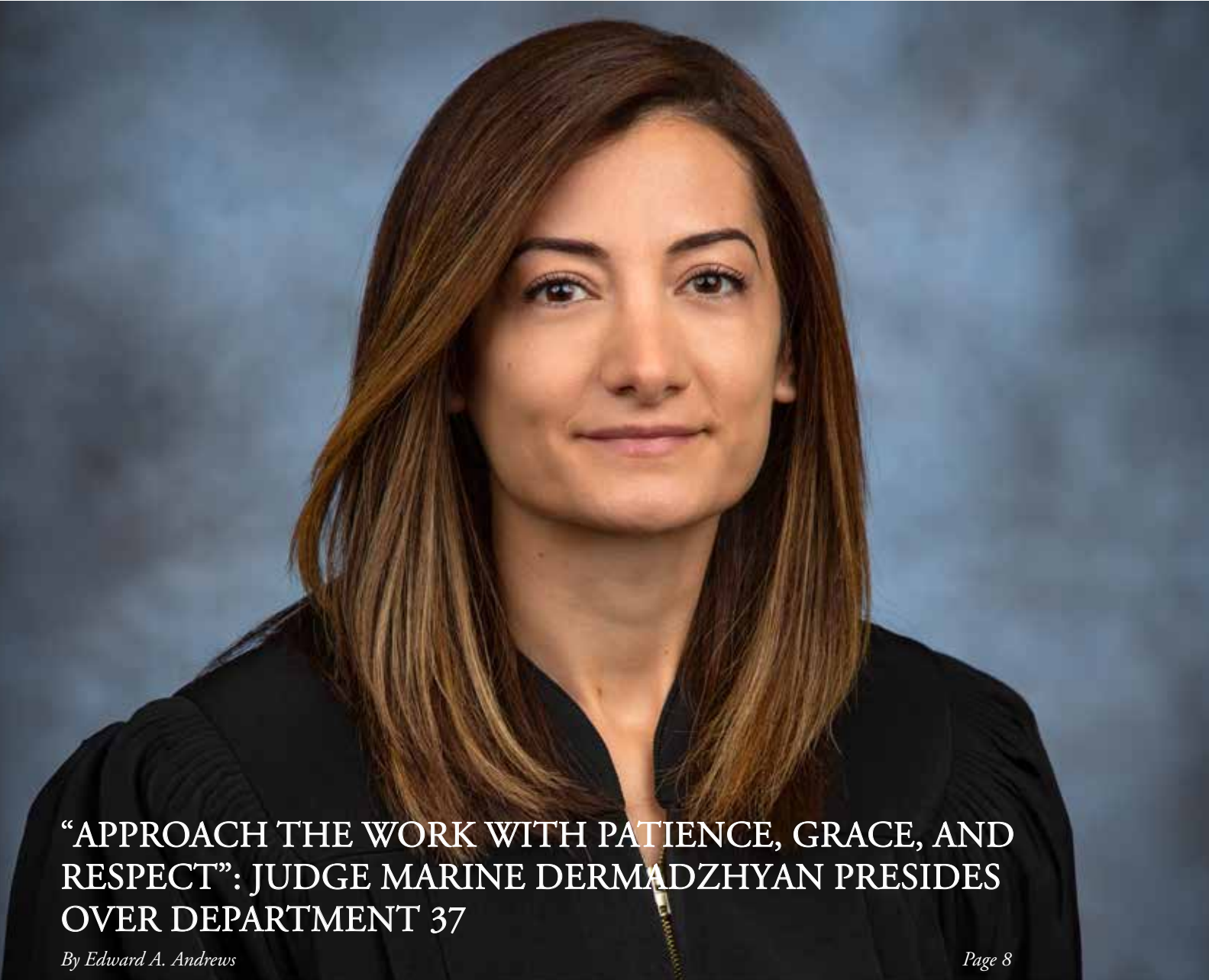




CITATIONS

SEPTEMBER - TWO THOUSAND TWENTY FIVE



“APPROACH THE WORK WITH PATIENCE, GRACE, AND RESPECT”: JUDGE MARINE DERMADZHYAN PRESIDES OVER DEPARTMENT 37

By Edward A. Andrews

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Guillermo "Bert" Partida

The Court Implements Goals of its Strategic Plan

Ventura County bar leadership, including the VCBA, met recently with Ventura Superior Court Presiding Judge **Matthew Guasco** and newly appointed Court Executive Officer **Kate Bieker** at the judges' law library. Guasco and Bieker detailed great strides in technology, processes, and other plans to improve access to the Court. For instance, the Court has expanded the filing clerk service hours to include the lunch hour, where before they were previously closed. The Court has also implemented electronic court filing for Civil, Probate, and Family Law. This is a great improvement over the previous filing process where papers needed to be filed by 4:00 p.m. Furthermore, the Court's website will be rebuilt in early 2026, with the site planned to be similar in appearance to San Luis Obispo and Alameda Counties to provide a streamlined interface.

Improvements are also being made to the records unit, and a new process is in the works to make available copies of court documents online. Once the cybersecurity risks are minimized, this new process should be a vast improvement over the current process of sending emails. The goal with e-filing is to be completely paperless by the year 2027.

The Court is still seeking volunteers for the mandatory settlement conference program to serve as Judge Pro Tem. The Court asks that parties consider the availability of private mediation to conserve this resource. Further, the Court is developing a program that targets cases involving less than \$50,000.00 at issue for a free, three-hour mediation program. The Court will seek trained and experienced mediators to volunteer for this program. The Court is also seeking volunteers to serve on Court appointed panel as limited scope attorneys to assist service members on default collection matters. The Court also has positions open for legal research attorney, judicial assistant, and court processing assistant.

In order to align with its goals, the Court will be winding down the collections unit and a third-party vendor will now be handling collections, which is also budgetary savings for the Court.

The Court has reiterated its commitment to providing all members of the public, regardless of citizenship or immigration status, equal access to its facilities, services and programs. Notably, the policy references Civil Code, section 43.54, subdivision (a), which provides that no person shall be subject to a civil arrest while attending a court proceeding or having legal business at the courthouse. The full policy may found at the Court's website at (https://www.ventura.courts.ca.gov/pdf_files/VSC_Equal-Access-to-Justice_Policy_2025-04-24.pdf).

