VENTURA COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION Est. 1904

CITATIONS

NOVEMBER – TWO THOUSAND TWENTY SIX



2026 BEN E. NORDMAN PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD RECIPIENT: LOUIS J. ("LOU") VIGORITA

By Don Greenberg, Wendy Lascher and Joe Strohman *Page 5*

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Kristine Tijam

The Ventura County Bar Association's 41st Annual Installation & Awards Dinner is set for **November 14, 2026**, at the Crowne Plaza Ventura Beach. The night will begin with a social hour at 5:00 p.m., followed by the dinner and program at 6:00 p.m. The event will include a DJ, dancing, and casino games (with play money only) following the main program. All attendees will receive a $500 chip to start, and the night's winner will receive the High Roller Trophy.

The theme of the 2026 annual dinner is "Lights, Camera, Action!" Those of you who attended last year's dinner will remember that an unexpected power outage due to rain resulted in the event being held mostly by "candlelight". Unfortunately, this prevented VCBA from showing the scheduled video honoring a 35-year history of past VCBA Presidents (1982 to 2017) as they shared their reflections during their term that night. Nevertheless, we all still made the most of the event and so many enjoyed the casino games, which prompted us to offer it again this year. For the 2026 annual dinner, Ventura County Superior Court **Presiding Judge Matthew Guasco** suggested the theme, "Let There be Light!" Because we plan on showing the VCBA Past Presidents Video at this year's dinner, the theme evolved into, "Lights, Camera, Action!"

We certainly have plenty to celebrate this year. 2026 marked the return of the Ventura County Trial Lawyers and the Ventura County Asian American Bar Association to VCBA. We are happy to continue our support of all of VCBA sections and affiliates, as well as continuing ongoing collaborations with other county bar associations within the state.

In addition to installing the 2027 slate of VCBA Officers & Directors at this year's annual dinner, we will also be honoring more award winners compared to prior years:

- Ben E. Nordman Award: Louis J. Vigorita
- James D. Loebl Award: Dina U. Ontiveras
- Verna R. Kagan Award: Robin J. Cottingham
- Trial Lawyer of the Year: to be announced at the annual dinner
- J. Roger Myers Scholarship: Valerie Salazar
- M. Carmen Ramirez Legacy Scholarship: Liliana Valdez

VCBA has been serving Ventura County attorneys for more than 120 years now, since 1904. Throughout that time, VCBA has certainly evolved over the years by creating and expanding programs to serve legal professionals and the greater community at large. This year, the VCBA board began the process of reviewing and amending its bylaws. These efforts stem from wanting to update outdated language, particularly to account for the evolutions in our industry affecting the current practice of law, including clearer language to resolve ambiguities, and help provide further clarity affecting affiliates and sections. Much of these efforts were driven by VCBA's desire to be more inclusive and help further encourage collaborations with other sections and affiliates. I am grateful for the VCBA Board of Directors' hard work in this significant undertaking.

This year's annual dinner, like in all other years, is another celebration of our local legal professionals, especially honoring those who have made notable achievements. Each year, I am reminded of just how many inspiring and hardworking local legal professionals we have in our community. So many work tirelessly to help our county, advocate for those who have little to no voice, and uplift our profession. Many work behind the scenes without any public recognition. As we approach Thanksgiving and focus on gratitude, I am thankful to be part of this legal community. I have had many conversations with local legal professionals through the years where we have expressed the professionalism, camaraderie, and support that exists within our legal community.

Outside of our respective professions, many of us will agree that we have plenty to be thankful for: good health and happiness, family and loved ones, and a blessed career, among others. For many of us, the hectic nature and stresses of our daily lives make it far too easy for us to forget to count our blessings. For that reason, I wanted to offer a reminder that while November and the Thanksgiving holiday are good reminders to appreciate all we have, gratitude should not only be limited to this one time per year. For that reason, I wanted to take some time in this article to also remind you all about the benefits of regularly practicing gratitude and its positive effects on overall wellbeing.

Within the field of psychology, "gratitude interventions" have often been the subject of scientific studies. Gratitude interventions are commonly defined and described as structured, evidence-based positive psychology activities designed to intentionally increase a person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of gratitude. Some examples are journaling, recalling and either thinking about or writing down three positive occurrences that occurred that day and why they happened, expressing gratitude to someone, creating "gratitude jars" (writing notes of appreciation on small slips of paper and putting them in a jar to read later), and quietly meditating or thinking mindfully about the positives in one's life.

Numerous studies have proven the impact on perspective and gratitude on mental health, physical health, and overall wellbeing. For example, a 2023 study found that gratitude interventions generated quantifiable reductions in anxiety symptoms (7.76%) and depression symptoms (6.89%), alongside a 6.86% increase in life satisfaction and general mental health improvements of 5.8%. Studies in 2024 and 2025 continued to echo those effects and further affirmed that those who practice regular gratitude interventions reported higher levels of happiness and optimism, stronger relationships and social bonding, and improvements in physical health including sleep, emotional resilience, and cardiovascular health.

