government career ambitions.

Loss, Relocation, and a New Path
In 1973, Mr. Piggott and his wife had the first set of triplets born on the Monterey Peninsula. One of the boys did not survive. Seeking a complete change in their lives, he accepted a job as Assistant Attorney General of American Samoa — despite a significant pay cut.

The islands were under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of the Interior, and Mr. Piggott noted, "America has never been good at colonial rule." He and his family spent two years on the island of Tutuila, the only place where the American flag flies in the Southern Hemisphere.

"I vowed to never take another government attorney job or join a firm where I was under a boss seeking money over humanity."

After returning to Monterey in 1975, he decided to practice law independently. Though he occasionally worked in partnerships, he avoided government positions and firms that prioritized money over principle. He co-founded the firm of Piggott, Ford, and Dalton, where Greg Davenport served as law clerk and later as their first full-time employee.

A Case That Changed Everything
In the early 1980s, Mr. Piggott was assigned to represent Joe Gonzales — known as "Death Row Joe" — in a murder case in Salinas, California. Gonzales, head of the Nuestra Familia prison gang, was ultimately convicted and returned to Stockton, where a broader case was underway involving numerous murders and potential death penalty charges for several gang leaders.

From his work on the Salinas case, Mr. Piggott had already seen the complaint and knew that the death penalty did not apply to the time period of the alleged murders. When Gonzales appeared in court, he demanded to be represented by Mr. Piggott. The court's original appointee asked to be relieved, and the court called Mr. Piggott to step in.

He agreed to make a special appearance to file a motion to dismiss the death penalty charges, believing that would lead to a plea. However, the judge told him, "No whipper snapper from the coast was going to tell him what to do." He later learned the courtroom's nickname was "the Greek Theater."

Despite the initial resistance, the Court of Appeal ultimately agreed with Mr. Piggott's position and overturned the death penalty allegations. Gonzales offered to plead to seven of the eight murder charges, denying involvement in the eighth. The District Attorney, however, refused to accept the plea, believing that removing a conspirator would weaken the case. The judge also refused a partial plea.

"I felt I couldn't abandon Joe — or any client — under those circumstances."

The case became the longest criminal trial in San Joaquin history, consuming the next two and a half years of Mr. Piggott's career. He could no longer maintain his practice in Monterey. The preliminary hearing lasted months before Judge Kim, and the trial itself stretched across a full year. He often chartered a small plane and was picked up by Larry Drivon's law clerk, Stew Tabak. He stayed with Mr. Drivon three nights a week.

Initially, his co-counsel were Ken Ferguson, Pete Pumphrey, and Larry Drivon. Before the preliminary hearing began, Mr. Ferguson became a judge and was replaced by Patricia Ferguson — his wife and a Deputy District Attorney at the time. The day the case finally went to the jury, Judge Saiers dismissed the remaining count, allowing Gonzales to plead to the others. Mr. Piggott soon relocated his practice to Stockton, where the judges said they would assign him as many serious cases as he could handle.

A Continued Voice in the Legal Community
Now retired, Mr. Piggott serves on the Board of Governors, offering decades of experience and perspective shaped by public service, personal conviction, and tireless advocacy.

As we mark 85 years of service to the legal community, we recognize individuals like Mr. Piggott — whose story is a testament to the values and resilience that define our profession.



Changes to Small Estate Threshold Increased

BY JANETTE L. ROSSELL
SJCBA Board Member and Attorney at Law



For decades, California's "Small Estate" thresholds slowly inched up while real property values have soared. Before April 1, 2022, estates valued over $166,250 required full probate administration. That threshold was increased to $184,500 for deaths occurring on or after April 1, 2022 and the limit adjusted by small increments on April 1st of each subsequent year. This disparity in changing values often led to extensive court proceedings for even the most modest of homes, often forcing families to sell the family home.

On September 21, 2024, Assembly Bill 2016 was signed by the Governor and chaptered by the Secretary of State, amending six sections of the Probate Code (Cal. Prob. Code § 13100-13101, 13150-13152, 13154) and repeal one section (Prob. Code § 13158). The significance of these amendments is how it impacts the management of a decedent's real property by successors of decedents.

Specifically, these changes mean that estates which contain real property valued at less than $750,000, will be able to take advantage of the expedited "Small Estate" process provided for in the Probate Code. The premise of this expansion in the threshold is that it will bring the Small Estate thresholds significantly closer to California's median home prices and will tie threshold adjustments to inflation.

How has this bill changed the law?