Jury services will also be changing to avoid the 8:00 a.m. line to enter the courthouse, which we have all seen or stood in at one time. The Court plans to implement postcard summons that will allow for kiosk check-in through the Court and likely an app that will eliminate the juror line. Yay!

The Court has reiterated its commitment to the docent Court tour program through

the Ventura County Bar Association. The application may be found on the VCBA website at (<https://www.vcba.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/0-CTP-Tour-App.pdf>).

Lastly, the Court is planning on re-instituting the in-person swearing-in of new attorneys in the ceremonial Courtroom on December 4, 2025.

Please have a safe end of summer and stay cool!

Guillermo "Bert" Partida practices law at Slaughter, Reagan & Cole, LLP in the areas of Personal Injury Defense, Premises Liability, and Habitability Defense. He can be reached at (805) 658-7800, or by email at partida@srllplaw.com.





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NEWS FROM THE COURT



Ventura Superior Court – Reminder to Request Court Interpreter

To meet the increased demand, and given the limited resources available, the Ventura County Superior Court reminds court users that, if they need an interpreter for civil (including Small Claims and Unlawful Detainer), family law, probate and juvenile dependency cases, they must submit a written request for an interpreter in accordance with Local Rule 20.03. VN-250 Request for Interpreter [English] [Español] must be submitted to the clerk's office not later than two (2) court days before each hearing.

If there are questions, please contact the Interpreter Office at (805) 289-8799 or at vcscinterpreting@ventura.courts.ca.gov.

New Jury Summons Process

The Ventura County Superior Court has announced a change to the jury summons process. Beginning Monday, 8/25/25, the Court has replaced its traditional long-form paper jury summons with a streamlined blue postcard. The new format is designed to reduce paper use and modernize jury services.

The postcard will provide key instructions and direct prospective jurors to complete the required jury questionnaire online. Paper questionnaires will no longer be mailed.

The Court expressed appreciation for the public's cooperation and emphasized the importance of jury service as a vital civic duty. Additional information is available at <https://www.ventura.courts.ca.gov/JuryService/>.

