



CITATIONS

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Kristine Tijam



On January 8, 2026, the Ventura County Bar Association and Ventura County Trial Lawyers Association hosted a celebration for the retirement of **Presiding Justice Arthur Gilbert**. Justice Gilbert's retirement capstones an incredible 50-year career in our judiciary, most recently serving as the Presiding Justice of the California Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, Division 6. The evening was filled with heartfelt speeches about Justice Gilbert's notable impact on our judicial system, the friendships he made over the years, and stories of just how many lives he touched during his career.

I was especially honored to be part of Justice Gilbert's retirement celebration, considering that he administered my attorney oath when I was sworn into the California State Bar in 2018. He welcomed me into this profession, so it meant a lot to be part of his sendoff as he embarks on his next chapter. We all wish Justice Gilbert a wonderful retirement, and he will be truly missed.

February marks the start of Ventura County's middle and high school mock trial competitions. 800+ students in our county participate in this program annually. This year, 15 middle school teams and 34 high school teams will be competing. As always, the program needs volunteers to act as presiding judges and scorers, ideally **60 per day**. Without a sufficient number of volunteers, the mock trial competitions are unable to run as intended. **The Honorable Gilbert A. Romero**, who leads this program, expressed that volunteers get to help

encourage and foster students' individual development. He added that this is truly a chance to do something for the betterment of our community now and for the future.

This year, the Ventura County mock trial competitions will be held as follows:

- High School Competition: February 21, 22, 28, and March 1, 2026, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., at the Ventura Courthouse
- Middle School Competition: February 28 & March 1, 2026, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., at the Ventura Courthouse
- Middle School Championships: March 5, 2026, 22:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., at Ventura County Office of Education

Volunteers can choose any of the above dates to participate. All volunteers are requested to commit to being available for the full day they volunteer, primarily due to the logistics involved with this event. Mock trial volunteers must have a legal education background. Although the competition focuses on a criminal case, volunteers do **not** need to be criminal law attorneys.

Prior to the mock trial competition, volunteers should expect to receive a Rules and Guidelines handbook. Additionally, the Ventura County Office of Education and Judge Romero host an orientation through Zoom, complete with a PowerPoint that runs through all necessary information regarding rules and scoring. This year, the scorers' orientation will take place on **February 10, 2026**, from 12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.

That orientation will be recorded and made available for those unable to attend at the scheduled time. As an aside, scorers who have **not** volunteered in the Ventura County Mock Trial anytime between 2023 through 2025 are eligible to earn two hours of MCLE credit for the meeting and event participation.

On mock trial competition days, volunteers should plan to arrive at 8:00 a.m. for check-in, as the program needs to assign all of the volunteers to various courtrooms each morning before the competition rounds can begin. Breakfast and lunch will be provided. Each courtroom requires one presiding judge, and scorers. When the program does not have sufficient volunteers, those acting as mock trial presiding judges will have to also simultaneously act as a scorer, and/or the trial will have fewer scorers. Neither of those situations are ideal, but the program is left with no other options when there are insufficient volunteers. In short, the mock trial program simply cannot run as intended without enough volunteers.

Each mock trial scorer will be given a Chromebook to use during the event for scoring. During the mock trial, scorers will need to rank each student's performance on a scale from 1-10. At the end of the trial, scorers will then need to provide team scores. Aside from numerical scores, scorers also provide typed feedback. Once scores and feedback are submitted, the mock trial judge and scorers then have a few minutes to provide verbal feedback in the courtroom directly to the students who participated.

It is widely believed that mock trials can be traced as far back as 14th century Britain, as part of a requirement for aspiring attorneys. Over time, law schools began focusing on teaching the law through analysis of caselaw, and mock trials began playing only a secondary, supplementary role in legal education. More recently throughout our country, mock trials have increased in popularity among middle and high schools to educate students about our judicial system and improve their skills in analysis and oral advocacy.

The United States mock trial competitions are centered on a different criminal trial each year and consist of two teams per trial: prosecution and defense. This year, the subject of the competition is a murder

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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trial. The trials are “closed universe.” An information booklet unique to each year’s competition includes all facts and relevant legal authorities that the students may use. Each high school team consists of one Pre-trial Attorney who is responsible for arguing pre-trial motions (such as to exclude evidence from trial); two to four Trial Attorneys responsible for opening statements, direct and cross-examinations, and closing arguments; and four witnesses (a combination of lay and expert). Additionally, the prosecution team has one court clerk, and the defense team has one bailiff. Each team also has the option of having two artists and two journalists. The middle school competitions do not include pre-trial motions.

The first-place county high school and middle school teams will each receive an invitation to participate in the statewide competition. This year will mark the first California Middle School Mock Trial State Finals, to take place in April 2026. The high school team who wins the statewide competition will then participate in the national competition.

According to the California Courts Newsroom, the mock trial model we are familiar with today originally stemmed from a Los Angeles program in 1980. Teach Democracy (formerly known as the Constitutional Rights Foundation) helped expand that program statewide, which now reaches around 37 counties. Approximately 8,000 California high school students participate annually in the statewide competition.

The Ventura County Office of Education (“VCOE”) began hosting mock trial competitions in 1983, in partnership with Teach Democracy (formerly known as the Constitutional Rights Foundation). The following year, the National High School Mock Trial Championship began. In 2022, VCOE expanded its regional competition to include a middle school program.

Judge Romero has been involved with the mock trial program for 20 years and told me that some of his best experiences have been coaching students and watching them develop. He and his wife, local attorney Sandra Romero, coach their son’s middle school team. Those of you who have volunteered in the past have undoubtedly

seen Judge Romero present on each day of mock trial in a leadership role and ensuring all runs as smoothly as possible.

In discussing mock trial, Judge Romero recalled two students in particular who will be participating this year for the third time, now in attorney roles. He explained that when those students first participated, they were very shy and so softspoken. Now, they are mock trial attorneys, projecting their voices and handling themselves with such confidence. Their parents cannot believe the transformation. According to Judge Romero, this story is not unique. Each student on the mock trial team has a wonderful, similar story. As coaches, regardless of whether the team wins or receives any awards, they spend countless hours working with students and seeing how far each one has come. This is why he coaches and volunteers his time to the program. He added that the students appreciate all of the volunteers who give their time to allow them to put their months of hard work into the competition.