Other studies have even reported positive biological and neurological effects from gratitude. For example, some studies showed that expressing gratitude stimulates the prefrontal cortex and brain reward centers, triggering the release of dopamine and serotonin, the "feel-good chemicals" that elevate mood and reduce anxiety. Regular gratitude practices were also found to lower the body's primary stress hormone, cortisol, while activating the parasympathetic nervous system to calm the "fight-or-flight" stress response. Finally, some studies link consistent gratitude journaling to

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
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improved sleep quality, reduced nighttime rumination, and structural enhancements in areas like gray matter volume and heart rate variability.

The very nature of our profession often places us in stressful, high-pressure careers. However, these careers are often also esponsible for, or help contribute to, many aspects of our lives we appreciate and find rewarding. We can all use the Thanksgiving holiday each year to ground us and remind us of what truly matters. Hopefully, we will also remember to maintain our gratitude for the blessings in our lives year-round.

I wish you all a wonderful Thanksgiving with your loved ones, and hope to see you all at this year's VCBA Installation & Awards Dinner!



***Kristine Tijam** is a civil litigation attorney at 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@shyerwinter.com** or (805) 603-8623.*

HAVE YOU HEARD?

Remembering Richard M. Norman

Richard M. "Dick" Norman, a founding



partner of Ventura law firm Norman Dowler, LLP, and a longtime leader of the Ventura County legal community, has passed away at the age of 91.

Admitted to the California Bar in 1962, Norman enjoyed a distinguished career spanning more than five decades. An accomplished trial attorney, mediator and arbitrator, he handled a broad range of civil matters, including personal injury, business, construction and trust litigation.

Norman served as president of the Ventura County Bar Association, the Ventura County Trial Lawyers Association and the California Coast Chapter of the American Board of Trial Advocates. He was also active in legal education, coordinating ABOTA trial advocacy programs and participating in the Ventura County Bench & Bar History Project.

A familiar presence in the local legal community, Norman helped mentor generations of attorneys and contributed to *CITATIONS*, including as an author. Norman's long career, professional leadership and service to his colleagues leave an enduring legacy in Ventura County's legal community.

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2026 BEN E. NORDMAN PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD RECIPIENT: LOUIS J. ("LOU") VIGORITA

Lou Vigorita's agreement to become president of Ventura County Legal Aid (VCLA) in 2023 is just a capstone example of his lifetime of putting in the work that public service requires. VCLA needed fresh energy and Vigorita brought it. But that is only one example of a lifetime of work making Lou Vigorita a spectacular choice for this year's Ventura County Bar Association (VCBA) Ben E. Nordman Public Service Award.

Starting at home

Vigorita grew up with a powerful role model. His father, Dr. John L. Vigorita, had served in both World War II and Korea. Dr. Vigorita left his medical practice in 1970 to volunteer as a surgeon with Volunteer Physicians for Vietnam via USAID.

Vigorita followed his father's many examples when he volunteered after school at a nearby Veteran's Administration hospital cleaning up labs and performing other tasks. He recalls there was one whole floor filled with World War I veterans suffering from mustard gas exposure, more than 40 years after that war had ended. Vigorita added to his knowledge of human nature during college. During the summers he worked various jobs in New York City – as a bartender, cab driver, waiter, lifeguard and hospital orderly.

While at Long Island University, Vigorita volunteered ("for credit") at a Brooklyn Child Development Clinic. He saw firsthand the obstacles faced by single working-class mothers. His mentors were inspiring. Working with "latch key" children opened his eyes to the hardships so many faced.

After college, Vigorita taught high school English in the New York City system, which he said was "the toughest work I have ever had." He needed a master's degree or equivalent to keep his teaching credential. One principal suggested a law degree would meet the requirement and open up more opportunities, so Vigorita took the LSAT, was admitted to Western State University College of Law (known today as Thomas Jefferson School of Law) in San Diego and changed the direction of his life.

Vigorita was admitted to the California bar in June 1977 and became a State Bar Certified Specialist in Workers' Compensation Law. His private practice focused on workers compensation and social security law for over 45 years. His wife Rosemary, a nurse who has teamed with her husband on many things, has provided her own example of public service as she supported Vigorita in his many projects.

Wherever there's a need

In 1983, with **Richard Weinstock, Peter Dowler, Will Gorenfeld, Ron Harrington, Barbara Macri-Ortiz**, and **Carmen Ramirez,** Vigorita helped found "Advocates for Civil Justice." His pro bono efforts for that nonprofit, which was dedicated to improving our civil legal system and assisting clients, continued through the organization's ten-year existence.

Meanwhile, Vigorita has been active in leadership in the Church of the Foothills, including as chair of trustees, a member of the church council, and as chair of the church's facilities committee. His ecumenical work also encompassed being board president of the St. Vincent de Paul group at Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic School, and as a board member at St. Paul's Episcopal Day School.

On top of all that, Vigorita also served as President and as a mentor for Big Brothers of Ventura County, as a long-time supporter of youth sports, including St. Bonaventure's golf and tennis programs and Villanova Preparatory basketball, and as a team coach for his son and daughter in soccer, baseball, and basketball.

He has been a member of the Ventura Downtown Lions Club for nearly 20 years (see *https://www.lionsclubs.org/en* and *https://venturalions.org/*) and, among many things, assists with its well-known "eyeglasses" program.

In 2019 Vigorita received the James D. Loebl Pro Bono Service Award (see *https://www.vcba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/November-Citations_WEB.pdf*).