Equal Access to Justice: Ventura Superior Court Policy

On 4/24/25, the Ventura County Superior Court formally adopted its Court Facility

Equal Access Policy, underscoring the judiciary's commitment to ensuring that every member of the public, regardless of citizenship or immigration status, has full and equal access to court facilities, services, and programs. Presiding Judge **Matthew P. Guasco** and Court Executive Officer **Kate Bieker** signed the directive.

The policy reflects statutory protections already embedded in California law. Under Government Code section 7284 (the California Values Act) and Civil Code section 43.54, no individual may be subject to civil arrest while attending court or conducting legal business. These provisions align with broader statewide guidance designed to insulate the justice system from immigration enforcement activities that could chill participation.

The Ventura Superior Court policy gives practical effect to these principles by establishing clear rules for court employees when immigration agents attempt enforcement actions in or around court facilities. Employees are instructed not to permit access to nonpublic areas, disclose personal information, or provide immigration-related details about court users unless specifically ordered by the Presiding Judge or Court Executive Officer. Any encounters with enforcement officers must be immediately reported to supervisors and judicial officers, with written documentation prepared.

The policy also prohibits inquiries into immigration status, prevents sharing of nonpublic personal information, and bars staff from notifying immigration authorities about nonpublic custody release dates or juvenile case records, absent judicial authorization. Immigration enforcement officers are required to obtain information through the same public channels available to any other member of the public, with no priority or special access to be granted.

By adopting this policy, the Ventura Superior Court seeks to preserve the courthouse as a safe and neutral forum where litigants, witnesses, victims, and the public can seek justice without fear of immigration consequences.

HAVE YOU HEARD?



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Hollister & Brace, a Santa Barbara law firm founded in 1965, is pleased to announce that **James H. Smith**, a well-established Santa Barbara lawyer, has joined the firm in an of-counsel capacity with a busy practice representing homeowners associations, landlords, contractors and parties to real estate transactions.

Smith can be contacted by email at JSmith@hbsb.com, or by phone at (805) 963-6711, ext. 227.

BLACK LAWYERS OF VENTURA COUNTY SUMMER SPLASH



BLVC section hosted a social gathering on August 23, 2025 in Camarillo for its members and their families for some fun in the sun. On behalf of BLVC president **Damon Jenkins** and its board, they are grateful for those who attended and they look forward to next years summer event. If you are interested in learning more about the section, please contact sandra@vcha.org.

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STATE BAR MANDATES ANNUAL PRO BONO REPORTING IN EFFORT TO CLOSE JUSTICE GAP

By Paul Bujold

Beginning in 2026, the State Bar of California will require active attorneys to report pro bono and reduced-fee legal service hours each year. The State Bar's purpose is to better understand attorneys' pro bono and reduced fee services, and to identify opportunities to reduce the access to justice gap. Some key points are listed below and FAQs can be found at <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/Portals/0/documents/accessJustice/Mandatory-Pro-Bono-Hours-Reporting-FAQ.pdf>.

Mandatory starting 2026:

Attorneys will be required to report their pro bono and reduced fee hours when renewing their licenses.

Reporting method:

Attorneys will report through the State Bar's website as part of their annual license renewal.

Reduced fee services:

Reporting also includes hours of reduced fee legal services provided to low-income individuals and non-profits.

No penalty for not reporting:

While reporting is required, there is no penalty for failing to complete pro bono hours or for not reporting them.

In 2019, the State Bar published a comprehensive study of California's justice gap, and last year the State Bar issued an update. An executive summary of the 2024 update can be found here <https://publications.calbar.ca.gov/justice-gap-study/executive-summary>. Requiring attorneys to report their hours demonstrates the California State Bar's ongoing interest in addressing the access to justice gap. Highlights from the update include:

- There is a persistent shortage of attorneys. Most counties are attorney deserts or at risk of becoming one.
- Californians do not receive any or enough legal help for 85% of their civil problems.

- Less than half of California attorneys provided any pro bono services in 2022.

Ventura County Legal Aid (VCLA) has many opportunities to provide pro bono services. Pro bono services reduce the justice gap, benefit our local community and raise the public's perception of our profession. VCLA is very interested in learning more about the barriers that keep attorneys from volunteering and what it can do to eliminate or reduce them. Contact VCLA at support@vclegalaid.org if you are interested.



Paul Bujold is the Executive Director of Ventura County Legal Aid.