As you may know, some of our county schools and students have achieved success



in both the statewide and nationwide mock trial competitions. In 2008, 2011, 2012, and 2013, La Reina High School (which was located in Thousand Oaks but recently closed at the end of the 2023-2024 school year) achieved first place in the statewide competition. In 2021 and 2024, Trinity Pacific Christian School (Westlake Village) took first place at the state competition. In 2013, La Reina High School placed second

at the national competition. In 2023, student Ella Ochoa of Channel Islands High School (Oxnard) was the first place Artist at both the state and national competitions. Finally, in 2024, Trinity Pacific Christian School ranked 8th nationally.

Last year, Valley View Middle School (Simi Valley) and Trinity Pacific Christian School were the 2025 champions at the county level. Trinity Pacific Christian School then went on to win first place at the state competition, then fifth nationally. The 2025 national mock trial champion was Montgomery Bell Academy from Nashville, Tennessee.

Anyone who has participated in mock trial can attest to the brilliant display of hard work, tenacity, confidence, and sharpness that fills the courtrooms during the competitions. It is inspiring and impressive to witness young students deliver meticulously crafted oral arguments, question witnesses, and handle objections like seasoned attorneys. Many students handle the entire trial with little to no notes. Additionally, the students truly *become* their roles, with some scorers in past competitions mentioning that some witnesses would be suited for acting careers.

The participating students also clearly find the experience incredibly rewarding. After competitions, their feeling of accomplishment is clear and palpable, with some students having even cried tears of joy and pride. The competitions also have inspired some students to pursue careers as attorneys or other legal professionals. Regardless of what the students eventually do professionally, the competition serves them in so many ways by sharply improving skillsets that will serve them throughout their life. Judge Romero emphasizes to all of the students participating that the skills they gain of public speaking, critical thinking, reasoning, and teamwork will serve them well regardless of what career path they follow.

I encourage all of you who are available to volunteer some of your time to help score this year’s competitions. Aside from scoring, another opportunity to volunteer with the program is to coach a mock trial team. Some participating schools have coaches who are practicing attorneys, while others solely have non-attorney coaches. Last year, one of the competing high school teams did not have an actual coach, but rather, was led by a fellow high school student. Although there

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NEWS FROM THE COURT

Ventura Superior Court Launches Redesigned Website

The Ventura Superior Court is pleased to announce the launch of its redesigned website, which adopts the Judicial Council of California's standardized web template currently used by a majority of the courts across the state. This innovative platform enhances user experience and accessibility; provides direct pathways to essential information; and offers more intuitive navigation.

Presiding Judge Matthew P. Guasco states: "The launch of this new and improved website is an important step in fulfilling an important goal of the Court's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan: improving the court user experience."

Court Executive Officer Kate Bieker adds: "the Court is excited to launch a new website that will allow people to navigate the court system with clarity, confidence, and ease."

Practice Tip: Ventura Family Law Ex Parte Requests (Updated January 21, 2026)

Ventura Superior Court uses different procedures for restraining order versus non-restraining order Family Law ex parte requests.

- **Restraining orders** (DV, Elder/Dependent Adult Abuse, Workplace, Gun Violence): Courtroom 34

hears these daily at **1:30 p.m.** Other Family Law courtrooms hear them at **11:30 a.m.** (Elder/Dependent Adult Abuse in Courtroom 32). Moving papers must be emailed by **9:00 a.m.** on the noticed day. Opposition is due by **11:00 a.m.** (Courtroom 34 matters) or **10:30 a.m.** (other Family Law courtrooms). Parties without email access must file in person at the Family Law Clerk's Office (Room 210) by **11:00 a.m.** or **9:30 a.m.**, depending on courtroom assignment.


- **Non-restraining order Family Law ex partes:** A reservation is required through the judicial secretary. These matters are heard daily at **11:30 a.m.** Moving papers must be emailed by **9:00 a.m.** on the hearing day, with opposition due by **10:30 a.m.** In-person filing deadlines are **9:30 a.m.** for moving papers and **10:30 a.m.** for opposition.
- **Do not mix email portals.** Restraining order matters and non-restraining order matters use different court email addresses.
- **Missed deadlines = no hearing that day.** Filing fees still apply. All payment types are accepted at the Family Law Clerk's Office.

Full notice: <https://www.ventura.courts.ca.gov/news/procedure-ex-parte-requests-family-law-updated-1212026>


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have been efforts to encourage other county schools to participate in mock trial, many have not because they do not have coaches or anyone able to lead the program.

I am sure all who have participated will agree that volunteering in mock trial is a unique, enjoyable, and rewarding experience. The student participants are such an incredible representation of our youth, and I am confident that they are on the right track for future success.

Additional information on mock trial can be found at the Ventura County Office of Education website at www.vcoe.org/MockTrial, and on the following VCBA webpage: www.vcba.org/mock-trial. I would also like to extend my thanks and appreciation to Judge Romero for his contributions to this article.



Kristine Tijam is a civil litigation attorney at Procter, Shyer & Winter, LLP and an adjunct law professor at The Colleges of Law. Her practice focuses on representing cities, businesses, and individuals in various types of lawsuits. She can be reached at kristine@proctershyster.com or (805) 603-8623.