VCBA and VCLA

Vigorita's support of the VCBA and VCLA spans over 40 years. He served on the *CITATIONS* Editorial Board for seven years and remains a freelance correspondent. He is a regular volunteer at the VCLA drop-in clinics, assisting clients and helping other lawyer volunteers with questions about workers' compensation, Social Security, and other legal matters.

One of Vigorita's greatest contributions and long-lasting achievements is helping turn VCLA into a professional organization with a firm foundation. To paraphrase VCLA board member **Kevin Staker**, Vigorita saved VCLA and then was instrumental in building it into a legal aid organization that the State Bar of California recognizes as a model program.

Historically VCLA has provided services through three important programs: (1) twice monthly drop-in legal clinics at the Ventura County Law Library, now held at The Colleges of Law (i.e., the program begun by then VCBA President and now **Judge Charmaine Buehner** and the late VCBA President, then Secretary-Treasurer, **Mark Kirwin**); (2) partnering with the Ventura County Family Justice Center (see *https://fjc.venturacounty.gov/*) where VCLA staff assist crime victims with legal issues; and (3) to a limited extent, the emeritus attorney program to interview and, when appropriate, try to connect volunteer members of the bar to handle specific pro bono matters.

In 2023 as VCLA President, Vigorita recruited Paul Bujold as executive director, enabling VCLA to focus on expanding services and obtaining additional financial support, including State Bar IOLTA and EAF grants. These efforts have enabled VCLA to improve its operations, expand its staff and services, stabilize its finances, increase community services (see *https://www.vclegalaid.org/*), and partner with The Colleges of Law to use 2L and 3L students to assist, shadow attorneys meeting with clients, and complete learning assignments under the guidance of VCLA's Managing Attorney. And VCLA has been able to

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VCBA TRIAL LAWYER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

By Kathleen Maheu, Esq.

Among the several awards presentations planned for the Ventura County Bar Association's 41st Annual Installation and Awards Dinner on November 14, 2026, VCBA will recognize outstanding trial advocacy in 2025. This year's Trial Lawyer of the Year finalists represent two noteworthy 2025 civil trial results, reflecting excellence in both plaintiff and defense advocacy.

Trevor Quirk, Marc Anderson and Daneel Touma — Quirk Law Firm



Attorneys **Trevor Quirk**, **Marc Anderson** and **Daneel Touma** of Quirk Law Firm are nominated for their representation of the family of Austin Gambill in *Jon Wesley Gambill v. Rene Frank Jimenez, Jr.*

Austin, a 16-year-old Ventura High School student and track athlete, was participating in a team workout in March 2020 when a work truck driven by an employee of M&B Services, Inc., veered onto the sidewalk along Seaward Avenue and struck him. Austin died from his injuries two days later.

The wrongful death action resulted in a **$9 million verdict**. The nominated trial team brings extensive ties to the Ventura legal community. Quirk, who founded his firm in 2006, has been active in local civic and charitable efforts. Anderson is a former president of both the Ventura County Bar Association and Ventura County Trial Lawyers Association. Touma, a Ventura County native, traces his interest in trial advocacy to attending a local Mock Trial competition as a middle school student.

Benjamin Sampson – Bordin Semmer LLP



Attorney **Benjamin Sampson** is nominated for his successful defense of the Oxnard Union High School District in *Jane Doe 1 v. Oxnard Union High School District, et al.*

The case arose from a July 2019 altercation involving several students at Oxnard High School. The plaintiff alleged that the district failed to prevent a foreseeable confrontation and failed to provide safeguards required by her Individualized Education Plan, resulting in an alleged traumatic brain injury.

The litigation involved more than 45 depositions, 11 designated experts and 522 proposed trial exhibits. Representing the defense as sole trial counsel against three plaintiff attorneys, Sampson secured a **complete defense verdict following a 10-day jury trial** in Ventura County Superior Court in 2025.

His nomination emphasizes not only the complexity of the litigation and the favorable result, but also his professionalism, clarity of presentation and ethical advocacy, qualities reportedly acknowledged by members of the jury.



Kathleen "Kat" Maheu *is a Partner with Nelson Comis Kettle & Kinney, LLP practicing family law, and Managing Editor of CITATIONS. She can be reached at* ***kmaheu@calattys.com***

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NEWS FROM THE COURT

Judge Mark Borrell Announces Retirement

The **Honorable Mark S. Borrell**, Judge of the Superior Court of California, County of Ventura, retired on October 9, 2026, concluding a distinguished legal career spanning decades of judicial service and contributions to the administration of justice.

Judge Borrell was appointed to the bench by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in May 2010 and served in both civil and criminal assignments throughout his judicial tenure. Before his appointment, he was selected by the judges of the Ventura Superior Court in 2005 to serve as a court commissioner, a position he held until his elevation to the bench.

Judge Borrell brought two decades of experience in private practice and a deep understanding of civil law to the Court. Before entering judicial service, he was a shareholder at Benton, Orr, Duval & Buckingham and prior to that, a partner at Borrell & Borrell.