These changes will only apply to estates in which: a decedent passed on or after April 1, 2025; the real property was the decedent's primary residence in California; and, the real property had a gross value not exceeding $750,000. The "primary residence" requirement is not defeated simply because the decedent may have been in a nursing home. The bill also will require a successor who files the petition to give notice of the petition to each heir and devisee. This will allow other interested parties to object and make their own claims.

How will competing interests be addressed?

Successors cannot simply dispose of the real property on their own. Because others are now being notified, they are much more likely to assert a claim or ownership rights to the property. The successor and other heirs are likely to have conflicting goals, with one party wanting to dispose of the property and another party wanting to assert ownership rights. These conflicting goals are likely to cause more partition actions to allow successors and heirs to get an equitable resolution.

Partition actions can begin in probate court during estate administration or can be brought separately. If there is disagreement about distribution of real property, partition may be required. (In re Estate of Canfield (1951) 107 Cal.App.2d 682, 686-87.) This will likely be the case with the property that would previously have just been disposed of by the successor.

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Designed and built for business, California Bank of Commerce, N.A. (CBC) is a California commercial bank positioned to serve the diverse and complex needs of the Legal Industry. Our unique value proposition delivers a premier experience through

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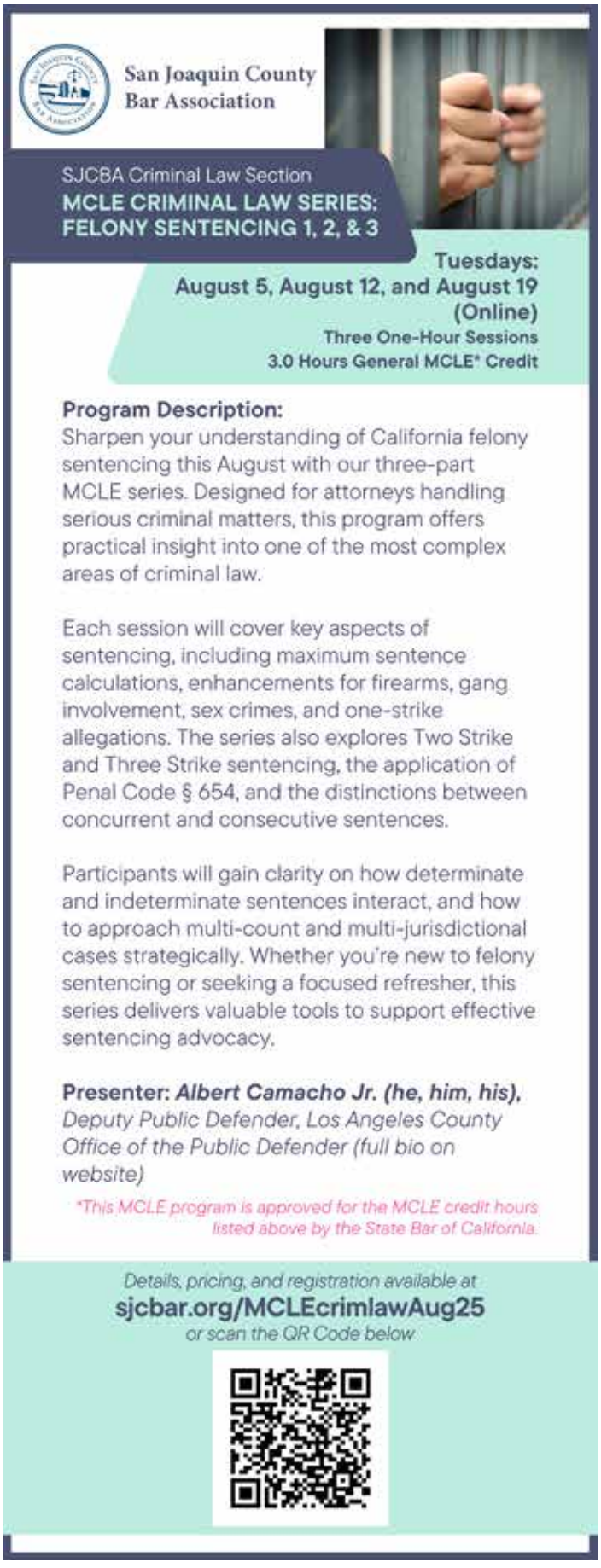

GOVERNOR APPOINTS ADAM RAMIREZ TO SUPERIOR COURT BENCH



On June 18, 2025, Governor Gavin Newsom appointed Adam Ramirez to the San Joaquin County Superior Court. He will fill the vacancy created by the retirement of Judge Jose L. Alva in September 2023.