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“APPROACH THE WORK WITH PATIENCE, GRACE, AND RESPECT”: JUDGE MARINE DERMADZHYAN PRESIDES OVER DEPARTMENT 37

By Edward A. Andrews



“It’s been wild,” **Judge Marine Dermadzhyan** says with a smile, describing her first year presiding over Department 37 of the Ventura County Superior Court. As the calendar courtroom that handles criminal domestic violence arraignments and settings, as well as collaborative justice court programs such as Veterans Court, “37” has many moving parts. For Dermadzhyan, it is an absorbing assignment that brings new issues daily and draws upon both her professional experience as an attorney and her personal experience thriving in new challenges. Dermadzhyan was appointed to the Ventura Superior Court in July 2023 by Governor Gavin Newsom.

Dermadzhyan brings with her years of experience in criminal law, particularly in domestic violence prosecutions. In running Department 37, Dermadzhyan works with the goal of ruling on – and resolving, when able – cases as efficiently as possible, with fairness, making sure every voice is heard. Dermadzhyan has worked to arrange the schedule of the courtroom towards this result. The courtroom day is currently divided, with mornings dedicated to arraignments, sentencings, violations of probation, bail reviews, and pre-trial risk assessments. Misdemeanor cases are typically handled in the morning with conferences at bench, although Dermadzhyan is open to attorneys with complex dispositions or issues conferencing

such misdemeanors alongside felonies for the afternoon calendar. Felony conferences begin at 1:30 p.m., often in chambers, with the Court taking the bench to begin calling cases at approximately 2:00 or 2:15 p.m. Tuesdays, which typically reflect in-custody matters from the weekend, have a heavier caseload. Expungement hearings take place on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. Because of the pace of a calendar court, Dermadzhyan prefers oral argument to briefed submissions, but is always open to an attorney asking her to make a record on an issue with which they disagree, or an attorney asking for an explanation of her reasoning.

Veterans Court is a particular point of pride. “The successful completion of Veterans Court brings me so much joy,” she shares. “If a veteran can take advantage of the resources and progress, it is very rewarding, especially at the conclusion of a case with successful treatment and help.” Veterans Court is held Thursdays at 1:35 p.m. Discussions regarding treatment and progress typically happen with involved parties on Wednesdays in chambers and contested issues can be further conferenced on Thursdays at 1:30 p.m. Dermadzhyan remarks positively about the collaborative approach parties bring in Veterans Court to focus on those issues that need work. In addition to Veterans Court, Dermadzhyan presides over the implementation of Drug Court proceedings following the passage of Proposition 36.

For all these varied matters, Dermadzhyan emphasizes that “it’s about maintaining an open mind, understanding the most important aspect of each case, and striving for just outcomes.” Attorneys who appear before her praise her demeanor and approach. Deputy Public Defender **Erik Aucoin** appears before Dermadzhyan daily as part of his calendar assignment said: “What I most appreciate about her is that she takes the time to analyze each case before her, prior to taking the bench.” During approaches to conference issues such as disposition or release, Dermadzhyan “is ready to engage in a thoughtful conversation about the issues

at hand, complete with a highlighted and annotated probation or pretrial release report.” And he notes that Dermadzhyan, “in addition to taking the time to analyze the issues prior to conferencing,” is open to arguments and additional information prior to making a final decision. “Courtroom 37 is easily the most collaborative and efficient courtroom I’ve appeared in, where all of the parties are given the opportunity to make their points with the certainty that the judge is respectfully and thoughtfully considering said points.” Deputy District Attorney **Melissa Toporoff**, who serves as the People’s calendar deputy in Department 37, further explained, “Her honor has created an environment that is respectful, efficient, and grounded in fairness. She is consistently thoughtful and well-informed in her decisions. She is a role model for women in the legal profession – bringing grace, intellect, and strength to the bench. Practicing before her is both a privilege and reminder of the impact judges have on the administration of justice.”