His contributions to the administration of justice extended well beyond the courtroom. In 2014, Judge Borrell was appointed by the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court to serve as an advisory member of the Commission on the Future of California's Court System, to study and recommend ways to improve access to justice and long-term efficiency. He also served on the Judicial Council's Traffic Advisory Committee, including as its chair, contributing to the development and administration of statewide judicial policy. At the local level, he served on several Court committees, including the Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee, the Rules Committee, and the Traffic and Collections Committee. He chaired both the Rules Committee and the Traffic and Collections Committee, providing leadership on matters central to the Court's operations and administration.

The Chief Justice assigned Judge Borrell as a panelist on the Ventura Superior Court's Appellate Division. His service on the Appellate Division, which included appointment as the Presiding Appellate Judge, reflected his particular strengths as a jurist. He brought intellectual rigor, careful analysis, and steadfast impartiality to the work of reviewing cases and resolving appellate issues, making valuable contributions to the Court's appellate function over many years.

Judge Borrell's career reflects a longstanding commitment to legal education. He taught at the Santa Barbara and Ventura Colleges of Law from 2009 to 2011. His own academic credentials include an undergraduate degree in Finance from the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a Juris Doctorate from McGeorge School of Law, where he graduated Order of the Coif.

"Judge Borrell set a high standard of excellence to which we all aspire as judges," said **Presiding Judge Matthew P. Guasco**. "While we are sad to lose a jurist of Judge Borrell's exceptional skills and work ethic, we support Judge Borrell's decision to retire after a distinguished career of service in the cause of justice. We wish Judge Borrell the best in this next stage of his journey."

The Court extends its sincere appreciation to Judge Borrell for his many years of service to the people of Ventura County and his enduring contributions to the judiciary. His career reflects a deep commitment to the rule of law, the legal profession, and public service.

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2026 BEN E. NORDMAN PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD RECIPIENT: LOUIS J. ("LOU") VIGORITA

increase the number of volunteer attorneys from 32 in 2024 to 59 in 2026. Client clinic visits have grown from 618 to 808.

Thanks in large part to Vigorita's leadership, VCLA has also created online and telephone access for clients needing assistance, added full-time staff, streamlined operations and record-keeping, continued its partnership with the Ventura County Family Justice Center, and continued its collaboration with other legal services providers. As a result, the number of people receiving assistance in Ventura County has increased substantially.

Vigorita would credit much of this success to Paul Bujold and VCLA's board members. But his innumerable volunteer hours and vision are what led to all these successes.

Vigorita's efforts for VCLA, on top of all of his other public service over the years, make him a tremendously deserving recipient of the Ben E. Nordman Public Service Award.

This article was a team effort, including, but not limited to, the contributions of ***Don Greenberg****,* ***Wendy Lascher*** *and* ***Joe Strohman,*** *each of whom are well known attorneys in the Ventura County legal community.*





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LAWYER MENTAL HEALTH IN A SMALL BAR

by Martha Fernandez, LCSW

Practicing law in Ventura County has real advantages. You know the clerks by name. Opposing counsel on Monday is a co-panelist at a section lunch on Thursday. Reputations are built over decades, and most lawyers here would say that familiarity makes the work more civil.

It also makes one thing harder: asking for help. When the judge, the colleague down the hall and the attorney across the table are the same people year after year, a visible stumble can feel permanent. This article looks at what the research says about why lawyers delay getting help, and offers four practical moves that work in a bar where everyone knows everyone.

What the research shows

The most widely cited national study, funded by the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, surveyed 12,825 licensed, employed attorneys. Published in 2016 in the *Journal of Addiction Medicine* by Patrick Krill and colleagues, it found that 28 percent reported symptoms of depression, 19 percent anxiety and 23 percent stress on a standard screening questionnaire, and 20.6 percent screened positive for hazardous or harmful drinking. Problem drinking was more common among younger attorneys and those earlier in their careers.

Those are screening scores, not diagnoses. CEREVITY's review "The ABA Says Lawyers Are in Crisis, Here's What the New Research Shows" makes that point at length: the questionnaire, the cutoff and the sample all shape the headline number. The barrier finding in the same study is clearer, and it speaks directly to small bars. Among attorneys who had sought treatment for substance use, the two most common barriers were not wanting others to find out they needed help (50.6 percent) and concerns about privacy or confidentiality (44.2 percent). Attorneys who had never sought treatment named the same two barriers first.

CEREVITY's own data points the same way. In a 2026 review of 305 law firm equity partners who sought therapy through the CEREVITY network, 67 percent said they had hidden their strain from their firm. These were lawyers who did eventually get help, so they are not a random sample. Still, the pattern is consistent: the worry is less about whether help works and more about who will find out.

Four moves for a bar where everyone knows everyone

1. Choose care outside the local referral circle. In a county this size, the therapist a client recommended or the counselor who spoke at a section meeting may feel too close. A clinician licensed in California can generally see a client located anywhere in the state by telehealth, so a Ventura lawyer can work with someone in San Diego or Sacramento who will never turn up in a local case. Ask any clinician how records are kept and who can see them.

2. Tell one person just enough to protect the calendar. You do not owe your firm or your staff a diagnosis. A partner or trusted assistant only needs to know that you have a standing appointment that does not move. One sentence, said once, is usually enough to keep a recurring hour clear.