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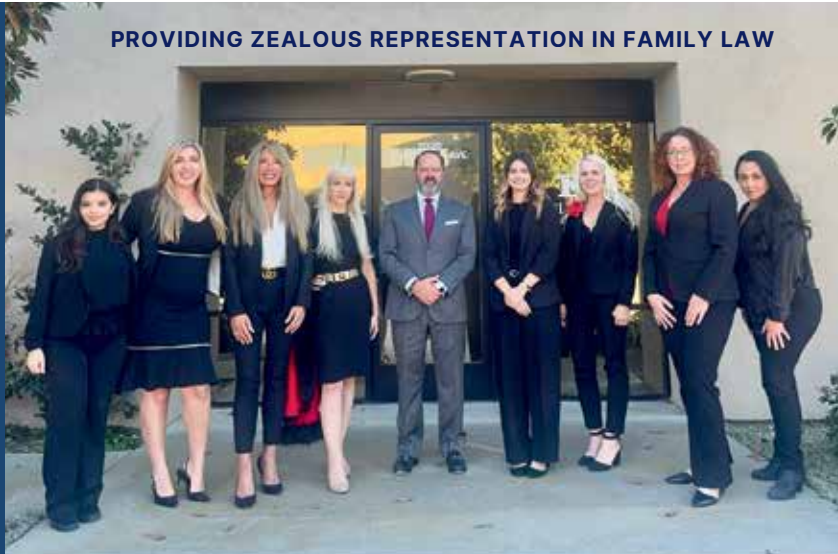
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HANNA MALCO, ESQ

Hanna is an associate attorney at Negley Law, APC. A Ventura native and fourth-generation resident, she has deep community roots, including service with the National Charity League, volunteering with the Humane Society of Ventura County, and recognition as a Las Patronas Auxiliary Debutante. Hanna earned a B.S. in Business from CSU Channel Islands and a J.D. from Chapman University's Fowler School of Law in 2023. She began her career in tenants' rights and personal injury, advocating for clients affected by uninhabitable housing, auto accidents, and premises liability. She brings that same compassion to family law, guiding clients through emotionally challenging matters. Outside work, Hanna enjoys time with family, her animals, and exploring the outdoors.

Welcome

New Attorneys!



CHANNY RUSSELL, ESQ

Channy is a Ventura-based family law litigator with extensive experience throughout Santa Barbara, Santa Maria, and Lompoc. She earned her law degree cum laude from Boston University School of Law, where she was a Fulbright fellow and completed a dual degree in International Relations and Conflict Resolution, after graduating from Washington & Lee University. Practicing family law in California since 2020, Channy has successfully represented hundreds of clients in complex matters involving high-asset estates, business interests, separate property claims, domestic violence allegations, custody disputes, prenuptial agreements, and Marvin claims. A former criminal defense attorney, she is known for untangling complex financial issues and forcefully defending wrongly accused clients. Fluent in Spanish, Channy is an active member of multiple California legal organizations and lives in Santa Barbara with her young daughter.

HAVE YOU HEARD?



Advisory Council Opportunity for Attorneys on Major Real Estate Project

Attorneys with in-house municipal, nonprofit, commercial real estate, or IP experience are encouraged to contact Studio Channel Islands Board President **Robin Wallace** regarding an ad hoc Advisory Council position for a large real estate development project. Robin may be contacted via phone or text at 213-453-5186 or by email at robin@landandskyart.com



Ventura County Legal Aid (VCLA) welcomes new Staff Attorney, Liseth Castillo

Liseth Castillo joined VCLA on January 12. Castillo will be stationed at the Ventura Family Justice Center (FJC), working under the guidance of Supervising Attorney, **Charles Gardner**. Castillo's arrival will give VCLA the capability to handle DV cases originating from the FJC. With only one attorney, VCLA previously prioritized

elder abuse cases. Providing counsel and representation in separation and custody cases is a valuable resource that will help individuals break the cycle of domestic violence. Funding for the new position comes from additional 2026 IOLTA/EAF funds received as a result of VCLA's thriving pro bono program. Thanks to the more than 50 attorneys who generously donated their time to help needy individuals in our community.

Castillo is a 2021 graduate of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles where she was the recipient of numerous honors and awards including The Pearl Castro-Mendez Scholarship, Outstanding Clinical Student Award, and Dean's Service Award. Castillo transitioned from a prelitigation position in a personal injury practice because of her interest in family law and desire to assist underrepresented individuals. She is fluent in Spanish and has experience working with low income individuals. She has considerable experience volunteering at the Harriet Buhai Center for Family Law affiliated with Loyola and at the Loyola Center for Conflict Resolution where she was a clinical student/mediator.

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EXPERIENCING “THE GREATEST HONOR” WITH JUDGE DIANA AIZMAN

By Benjamin W. Karabian, Esq.

On July 18, 2024, **Diana Weiss Aizman** was sworn in as a Judge of the Superior Court of Ventura County. Some in the Ventura legal community may have still been getting acquainted with the former criminal lawyer turned Commissioner a few months earlier. But, by the time she donned the robe as a judge, Aizman was already established as an effective, well-embraced bench officer. She credits her early success to the support and mentorship of her fellow judges, but the breadth of her experience no doubt uniquely equipped her for her new role. Aizman, after all, had meaningfully practiced at all *three* stations in a criminal courtroom before taking the bench at the Hall of Justice.

While Aizman’s appointment may seem obvious in hindsight, the bench was by no means preordained. She does not hail from any judicial, or even legal, pedigree. Her last name doesn’t evoke wonder of a possible relation to any well-known jurist. That’s because Aizman’s odyssey began in the Soviet Union before she was born. Her family, made up exclusively of engineers, left Ukraine to emigrate to the United States shortly before she was born. They settled in Los Angeles, where Aizman attended public school through college in pursuit of becoming a lawyer.

Aizman’s legal career began firmly with the prosecution. While getting her law degree at Southwestern, she interned for the Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office in their Organized Crime Unit. After passing the bar, she became a prosecutor with the Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office. It was in that assignment, as a new Deputy City Attorney staffing a court with a heavy calendar, that she remembers first wanting (seriously) to become a judge. “I remember being in Dept. 74 [at the Metropolitan courthouse] and seeing the bench officer handle the calendar so efficiently, and thinking to myself, I can do that,” recalls Aizman. “It’s where I saw myself making the greatest contribution to the system.”