Department 37 is not an island; with a core calendar of domestic violence cases, Dermadzhyan must also consider how those cases interact with other departments in the Courthouse. While she knew of the crossover, Dermadzhyan noted that she was still surprised by the prevalence of mental health issues in domestic violence cases. She sees families fractured because of mental health challenges intersecting with domestic violence and child abuse. This requires careful consideration because “families often just want treatment after there has been a breaking point.” Such cases may continue to Mental Health Court in Department 13, where the Court can fully apprise itself of such issues. Even if those cases return to Department 37, mental health assessments and the like can remain helpful in evaluating a case. She does note a few factors that tend to weigh towards treatment rather than custodial sanctions, including whether a party can abide by a protective or restraining order and the support of family in seeking treatment.

Although she now employs her expertise in many areas of law, Dermadzhyan’s story

began far from halls of justice. She was born in Armenia under the Soviet Union and moved to the United States at age four with her family. With her brother and sister, she spent her early years in an apartment in Hollywood before her family was able to buy a house in North Hollywood. She's a proud product of public education, having taught herself English watching shows like *The Price Is Right* and *The People's Court*. Her parents worked tirelessly. "My mother is my role model. I vividly remember her working long shifts at a textile factory, handling dinner, then beginning her English homework when I went to bed. She would read books in English and then she would give them to me to read. She showed me the importance of hard work and dedication." To Dermadzhyan, that example was important because, with her parents both busy, she held herself to the responsibility of making sure projects at school were done and on time. When it came to college, she only applied to UCLA, where she was accepted.

She subsequently earned her law degree at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and began work in Tulare County as a deputy district attorney in Visalia and Porterville, an experience that introduced her to a very different part of California and a broader perspective on life and law. When asked about advice for aspiring attorneys, Dermadzhyan is straightforward: "Going into law is not for the faint of heart. It requires a lot of patience, and a lot of sacrifice. And it tests one's ability to practice kindness." As an attorney, "the most important thing is to maintain one's integrity. When I was a lawyer, things were not personal, and I always respected and showed respect to the other side." The same humility extends to her work on the Court, and she is quick to note that she learned something from every bench officer before whom she appeared as a lawyer. Now, as a judge, she wishes to ensure that no one in her courtroom is ignored or disrespected.

Outside the courtroom, Dermadzhyan enjoys spending time with her family. She notes that her experience as an attorney and judge has shown her, as a mother, "the impact of how you engage with children and how you raise and how you support them." Whether continuing to preside over Department 37 or serving in future assignments, Dermadzhyan looks forward to continuing to serve the community as a jurist in the Ventura County Superior Court.



Edward A. "Ted" Andrews is a Senior Deputy District Attorney with the Ventura County District Attorney's Office. He is currently assigned to the Special Prosecutions Unit.



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MEMBER SPOTLIGHTS

By Kathleen Maheu



Matthew A. Zavala has been a member of the California Bar since 2009 and joined the Ventura County Bar Association in 2018. He is the founder of Zavala

Law, PC, where he focuses his practice on plaintiff personal injury matters. Before establishing his own practice, he gained experience in insurance defense and medical malpractice defense, giving him perspective from both sides of the courtroom.

A graduate of Thomas Jefferson School of Law, with an undergraduate degree from San Diego State University, Zavala has also dedicated time to teaching as a former adjunct professor at the Colleges of Law in Ventura. He currently serves on the VCBA LRIS Governing Committee and is active

with the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles.

Zavala grew up in Anaheim but now calls Ventura home. He is happily married and the proud father of three young children, ages five, three, and nine months. A former fish parent to Bluey, he is now preparing for life as a soon-to-be chicken owner. What he prizes most is his free time with his family.

Law was a natural path for Zavala, who comes from a law enforcement family. Though he once considered joining the force himself, a high school government class steered him toward advocacy and the courtroom. His professional philosophy is grounded in the principle that “for every wrong there is a remedy,” a maxim from California Civil Code section 3523. If he weren’t practicing law, he imagines he might have pursued a career in law enforcement or spent more time surfing.

Away from work, Zavala finds balance in surfing, exercise, and meditation. He enjoys Ventura County’s Mondo’s beach, and Art’s Corner Café tops his list of local restaurants. A lover of pizza, football, and vintage cars, especially a 1971 Ford Bronco, he values time spent off-grid, surrounded by trees.

His favorite books range from *To Kill a Mockingbird* to Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, and Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He is also a devoted fan of *The Sopranos*. For inspiration, he looks to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., whose view of the law as both principled and adaptive resonates deeply, and to Nelson Mandela’s reminder: “May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.”