3. Use the State Bar's Lawyer Assistance Program as one option. The VCBA's Member Benefits page lists the State Bar of California's Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP). According to the State Bar, participation is confidential under Business and Professions Code section 6234, LAP counselors offer a free assessment, and attorneys can use up to two free short-term counseling sessions with a local therapist who works with legal professionals. The number is 877-LAP-4HELP (877-527-4435). The LAP also offers free one-hour presentations on wellness topics that qualify for an hour of MCLE competency credit, an easy fit for a VCBA section or for the Barristers, given that the national data shows the heaviest drinking among newer lawyers.

4. Watch for early signs before a client or court does. In lawyers, strain rarely shows up first in the work product. It shows up in sleep that no longer restores, irritability at home, a shrinking list of people you are honest with and small decisions that start to feel heavy. If two or more of these have lasted several weeks, that is the time to act, well before a missed deadline makes the decision for you.

A small bar can be an advantage

The same closeness that makes asking for help feel risky can also make it easier to offer. A colleague who notices that someone seems worn down, and says so privately and kindly, can do more than any program. Ventura County lawyers already look out for one another in court and at bar events. Extending that to mental health does not take a new initiative, only the willingness to ask a colleague how they are really doing and to listen to the answer.



Martha Fernandez, LCSW, *is a licensed clinical social worker with eight years of clinical experience and co-founder of CEREVITY, a private-pay concierge network of independent licensed clinicians built for high achievers, including attorneys. Her work appears at cerevity.com and in her book Wired to Burn: A Therapist's Guide for High Achievers Running on Fumes.*

Turn Settlements into Second Chances

Cy Pres allows unclaimed class action funds to be donated to nonprofit organizations that serve the public. To learn more, go to vcba.org/december-citations/.

By designating CASA of Ventura County as your Cy Pres recipient, you help provide trained volunteer advocates who ensure children in foster care are heard, protected, and given hope for a brighter future.
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BARRISTERS CORNER

Nominations for 2027 Barrister Board Positions are Now Open

Barristers provides annual programming each year to assist the newer members of our Bar with networking, mentoring, and furthering their education. Each year, Barristers organizes events for social engagement and entertainment (such as Trivia Night, Wine & Cheese Night and Meet the Bench), MCLEs (e.g., the Judicial Speaker Series and Bridging the Gap), and connects new lawyers (and law students) with attorneys in fields of expressed interest through its network. The 6-8-member Board of Barristers coordinates these events each year and is always looking for additional members (including law students) to assist with planning and to offer new ideas.

Do you know someone who would be a great addition to the Barristers Board? Would you like to be a member? We meet on the first Thursday of every month.

If you are interested, the following seats are available for nomination for next year's Barristers Board:

1. Member at Large (3)
2. Secretary
3. Treasurer
4. Vice President
5. President

Nominations may be emailed to *christal.porter@rodnunskylaw.com* (subject line: Barristers Nomination) and must be received by 11:59 p.m. on November 30, 2026. Nominations may only be made by eligible Barristers (described below).

Nominees will be confirmed for eligibility.

A "Barrister" is any member in good standing with the Ventura County Bar Association who, on January 1 of a given year, meets at least one of the following requirements: (i) is under the age of thirty-six (36) years; (ii) has been admitted to practice law in any jurisdiction for a period of seven (7) years or fewer; or (iii) has been in practice in any jurisdiction for a total of (7) years or fewer. Active law students who are members of the Ventura County Bar Association are considered "Student Barristers" and may serve on the Board as a Member at Large but may not serve as an officer of the Board.

If you would like more information or to see a Barristers Board meeting in action, please e-mail **Christal Porter** (*christal.porter@rodnunskylaw.com*) for information regarding the next meeting.

VCBA BAR LEADERS APPRECIATION RECEPTION

On behalf of the VCBA board, the special evening was dedicated to recognizing the 80+ volunteers who serve on various committees and boards for their invaluable service, leadership, and the profound impact they make on our legal community.







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Judge O'Neill recently retired from the Ventura County Superior Court after a 28-year career on the bench, the last 17 of which were spent in the court's civil division. He served as the civil supervising judge for over seven years and was the court's full-time settlement judge for six years. During 10 years of handling a civil vertical calendar and trial assignment, Judge O'Neill presided over all types of civil trials and law and motion matters, along with long-cause trials in other areas such as family law and probate. Judge O'Neill has significant appellate experience, and served as Ventura County's Presiding Judge and Assistant Presiding Judge. He brings to ARC a versatile and pragmatic background, whether called upon to mediate, arbitrate, or serve as a special master or referee.

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MOVIE REVIEW:

THE AI DOC - OR HOW I BECAME AN APOCALOPTIMIST

By Angela Salazar

I considered having AI write this review. How apropos would it be to have AI write a review about an AI documentary? But I promise, except for spellcheck, this is all me.

Recently, I had an uncomfortable experience in a law school class that shall remain unidentified, with a professor who shall remain nameless. We were in the last class before an open-book exam. The subject matter covered a section of law that most students were referencing online. Online exams lock the taker out of all programs except the exam software, so I asked whether this would be the case for our exam. If so, we needed to be prepared with a hardcopy version of the applicable laws. The professor's response was a tense warning that school could detect AI use in our writing. I tried to clarify my reason for the question, but the professor would not hear it and repeatedly reiterated the crime and punishment for using AI. I was, in not so many words called a cheater in front of my peers, some of whom I see weekly in the course of my job at a local immigration law firm.