Aizman’s time as a prosecutor gave her insight into law enforcement, the inner workings of a large bureaucracy, and the perspectives of victims of crimes minor and serious. Managing heavy calendars conditioned her to avoid the verbose record-

making some prosecutors think is helpful. She took a number of assignments with the City Attorney’s Office including training law enforcement on DUI prosecution—an area of criminal law she regards as a personal specialty.

After four years of running courts and trying cases, Aizman left to start her own firm and she quickly became a prominent criminal defense attorney in Los Angeles. Her success, quick wit and presence garnered her invitations from TV networks to appear as a legal analyst alongside the likes of Nancy Grace, Shepard Smith and Geraldo Rivera. Private practice wasn’t all glitz and glamour, however. Aizman saw the consequences of criminal justice visited upon the individual defendant. “You need good boundaries to be an effective advocate,” she advises, credits the experience with helping her see “the real world from a different perspective.” Aizman, like many private defense attorneys, also spent long days on congested freeways shuttling between the numerous courthouses in the greater L.A. area. “Being a defense attorney helped me understand the value of people’s time. When presiding over a calendar court, I would tell my staff not to wait for everything to be ready. Call me out even if it’s just to run one case.”

When I asked if she misses private practice, Aizman responded with a quick “No,”



Aizman appearing on Nancy Grace as a legal analyst.

but then paused. “What I miss is working directly with addicts who are ready to make the commitment towards sobriety,” she said, before muttering a woman’s name under her breath and smiling.

Despite having an extremely successful practice, and the luxury of choosing her own cases, Aizman yearned for the bench. In 2019, Aizman became a *judge pro tem* and finally got the opportunity to exhibit the courtroom management she had been preparing for internally for so long. Soon, she was accepting multiple court assignments on the same day and reporting the “all clear” before lunch. Her *pro tem* experience added such fuel to her judicial fire that she made the choice to wind down her practice to focus on her goal of becoming a full-time bench officer. She was evaluating a return to prosecution to better her chances when she saw a position announcement for a commissioner spot in Ventura County to fill an opening in Dept. 10 handling DUI cases.

“It was intense,” says Judge Aizman about the process. “But it was very different [speaking of becoming a commissioner versus a judge]. The commissioner process was very much about my qualifications, and it was specific to Ventura. I was interviewed by all of the judges in Ventura. Ventura is a close-knit community. It was not lost on me that I was being considered amongst a pool of candidates that have been working in this community for their entire careers.”

The process to become a judge, in contrast, was much more about her personal experiences and why she deserved to be a judge. “I would describe it as more of a discussion, almost more of a therapy session, than an interview. It was very well done, and thanks to the late Judge [Ryan] Wright, I was very confident. His comments are saved in my phone for whenever I need a boost.”

Meaningful experience as a prosecutor, defense attorney, *pro tem* and commissioner may seem like the perfect blueprint to becoming a judge, but Aizman maintains it is not necessary. She asserts that some of her most respected colleagues had only one, primary lawyer role before becoming a judge. “I don’t think it’s just about where you worked. It’s about what you got out of that in terms of understanding people. Humanity is what binds us all.”

If Aizman’s journey may be compared to the legendary 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team,

Governor Newsom's appointment was the gold medal victory over Finland. But it is Aizman's selection as Commissioner that is remembered with the emotion of that miraculous win over the Russians a round earlier. "I got a call from [Supervising] Judge [Kevin] DeNoce and [Assistant Supervising] Judge [Matthew] Guasco, saying the judges of Ventura County had selected me to be Commissioner. I'm sure more was said but I don't think I heard it. I remember saying thank you, putting the phone down, and then I just screamed. I screamed so loudly my husband who was in a different building heard me."

Commissioner Aizman took to the role with the balanced efficiency her colleagues anticipated when they selected her. Staff attorneys on both sides of the table appreciated being summoned to the bench for introductions to break the ice, and her willingness to fully hear out both sides.

Everyone in her court undoubtedly appreciated her cut-to-the-chase style and avoidance of unnecessary delay, even in a new jurisdiction. Aizman credits a bit of advice for allowing her to hit top gear on the bench. "I had a close colleague who I respect very much tell me I had good instincts, and to trust my instincts. I follow my instincts and don't get caught up in the second-guessing that can slow things down."



somewhat to convey her surprise—and appreciation—for her colleagues. "The degree of camaraderie among the bench

officers in Ventura, and especially the criminal judges, is unlike anything I have experienced since my earliest days as a DCA." Unsurprisingly, Aizman, who enjoys snowboarding and weightlifting, has found a new person to spot her. "[Judge] [Kristi] Peariso can lift heavier than I can. She's incredibly strong—on and off the bench," says Aizman of her colleague. It remains to be seen if any of her colleagues will be bold enough to tackle the slopes with her.

I stop in from time to time to discretely get a glimpse of my former colleague running calendar from a non-attorney seat in her courtroom. It provides a kind of universal benefit to see destiny play out. My last visit, though, will remain with me for some time in terms of my opinion of Aizman as a bench officer.

It was the afternoon session, and a Spanish-speaking custody defendant was before her. Not only did the prosecutor and public defender start off wildly opposed on the issue of own-recognition release ("OR") and overall posture of the case, but a victim was present as well. She stood from the audience and voiced her own reasoning why the defendant should not be granted OR. Aizman asked two questions of the prosecutor, one of the defense attorney, one of the victim, and one of the defendant himself (who talked over the court so much I feared he was going to bring about a conclusion of the matter before Aizman ruled on the merits). She then articulated the court's position, concise and complete with considerations and potential consequences, and delivered her ruling. All parties, including the victim, nodded their heads up and down in unison acceptance of her ruling. Compromise is often described as everyone not getting everything they want. This was the opposite. And it was all achieved in less than seven minutes of the case being called. With an interpreter.

Aizman moved from Department 10 to Department 11 in 2025 to preside over a broader array of cases. She sat as magistrate for the preliminary hearing of Ventura County's first fentanyl-murder case. She now sits in Department 27, a criminal trial court. While judicial efficiency may have sparked her interest and distinguished her early on, Aizman sees her role as changing

as felony trials become a large part of her assignment. "I had a complex felony trial involving serious allegations against a very young defendant accused of attacking a police officer. I usually give the parties thirty minutes for *voir dire*. I put that aside because this wasn't the case for it and I let the attorneys do their thing," she said.