Melissa Cohen has been part of the Ventura County Bar Association since the late 1990s and has been practicing law since 1987. A graduate of U.C. Davis and the University of

Southern California Gould School of Law, she is a partner at Milhaupt & Cohen, where she focuses on family law. Earlier in her career, she also practiced real estate law. She currently serves on the Ventura County Family Law Bar Association board and took on the role of president in 2025.

Cohen’s ties to the legal profession run deep. Both of her parents were lawyers in Ventura County. Her father, **Phil Cohen**, began his career with the District Attorney’s Office in the mid-1960s and later joined County Counsel, while her mother entered law school in the 1970s and went on to practice family law and estate planning. Together, they founded Cohen and Cohen in Camarillo. Her sister, **Kendall Van Conas**, continues the family legacy as a certified specialist in estate planning and probate, and as managing partner at A to

Z in Oxnard. Despite initially resisting law in favor of her history degree, Cohen was nudged toward law school by a professor’s encouragement, and her parents’ urging sealed the path.

If she weren’t practicing law, Cohen says she might have pursued her dream of becoming an oratorio singer – she’s a soprano with a passion for choral music. Singing and reading remain her favorite forms of relaxation, and she’s just as happy on a hiking trail as she is immersed in a book of history or historical fiction.

Her personal life is equally full. Cohen is the proud mother of twin sons, Colin and Evan, both 27, who chose careers outside of law. At home, she shares her space with Heidi, a semi-feral tortoiseshell cat. She prizes family above all else and keeps traditions alive by baking challah bread monthly in big batches.

Cohen has an adventurous palate. Anything deep fried, hot and spicy, or loaded with sugar tops her list of favorite foods. Her go-to local restaurants include Latitude 34, Money Pancho, Rumfish y Vino, and Café Ficelle. Her favorite Ventura County spots vary with her mood, from strolling

down Main Street, to hiking near Satwiwa, to relaxing at Sycamore Canyon Beach, or sharing drinks in the backyard with family.

Travel is also a big part of her life. She finds beauty in the Midwest during fall, treasures memories of her honeymoon in British Columbia, admires the landscapes of northern New Mexico, and cherishes her family connections in northern England, especially in Chester, York, and the Dales.

Cohen also has a few quirks and surprises: she can read words backwards at lightning speed, she avoids name tags whenever possible, and her favorite legal statute is Code of Civil Procedure section 473. “Isn’t it everyone’s?” she jokes. As for her guiding principle, she lives by the reminder: “Just because you *can* do a thing doesn’t mean you *should*.”



Kathleen “Kat” Maheu is an associate attorney practicing family law with Pachowicz | Goldenring, a PLC, and Managing Editor of CITATIONS. She can be reached at kat@pglaw.law.

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VENTURA COUNTY LEGAL AID (VCLA) RECEIVES PRO BONO AWARD

By Paul Bujold

With the help of volunteer attorneys, Ventura County Legal Aid (VCLA) has received a Pro Bono award.

In January, VCLA will receive new pro bono funding from the Legal Services Trust Fund, the grant-making arm of the California State Bar. The award is in addition to VCLA's IOLTA/Equal Access Fund grant that was renewed for 2026. Pro bono awards are given to organizations in which volunteer attorneys provide a significant portion of services. VCLA was not previously eligible, but thanks to rule changes and continued growth in the

number of pro bono attorneys, VCLA was selected. Only 25% of IOLTA/EAF grantees will receive pro bono funding next year.

The funding is a direct result of the almost 50 attorneys who volunteer at the walk-in clinic, assist referrals in their offices, or volunteer at the Family Justice Center. VCLA would like to thank VCBA for promoting VCLA and Bar President Guillermo "Bert" Partida for encouraging attorneys to donate their services. There are too many attorneys to thank individually, but VCLA is obliged to acknowledge

Jay Sherman who volunteered hundreds of hours last year at the Family Justice Center.

The pro bono award is not a bonus or supplement; due to circumstances and complexities in the distribution formula, it's larger than VCLA's regular IOLTA/EAF grant! VCLA hopes to use these funds to hire another attorney next year. The generosity and hard work of our volunteer attorneys has always helped the individuals they serve, now that good work will be multiplied throughout our community.

THANK YOU VCLA VOLUNTEER ATTORNEYS

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