The irony of this interaction is that, as an older student, not being well-versed in AI makes me irrelevant. But as described above, using AI can also label me a cheater. This vast dichotomy of unknown boundaries and standards regarding AI usage and application is the same in every industry and at every level, not just law school. The documentary *The AI Doc: Or How I Became an Apocaloptimist* shows that even AI creators are experiencing similar unknowns. The documentary covers both sides of what AI has the potential of doing, the good and the bad, with opinions from the people who built it or are well versed and working in it. But it also starts with the basics, including the question "What is AI?"

If you're confused about AI, you're not alone. Odds are you are an attorney or law student and wonder if your career is at risk, and how you should prepare? Or is it too late? How should you be using AI? Judges hate it, but clients love it. And in between are the peer comments: "He used AI," said as a compliment referring to genius efficiency, or said as an insult referencing laziness and stupidity. The documentary illustrates that both comments can be true, which is why we need to know how to use AI. It has the potential to take our productivity, intelligence, and the practice of law in two very different directions. This is why you should watch this documentary.

I especially loved two things about *The AI Doc: Or How I Became an Apocaloptimist*. First, that it approached a "techy," abstract, scientific subject and made it human. It is filmmaker Daniel Roher's question to understand what AI means for the world and its individuals; how will we earn and exist when computers are doing our work better and faster than us? The documentary was made over the course of a year, and during that time Roher's wife became pregnant and had a child. We feel his sense of urgency to get answers for his family. What kind of world did he bring his child into? He asked questions any concerned parent would ask. He dug deeper the way one does when their family's future is on the line. He sought out the experts, from creators like Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI to analysts like Ajeya Cotra, AI Risk Advisor. Almost everyone answered his invitation. Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk were noticeably absent.

If anything, you should watch this documentary to become acquainted with the players and names involved. Why does this matter to attorneys? Because not every model of AI is suited to the law, and because developments are happening quickly. Big law is setting the direction of AI in legal work, and you should know the names behind the partnerships. Kirkland & Ellis invested $500 million in AI innovation and a partnership with Palantir. Latham & Watkins purchased Nvidia GPUs (graphical processing units) that will be proprietary to only Latham & Watkins. They are developing their own legal AI that no one else can use. I wonder how this will affect attorney client privilege.

The second thing I especially loved about this documentary was the visuals, and I do not think it is because I was a former creative. Roher is an artist and filmmaker. It is obvious he comprehends visual concepts best. But even better, he takes concepts and knows how to make them visual. Expert ideas passed through his creative mind and were interpreted on screen through illustrations, graphics and videos that made it make sense. AI is the process of calculations executed at ridiculous speeds with mind blowing amounts of content. It is hard to grab these concepts. The visuals gave it handles.

My contracts professor, who I admired despite having made us cry, repeated ad nauseam, "No slice of bread is so thin that it doesn't have two sides", and this is why CITATIONS readers will love this documentary. The looming issue is whether AI will destroy us, or take us to a level of brilliant innovation that we have yet to comprehend. These two opposing thoughts are well fleshed out, supported, and countered against each other in the documentary.

The takeaway, and there's room for more than one, is that we each need to make an ethical choice on how we will use AI and how we will hold each other accountable as it grows. I chose to write this review myself, as well as my exam essay, because it is the right thing to do. The time and place to use AI is not here. And I hope, for me, that awareness is always self-evident and coming from within; never from external punishment.

The AI Doc, or How I Became an Apocaloptimist, is currently available on Netflix.

***Angela Salazar** is a 3L student at the Colleges of Law, a legal assistant at Howard J. McClure & Associates, and a member of the VCBA Barristers Board. Her previous careers include art direction in filmmaking, advertising and professional tennis.*

Scarcella, Mike. "Law Firm Kirkland to Spend $500 Million Developing Its Own AI Platform" Reuters, 28 May 2026, *https://finance.yahoo.com/sectors/technology/articles/law-firm-kirkland-spend-500-215908453.html*

"Latham Buys Its Own AI Servers in BigLaw First", Legal Cheek, 11 September 2026, *https://www.legalcheek.com/2026/09/latham-buys-its-own-ai-servers-in-biglaw-first/*



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MEMBER SPOTLIGHTS:

RENNEE DEHESA AND SUSAN McCARTHY

By Kathleen Maheu



Despite years of involvement in the Ventura County legal community, **Rennee Dehesa** admits there's something her colleagues might not know about her: She doesn't particularly like being the center of attention. That may make this Member Spotlight a little uncomfortable, but her nearly two decades of involvement with the Ventura County Bar Association makes her a fitting subject this month.

A Ventura native, Dehesa attended the University of San Diego before earning her law degree from California Western School of Law in San Diego. She was admitted to the California Bar in 2007 and joined the Ventura County Bar Association that same year.

Dehesa practices with Becker & Dehesa, LLP, focusing on trusts and estates. Her legal experience also includes family law, bankruptcy, and business law. She was drawn to the profession by a desire to help people navigate difficult times in their lives within a complex judicial system—a motivation that fits naturally with her current practice.