Ramirez brings nearly 20 years of legal experience to the bench. He served as an Associate and later as a Shareholder at Hakeem, Ellis, Marengo & Ramirez, and has taught as an Adjunct Professor at Humphreys University Drivon School of Law since 2019. Earlier in his career, he worked at the Family Law Service Center and the Law Office of Christopher K. Eley. He earned his Juris Doctor from Humphreys University Drivon School of Law.

Presiding Judge Gus C. Barrera noted that Ramirez's background in family and civil law will be a valuable asset to the court, especially as it prepares for several upcoming retirements.

Ramirez expressed gratitude for the appointment, stating, "I am deeply humbled to serve the people of San Joaquin County alongside some of the best judicial officers in the state."

A swearing-in ceremony will be held at a later date.

Adapted from press releases by the Superior Court of California, County of San Joaquin, and the Office of Governor Gavin Newsom.



SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITY

CLARENCE CHAN SCHOLARSHIP

Presented by the San Joaquin County Bar Foundation and the Honorable Frank Kim Asian/Pacific Islanders Section

AWARDS

1ST PLACE: $1,500
2nd Place: $1,000
3rd Place: $500

Eligibility

- Open to high school, college, or law students interested in a legal career
- Preference given to students with a connection to San Joaquin County, such as:
  - *Currently living, working, or attending school in the county*
  - *Previously lived, worked, or studied in the county*
  - *Planning to return to the area in the future to give back to the community*

Essay Prompt

Please write a one–page, double–spaced essay addressing the following:
Why are you pursuing a career in the legal field, and how do you plan to give back to the community of San Joaquin County—as a person of API descent or in support of the API community?

How to Apply

Submit your essay via email to:

- gloria.han@sjcda.org

Your submission must include:

- Full name
- Phone number
- School name

Deadline

September 21, 2025, by 5:00 PM



DEADLINE
AUGUST
- 1 -
2025

$1,500 SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITY

Completed your first year of law school? Planning to practice in San Joaquin County? The Women Lawyers Section of the San Joaquin County Bar Association is now accepting applications for its $1,500 scholarship, awarded to a woman-identifying law student dedicated to legal education and community impact. Applications are due by August 1, 2025.

Scan the QR code or visit SJCBAR.org/WLSscholarship2025 for eligibility details and to download the application.

APPLY TODAY!

SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION
WOMEN LAWYERS SECTION

SJCBA MEMBER APPRECIATION NIGHT

Thursday, August 21, 2025

Join us for the 4th Annual SJCBA Member Appreciation Night on Thursday, August 21, 2025! We'll save you a spot at Banner Island Ballpark's Back Porch to cheer on the Stockton Ports as they take on the Lake Elsinore Storm.

DINNER 6:30 PM ↓ **GAME 7:05 PM**

Banner Island Ballpark
404 W Fremont St., Stockton, CA

Tickets: $12 each
(includes game + bbq buffet dinner*)

Member Specials:
4 tickets for $40 ($8 savings)
5 tickets for $50 ($10 savings)

Tickets available at SJCBAR.ORG/2025PORTS or scan the QR code.

Parking not included**

SPONSORED BY:
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*Menu: All-Beef Hot Dogs, Marinated Shredded Chicken, Roasted Corn Kernels, Baked Beans, Classic Potato Salad, Green Beans with Bacon, Potato Chips & Grandma's Cookies, plus soda & water. Other beverages available for purchase.
**On-site parking will be available in the North and West Parking lots. Parking is $10 in the West Lot and $15 in the North Lot for the 2025 season.

- Banner Island is a cashless ballpark.
- Venue FAQs: https://www.milb.com/stockton/ballpark/knowbeforeyougo

209.948.0125 info@sjcbar.org sjcbar.org sjcbar.org sjc_bar sjcbar SJCBar

San Joaquin County Bar Association
343 East Main Street, Suite 408
Stockton, California 95202

CHEERS TO 85 YEARS!

Join us as we celebrate 85 years of community, service, and connection. Enjoy live music, appetizers, and a special tribute to retiring judges — plus a warm welcome to new members of the bench.

Wednesday, September 17, 2025 • 5:00 PM
University Plaza Waterfront Hotel – Courtyard
DETAILS TO FOLLOW — WE LOOK FORWARD TO CELEBRATING WITH YOU!