A year and a half later, the bench experience continues to provide the professional satisfaction Aizman dreamed of for all those years. This is in large part because Aizman, who practiced in every county from the Mexican border to Central California, and from the Pacific Ocean to Arizona, got her gavel in Ventura—a unique jurisdiction well-suited for her style.

"Early disposition is not lip service like it is in some counties. The bench gets involved. We sit down with the parties and resolve cases," she says, noting one of the things she believes Ventura does better than some other jurisdictions. She also has high regard for the justice partners in Ventura. Aizman credits **District**



CA Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero and Judge Aizman at the New Judge's Orientation in 2024.

Attorney Erik Nasarenko with policies that are more functional and contemporary. And she regards the quality of public defenders in Ventura as "among the best in Southern California." But above all, her respect and appreciation for her judicial colleagues shows through most clearly.

So how does this former lawyer and cable news legal analyst sum up being a judge in Ventura when asked? "It is the greatest honor of my life," she says.



Benjamin Karabian is the principal attorney at The Karabian Law Firm, A Professional Corporation, in Westlake Village and practices criminal defense, personal injury and administrative law.



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MEMBER SPOTLIGHTS: AMBER LEE AND THOMAS HARTNETT

By Kathleen Maheu.



Amber Lee has built her entire legal career around the courtroom. A Ventura County Deputy District Attorney assigned to the Homicide Unit, Lee focuses on criminal prosecutions and has never strayed far from trial advocacy. After completing her undergraduate studies at UCLA and earning her law degree from Pepperdine School of Law, she joined the Ventura County District Attorney's Office and has remained committed to public service ever since.

Lee has been a member of the Ventura County Bar Association since December 2012 and was admitted to the California Bar in 2011. In addition to her prosecutorial work, she stays deeply engaged in the legal community. She is a member of the National Black Prosecutors Association, Black Lawyers of Ventura County, and the Ventura County Judicial Evaluation Committee. She also serves as an adjunct professor of trial advocacy at Pepperdine Caruso School of Law and teaches trial advocacy to prosecutors statewide through the California District Attorneys Association. Most recently, she authored chapters on direct and cross-examination for a trial tactics manual for prosecutors, underscoring her dedication to sharpening courtroom skills for the next generation of advocates.

Her love of trial work started early. Lee traces her path to the law back to her grandmother, who worked in the home of an attorney and introduced her early to the idea of legal advocacy, often watching *Matlock* together. That early exposure planted the seed, but it was college mock trial that sealed it. Competing at UCLA and Pepperdine, Lee discovered her love for courtroom work and was ultimately named an "All-American," ranking among the top 10 mock trial advocates in the nation. Those experiences confirmed what she already felt instinctively: she was meant to be a trial attorney. That realization led her to criminal law, where she saw an opportunity to serve the justice

system in a meaningful way by advocating for victims while also protecting the rights of the accused.

Although she splits her hometown roots between Santa Ana and Moreno Valley, Lee now practices in Ventura County and has grown fond of local favorites like Point Mugu at sunset and dining at Lure. Her favorite food is a Connecticut lobster roll. When she is not in court or teaching, she unwinds by watching baseball, listening to music, working out, or taking scenic drives with a favorite playlist. She is an enthusiastic Dodgers fan (Go Blue!) and enjoys basketball, Zumba, and step aerobics for exercise. When she has time for television, she enjoys 30 Rock, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, and Abbott Elementary. Favorite films include *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Lee brings warmth and personality to everything she does. She is a proud aunt to several nieces and nephews, keeps an orchid named Peggy, and prizes sentimental keepsakes, especially birthday cards from family and a baseball signed by Clayton Kershaw. If she were not practicing law, she says she would be starring in Broadway musicals, or vacationing in Hawaii. She also collects coins and shares a memorable story about dropping out of preschool so she could stay close to her grandmother, then proudly returning for graduation at the end of the year.

Asked which statute resonates most, Lee points to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She notes two favorite quotes that capture her outlook on both life and law: "The time is always right to do what is right," by Martin Luther King, Jr., and "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive," from Audre Lorde. If she could interview historical figures, they would include Thurgood Marshall, William Shakespeare, and Harriet Tubman.

For Lee, trial advocacy is not just a profession. It is a calling rooted in service, teaching, and a deep respect for the justice system she works in every day.



Thomas Hartnett brings an appellate advocate's mindset to everything he does. A longtime member of the Ventura County Bar Association since 2011 and admitted to the California Bar in 2009, Hartnett currently practices with the Ventura Public Defender's Office, where his work focuses on writs, appeals, and post-conviction matters. A graduate of Santa Clara University School of Law with undergraduate roots at Long Beach State, Hartnett previously handled felony trials before shifting his attention to post-conviction advocacy.

Hartnett grew up in San Diego and now resides in Santa Barbara. Within the legal community, he serves on the Judicial Evaluation Committee and California Attorneys for Criminal Justice, continuing his commitment to improving the justice system from multiple angles. Asked why he chose law as a profession, Hartnett's answer is simple and direct: he always wanted to be an advocate. That core motivation continues to shape his career in public defense, where he works behind the scenes on complex legal issues that often determine the outcome of cases long after trial.

One of Hartnett's most memorable legal experiences predates his career entirely. In 2004, he traveled to Washington, D.C., slept overnight on the sidewalk in front of the United States Supreme Court, and secured first place in line to observe oral argument in *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*. He is still friends with the person who stood second in line that morning, a story that reflects both his early passion for constitutional law and his appreciation for the human connections that come with shared experiences.