Over the years, Dehesa has been active in several legal organizations, including the Mexican American Bar Association (MABA), Barristers, the VCBA Board of Directors, and the Diversity Bar Alliance. Her involvement reflects a longstanding connection to the local legal community, even if she would prefer not to be the focus of attention herself.

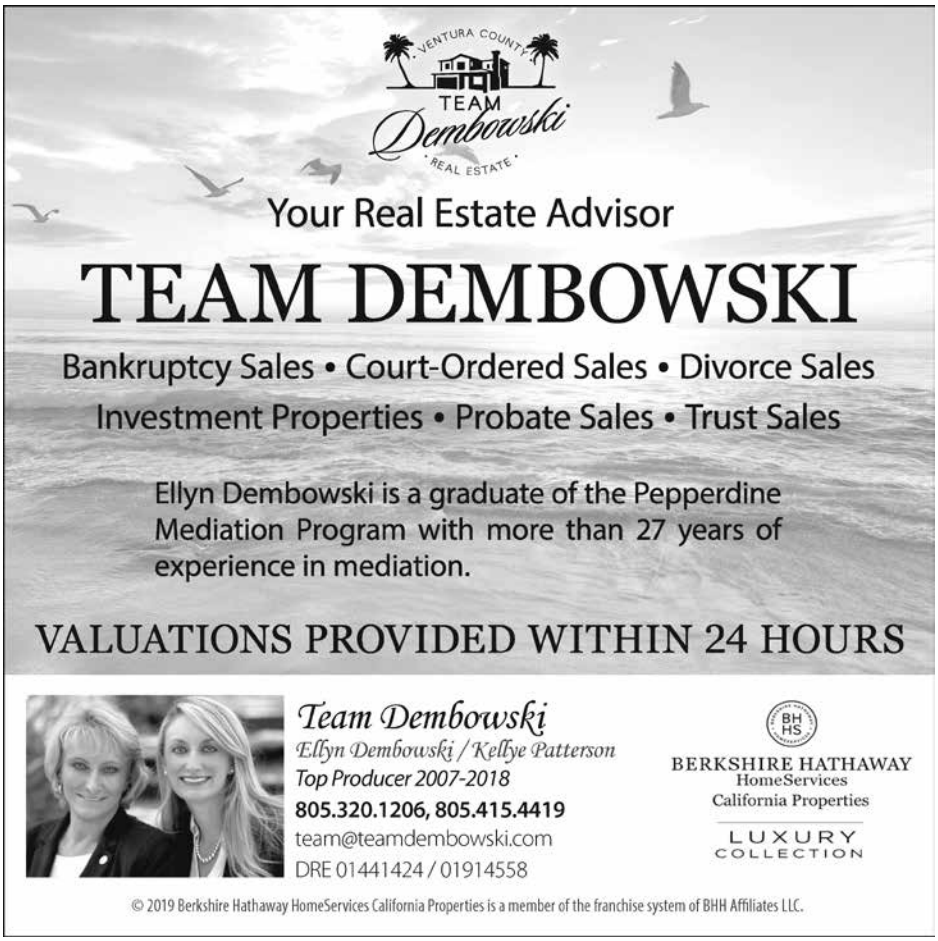
Dehesa now lives in Camarillo and has one child and a Labradoodle named Osten. Asked what she prizes most, her answer is simple: time. When she has some to spare, she enjoys reading by a pool, practicing yoga, or spending time at the beach, her favorite Ventura County locale.

Her favorite restaurant is Lure Fish House, and Italian food tops her list of favorite cuisines. Her favorite book is Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, while her choices for favorite film and television show are *Love Actually* and *Ted Lasso*, respectively.

Dehesa enjoys watching soccer (or fútbol) (fitting considering her fondness for *Ted Lasso*) and counts Spain as her favorite vacation destination. As for her favorite car, she sees no reason to look beyond what she already drives: "Mine—Prius."

Her choice of historical figure to interview would be Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and her favorite provision of written law is the Fourteenth Amendment. What would Dehesa be doing if she weren't practicing law? She imagines she would be "working for a company of some sort." Fortunately for Ventura County's legal community, she chose the law instead.

Her favorite quote offers a fitting conclusion: "Success is a journey, not a destination."





Susan McCarthy has spent much of her legal career bringing order to complicated disputes. At home, however, she faces a challenge that may be beyond even her considerable problem-solving skills: persuading two cats to play with her dog.

McCarthy shares a tiny Ventura beach bungalow with Evie, a German Shepherd mix she adopted in 2017, and two kittens, Keaton ("KeKe") and his spicy sister, Sriracha ("ChaCha"). Evie arrived as a highly reactive one-year-old dog, but years of training, for both Evie and McCarthy, transformed her into a well-behaved "love bug." Unfortunately, despite Evie's best efforts, the cats remain thoroughly uninterested in playing with her.

Originally from West Covina, McCarthy graduated from UCLA, where she remains a Bruin at heart, before earning her law degree from USC Gould School of Law. Admitted to the California Bar in 1986, she practiced in Los Angeles before joining Arnold LaRochelle Mathews VanConas & Zirbel LLP (A to Z Law) in 2003, initially as a contract attorney, then as an associate, and, since 2017, as a partner.