Outside of work, Hartnett values his friendships above all else. He is married, shares his home with two cats, Albee and Oscar, and relaxes by watching movies or woodworking. His favorite Ventura County locale is simply the ocean, and he

enjoys dining at Immigrant Son Caffee. Sushi tops his list of favorite foods, while his viewing tastes range from *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Tokyo Drift* to television favorites like *Deadwood*, *Succession*, and *Industry*. His favorite books include *Catch-22*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

A soccer fan who stays active through hiking, walking, and diving, Hartnett drives a Subaru and counts Japan as his favorite vacation destination. Asked to name a favorite written law statute, he offers a characteristically dry response: "Jury Verdict: Not Guilty." As for historical figures, Hartnett demurs entirely, invoking the adage, "Never meet your heroes." His favorite quotes reflect both humor and perspective, from *Wedding Crashers* ("Rule Number #76: No Excuses Play Like a Champion!") to a line often attributed to Mark Twain: "It ain't what you know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." Together, they capture a practitioner who values discipline, skepticism, and steady advocacy in equal measure.



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REMEMBERING JUDGE RYAN WRIGHT: A LIFE OF SERVICE AND DEDICATION TO JUSTICE

By Edward A. Andrews and Rachel Coleman

Sadly, on September 24, 2025, the **Honorable Ryan J. Wright** passed away following a long illness. A Ventura native and respected jurist, Wright served on the bench for 13 years, repeatedly serving as the Supervising Judge of the Criminal Division, where he oversaw hundreds of significant jury trials. His career reflected a lifelong commitment to public service, beginning with his early work as a reserve deputy probation officer counseling youth. He clerked at both the Ventura County Public Defender's Office and the Ventura County District Attorney's Office during law school. As a Deputy District Attorney, he handled some of the toughest prosecutorial assignments, bringing more than 100 jury trials to verdict before his election in 2011. In addition to his work in the courtroom, Wright mentored fellow judges on the Court and taught students at Pepperdine University School of Law for many years. A leader in the Ventura County Superior Court, Wright was known for his integrity, fairness, and commitment to improving the justice system. In September 2024, his colleagues on the bench elected him Assistant Presiding Judge.

Presiding Judge Matthew Guasco



remembers Wright's tireless commitment to fairness and justice, and what he describes as Wright's "intense energy to improve what we do as judges." Referring to him as "the most loyal of friends," Guasco recalls the first time he met Wright. He was working in chambers after a challenging morning calendar. "I walked Judge Wright, who said, 'I'm Ryan Wright, welcome to the Court.'" They had both recently joined the bench and bonded over a shared commitment to judicial values. Wright was widely respected for his knowledge and experience in Fourth Amendment, evidence, jury, and sentencing issues, and that expertise continued on the bench. "Judge Wright was my go-to for Fourth Amendment and criminal law issues," Guasco recalled, noting that he and Wright would often discuss and debate complex issues – when not contending

over the Dodgers and the Giants. "You get to know someone when you are working through a thorny problem," Guasco explained. "I still feel his presence every day, especially when I am struggling with a question."

Their conversations and friendship eventually formed the foundation of court leadership going into 2025. Wright was known for his strong focus on efficiency when using taxpayer dollars, jurors' time, and the time of attorneys, defendants, and victims. "He was scrupulously fair in all things," Guasco notes. One of Wright's frequent reminders, "The case doesn't exist for our convenience," still resonates. In leadership, Wright was driven to improve what the Court does to serve the people, holding himself to the same standards he used in a courtroom. "He never expected anything of a lawyer that he did not expect of himself," Guasco explained, "to be on time, prepared in a comprehensive manner, to know the law, to be direct, never come close to misleading the Court, and to always be upfront about the weaknesses in a case." Living with diabetes and associated vision challenges since childhood, Wright also pushed for increased court access for those with disabilities, both physically and technologically. "He felt the Court's primary mission is to be a Court of excellence," Guasco recalls, "including excellence in access."

Guasco also remembers Wright's lighter and more empathetic side. "He had a great sense of humor and loved practical jokes. I don't like clowns, so of course, many of his surprises for me included clowns." Overall, Wright "loved being a judge," which included understanding the realities of the courthouse. Guasco recalls once, following a particularly traumatic moment in trial that impacted all in the courtroom, going to Wright's chambers. "I had been deeply affected by what happened. And I needed to process my feelings in that moment. There was no judgment. I knew that no matter what, Ryan was there for me."

Others throughout the community echo Wright's commitment to fairness, administrative efficiency, and mentorship of others.

District Attorney Erik Nasarenko recalls:



"I was new and fresh-faced as a deputy district attorney over 17 years ago and, frankly, not really knowing a soul yet in the office, I watched as a goatee-sporting man dressed

entirely in black and looking like he hadn't slept in days knocked on my cubicle door. 'You went to UCI?' he inquired, a reference to the short bio that went out earlier that day announcing that I graduated from UC Irvine. 'So did I. Welcome,' he replied, and then walked away. That was it. That was my first Ryan Wright interaction: Direct, to the point, but oddly reassuring, like maybe I belonged in this office because I had a fellow Anteater with me. His fatigue and bleary eyes, I would later learn, were byproducts of his late nights with law enforcement reviewing search warrants, answering Fourth Amendment search and seizure questions at 2 a.m. and just being Ryan, the narcotics prosecutor who understood the importance of getting dope off Ventura County streets while always complying with the law and Constitution.

A few years later he ran for judge in a hard-fought election and won convincingly. As a jurist, he was no-nonsense, no-BS and very much like that 20-second interaction when I first arrived: Focused and blunt, but also looking to do good. The witnesses you were presenting in your trial better be 'lined up, ready to go and stacked in the hallway,' he sternly told this prosecutor on more than occasion, a reference to his notorious impatience with delay in court proceedings and keen acknowledgement that jurors didn't particularly care for the fits and starts of the jury trial experience. At a difficult child molestation sentencing where the victim addressed the court, Ryan listened intently and empathetically to the teenager's harrowing account, letting her know that he was the father to two teenage daughters and that her impact statement had deeply impacted him as he offered assurance that she was not to blame for the horrendous crimes, that life sentence belonged solely to the defendant.