McCarthy's practice has always focused on civil litigation, in state and federal courts, arbitration, and other forums. Her experience spans business and commercial disputes, real estate litigation, business breakups, commercial lease and landlord-tenant disputes, probate and trust litigation, and elder abuse matters. What she enjoys most is the variety. Each case presents new facts, legal issues, and clients, along with the opportunity to learn something new and develop an approach suited to the particular dispute.

A VCBA member since approximately 2006, McCarthy previously served on its Board of Directors. She has also served on the Ventura County Trial Lawyers Association Board since 2008, including two terms as secretary. She is completing her second term as vice president and will become VCTLA president in 2027.

McCarthy moved from Los Angeles to Ventura in 1999, settling near the beach just three blocks from her brother and sister-in-law. She has remained there ever since. Not surprisingly, the beach is her favorite Ventura County locale, and RumFish y Vino is her favorite local restaurant.

Her interests extend well beyond law and her four-legged housemates. McCarthy has completed sixteen half marathons and Spartan obstacle course races, the latter involving distances of approximately five to sixteen miles and as many as 32 obstacles. She also enjoys hiking, snow skiing, e-biking, and functional weight training. Her favorite spectator sport, appropriately enough, is *American Ninja Warrior*.

For entertainment, McCarthy counts *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Goliath*, and *Slow Horses* among her favorites. She enjoys traveling, particularly to just about anywhere in Europe. And although she has undoubtedly driven many cars since, her favorite remains her first: a 1972 Triumph GT6.

If she weren't practicing law, McCarthy imagines two possible careers: training difficult dogs or traveling the world and writing about her adventures. Ideally, she would find a way to combine the two. Given her experience with Evie, the dog-training option seems particularly plausible.

McCarthy places the greatest value on her relationships with family, friends, and her "furry kids." Her favorite quotation, from Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams*, offers insight into her professional life: "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man."

For McCarthy, the words capture what she finds rewarding about litigation. Cases often begin with competing stories, documents, personalities, and legal issues that seem chaotic. The satisfaction comes from sorting through it all, determining what matters, and developing a coherent story and strategy for the client.

As for the situation at home, Evie may simply have to accept that some disputes cannot be resolved through negotiation.



Kathleen "Kat" Maheu *is a Partner with Nelson Comis Kettle & Kinney, LLP practicing family law, and Managing Editor of CITATIONS. She can be reached at* ***kmaheu@calattys.com***

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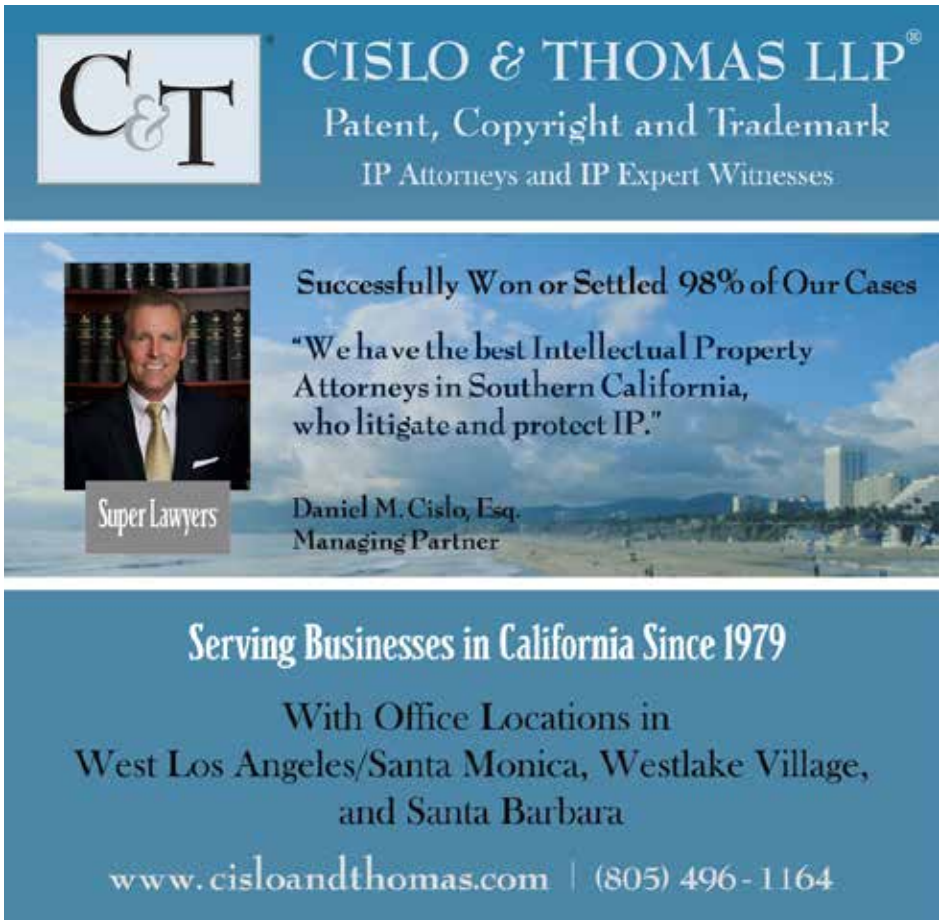
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