But what I admired most about Ryan was his willingness and ability to admit he was wrong and reverse his previous position on the record in open court. He was the first to admit that sometimes he made too quick a ruling or reacted too suddenly when issuing an order. Not a big deal. He would take the bench, explain the reasoning behind the change of position and then move on. Done.

As we mourn his passing, let us also celebrate his strength of character and keen legal mind. The Ventura County courthouse is better because of Ryan, and so, too, is the cause of justice for all who enter its doors.”

Chief Deputy Public Defender Ayala Benefraim shared: “We have all had



our own unique experiences with Judge Wright, and whether they made us laugh, cry, frustrated us, or pushed us to grow, every one of them was rooted in his deep and genuine commitment to justice. Judge Wright was famous for his insistence on timeliness. For all the moments he raised our blood pressure, he was also responsible for helping so many of us sharpen our craft. The Public Defender’s Office motion bank has many briefs that exist only because Judge Wright believed we could dig deeper, understand more, and do better. That, to me, is part of the legacy he leaves behind: he made us stronger, more thoughtful lawyers, even if he drove us all a little crazy in the process.

I first met Ryan Wright when he was a felony attorney in the District Attorney’s Office and happened to draw the short straw of covering misdemeanor pretrials. I spoke with him about a misdemeanor drug case, asking for special consideration because my client had been swept into a far larger drug operation. To my surprise, Ryan listened closely, understood the context, and agreed to my request with a warm smile. It was the first time I felt a prosecutor truly heard and appreciated the ‘street knowledge’ I was trying to convey. I later learned he had worked narcotics, and I suspect he knew much more about that drug deal than I did.

When he later moved to the bench, I hoped that the fairness I had seen that one day in misdemeanor pretrials would carry

into Judge Wright’s courtroom, and in the many trials he presided over, it did, even if sometimes in his own uniquely complicated way. I tried both my first life-exposure case and my last one in front of him. He was the first judge to threaten to hold me in contempt, but, perhaps strangely, I look fondly upon that memory, because I learned a lot.

On the bench, he could be exacting—fussy, even—but behind the scenes he was warm, funny, and profoundly down to earth. His meticulousness came from a place of deep love: love of order, love of fairness, and love of doing right by the people of this County. He carried the weight of this courthouse on his shoulders as if it were his personal duty to make sure justice reached every person who passed through its doors. Some questioned his methods at times, but no one ever questioned his principles. Being in front of Judge Wright meant knowing that he would work tirelessly to get it right, and that he was humble enough to admit when he didn’t.

Judge Wright’s passing is a profound loss for the County of Ventura. He dispensed justice daily and served as a steadfast guardian of fairness in a period marked by significant legal and operational change. I miss him and remain grateful for the tough love he offered, the lessons he taught so many of us, and the many chambers conferences where we got to know the real Ryan Wright—a good man, a fair man, and someone who truly cared.”

Attorney Ron Bamieh described Judge



Wright’s deep sense of empathy: “I met Ryan when we were both prosecutors in the Ventura County DA’s office in the late 90s. We were friendly but not close friends; we were both ambitious, chasing cases, and didn’t have much time outside of work to socialize, except for getting a beer or two over the years. I got to know him a bit better when I was in private practice and he asked me to help a family member who needed a trial lawyer. I was happy and honored that he asked me to help, and during my work on that case, we got to know each other a bit better and developed a mutual respect.

You would think working in the same

office with someone and later working a case for them would be the way you get to know who someone really is. I believe I got to know who Ryan was when I appeared before him as a Superior Court Judge in a case I had years earlier. I represented a young Black woman who had become intoxicated and ran over and killed a treasured member of our community, a teacher at a local high school. The teacher was White, and that is only relevant for what comes next. My client entered a guilty plea in front of Ryan, and it was Ryan’s task to sentence my client.

The day of sentencing, I arrived in the courtroom, and it was filled with people. On one side were those supporting my client; virtually everyone on that side of the courtroom was Black. The opposite side of the courtroom was those who were there in support of the victim’s family, every seat taken, and all those people were White. I felt the tension when I walked in. Emotions were high when I entered the courtroom. I knew the bailiff was nervous because he called for backup, and three more deputies arrived to ‘keep the peace.’ Ryan took the bench, acknowledged the emotional nature of what was about to take place, and warned everyone to remain peaceful and respectful or face removal. Ryan then invited the prosecutor to have people close to or related to the victim give their statements in open court regarding their sentencing recommendations.

Typically, in these cases, those who speak on the ‘victim’s side’ show anger and hostility at the person being sentenced for killing their loved one and ask for the maximum sentence. The victim’s family and friends had the chance to tell Ryan what they felt and wanted for sentencing. It was soon after the first speaker was the wife of the victim, and I told my client to brace herself for the anger and calls for justice she was about to hear. It took about a minute or two to realize that this was not going as I anticipated. With every word of the victim’s wife, the tension dissipated. She told the story of a man who believed in faith and forgiveness, planned to follow his example, and said she was forgiving my client. Instead of speaking in anger and demanding vengeance, she spoke of love and God. How the victim, a man deeply committed to God, would encourage everyone to forgive, and she would be disrespecting her husband if she didn’t do so. After the victim’s wife came others, and

all of them asked Ryan to do just that: to forgive my client and not sentence her to jail or prison. It was an experience I had not had in a courtroom, and when I looked up after the last statement, I saw Ryan in tears. When I looked at others, I saw that Ryan was not alone; the bailiffs, the clerk, the defense attorney, and even the prosecutor all showed the impact of what they had just experienced. Ryan acknowledged his emotions and took a recess.

At recess, what had once been two sides of a courtroom became one. It started with the victim's wife walking up to my client, putting her arms around my client, and praying with her. Soon, all from the "victim's side" of the courtroom followed suit and embraced the people who were there in support of my client. When Ryan returned to the bench, you could not distinguish the sides of the courtroom by race, since everyone was now sitting together like they were all long-lost friends who had just been reacquainted. This did not escape Ryan; he spoke of what he had just witnessed. Ryan spoke of how he had relied on forgiveness and faith in his life, and he encouraged all there to remember the moment and take it with them when they left the courtroom. His words had meaning and were kind to both my client and the victim's friends and family. He was touched, but even after being moved so deeply by what he had witnessed, Ryan ultimately did his job as required and followed the law. After pronouncing his sentence, Ryan told my client that he was praying that she would heal from this experience and go on to a well-lived life. Ryan expressed to the victim's family and friends how their faith was inspiring to him, and their forgiveness healed more than just the person he had just sentenced.

When I received the news of Ryan's passing, I thought of that day in that courtroom, of faith and forgiveness, and how my friend left this world better than he found it."

Assistant Sheriff Victor Fazio also remembered his friend, especially Wright's care and respect towards victims. As Assistant Sheriff Fazio shared:



"In his role as a Superior Court Judge, he kept you in line when testifying and was a stickler for courtroom etiquette.

Ryan was a true believer in the law. For those who were fortunate enough to get a search warrant signed by him or to testify in his courtroom, you knew that he kept you on your toes and demanded perfection and professionalism. He did this not to make law enforcement's job harder but to ensure justice for victims. He never wanted law enforcement to be the reason justice couldn't be served.

Some of us remember Ryan as our favorite DA of all time. He would work all day reviewing warrants, filing cases, and appearing in court. He would then come out with us at night for buy rides, jump busts, and search warrants. It wasn't uncommon for Ryan to stay out with us past midnight and then be back in court early in the morning. Those who knew him well knew that he had a tender heart and a lot of compassion. He was also fiercely loyal to his friends. He truly was one of a kind.

Ryan is sorely missed in Ventura County. His absence is felt every day. Rest in Peace, Ryan."

Senior Deputy District Attorney (Ret.) Tony Wold shared,



"I first met Ryan when we sat for the 1997 California Bar Exam. We were both members of the incoming class of new prosecutors for the Ventura County District Attorney's Office, and we became close friends, a friendship that endured for nearly 30 years until his untimely passing.

Ryan possessed a deep sense of empathy and a genuine desire to help people. Initially, he considered becoming a public defender and interned with the Ventura County Public Defender's Office. However, he eventually realized that his calling was in prosecution. To Ryan, helping crime victims versus helping defendants was simply two sides of the same coin of empathy.

As a prosecutor, Ryan was diligent and selfless. He became the office expert on search and seizure, always willing to assist colleagues both on and off the clock. I remember one occasion when Ryan helped me with a search warrant well after midnight. He accompanied me and law enforcement to the judge's residence to be available for questions and remained present when the warrant was executed an hour later to provide further assistance. He later brought this same work ethic to his role on the bench.

While Ryan has been deservedly celebrated for his professional achievements, he would be the first to tell you that his most important role was as a father. He loved and doted on his children; they were truly his life. He loved simply being home with them, whether it was going for a swim, barbecuing, watching sports, or just simple shows. Most lawyers only know Ryan's judicial persona, but he had a great sense of humor and could really make you laugh. He was a very warm, genuine person who cared deeply about others. He was a pleasure to be around and I am grateful for the time I had with him."



Wright's personality and mentorship carried throughout his cases. He is remembered by those in the courthouse whom he taught as his students. As **Deputy District Attorney Paul Hiepler** recalls,

"As a first-year law student, I was terrified of my first summer job. Judge Wright had reached out to Pepperdine looking for summer law clerks, and my counselor recommended me and arranged an interview. Not knowing what to expect, I approached the meeting very professionally, bracing for a barrage of tough legal questions. Instead, we spent 30 minutes talking about basketball, the Dodgers, and old true crime cases—before he casually told me I got the job.

That summer was the most enjoyable and formative experience of my legal career. Coming in with almost no knowledge of the criminal court process, I had the privilege of learning under the tutelage of one of Ventura County's greatest criminal judges. The summer was filled

with challenging legal questions and countless stories from Judge Wright's time as a narcotics prosecutor—jumping out of helicopters, breaking down doors during search warrants, you name it.

Above all, Judge Wright was not only a great judge but also a remarkable mentor and friend. He was someone who told you the absolute truth 100% of the time, regardless of how you felt. Judge Wright was always there—whether it was the middle of the night or a busy day—he would respond and be eager to help. I went from knowing almost nothing about criminal law to finishing that summer with a clear calling: to become a prosecutor in Ventura County. None of that would have been possible without Judge Wright's guidance.

I deeply miss his leadership and wisdom in my life, and our county will forever miss his steady hand, blunt honesty, and unwavering integrity on the bench."

And as **Deputy Public Defender Matthew Benitez** recalls

"Throughout my time as both a law student and attorney, Judge Wright had a presence

and demeanor that demanded your best. He made me a better student and he helped shape the attorney I am today. Judge Wright was fair to everyone, which is reflected by his background. He will be deeply missed, but never forgotten by all those who had a chance to know him or appear in front of him."



On May 15, 2025, Wright presided over the swearing-in ceremony for **Deputy District Attorney Laura Garibay**, pictured above:

Wright is also respectfully remembered by the authors of this article. Wright presided over **Senior Deputy District Attorney Edward "Ted" Andrews'** first murder trial, a first-degree vehicular killing in the Fillmore area, as well as several other trials, eventually becoming a mentor. **Rachel Coleman** recalls Wright as a direct resource for her whenever the Ventura County Bar Association or the Barristers needed to invite any Pepperdine law students to local bar events or inform the students of local scholarship opportunities. He was always happy to pass along the information for her despite how busy he was with his role as a Superior Court judge.

No publication could adequately reflect what Judge Ryan Wright meant to the community. Readers are invited to submit further remembrances as letters to CITATIONS. The Honorable Ryan J. Wright is sorely missed. Respected and admired, Judge Ryan Wright remains an example of fairness and dedication in Ventura's justice community.

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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, and also serves on the CITATIONS editorial board.



Rachel Coleman has extensive experience in personal injury, business disputes, medical malpractice and criminal defense matters. She is a member of the VCBA

Board of Directors, and serves on the editorial board of CITATIONS.



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