

By Michael D. White

The Value of Experience: SFVBA Past Presidents Share Their Insights

Leading the San Fernando Valley Bar Association from its founding in 1926 to this very day have been Boards of Trustees, from which have come the Bar's Executive Officers—its Presidents—who have led the Bar, navigating the organization all the while providing guidance and overcoming the myriad of challenges facing not only the Bar, but the legal profession and the community, as a whole

WHAT IS PAST
IS PROLOGUE

WHAT IS PAST, WROTE William Shakespeare in his play *The Tempest*, is prologue, and, while the original context is one of the choices between doing good and doing evil, in today's context, the quote has come to mean that what has gone before sets the stage—the context—for the present.

In just five years, the San Fernando Valley Bar Association will have served the Valley community for 100 years; a period in which its members have seen the Valley—a land mass—develop from a rural cornucopia of orange and olive groves, cattle ranches, wheat fields, and chicken farms into a thriving, diverse community of manufacturing, industry and commerce. A community covering as much ground as Boston, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. combined that would, if counted as its own independent city, rank as the fifth largest in the entire nation.

From the beginning of that century of service, the Bar has been instrumental in providing the Valley community with access to justice—from its early efforts to provide the Valley's handful of attorneys with a professional organization to call their own and the campaign to establish the first of several courthouses to its current status as one of the most active legal and community service bar associations in the entire state.

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profession and the community, as a whole.

Taking the Helm to Diversity

When he took office as President of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association in 2006, Richard A. Lewis saw the need to steer the Bar into better alignment with the changing face of the Valley community. Lewis served as SFVBA President in 2006 with the goal of making the Bar a much more diverse organization.

The challenge became the accomplishment he is most proud of when the Bar became an active member of the Los Angeles-based Multicultural Bar Alliance with the SFVBA claiming the distinction of being, to this day, the only regional Bar that is a member of the group.

"The Valley has become a very diverse community and in order to better represent their clients, Bar members have to understand the issues being faced by the people in the community so that when an individual comes to an attorney about a particular issue, the attorney needs to have a better filter to understand the particular challenges the person is dealing with," says Lewis.

"The Bar has shown real growth in that regard and I hope that I was able to be instrumental in helping that effort along."

Goals vs. Time

According to Caryn Brottman Sanders, who led the Bar in 2015, the Bar's Executive Officers find themselves with more to accomplish in terms of goals than there is time to fulfill them.

"I think one of the greatest challenges facing any incoming Bar

Michael D. White is editor of *Valley Lawyer* magazine. He is the author of four published books and has worked in business journalism for more than 35 years. Before joining the staff of the SFVBA, he worked as Web Content Editor for the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. He can be reached at michael@sfvba.org.



president is that we are only president for one year,” she says. “That means one year to try to accomplish your goals, while also working with staff and potentially new trustees or trustees that have been around a while and are reluctant to change.”

Kira S. Masteller faced the same issue—motivation—during her 2017 term as SFVBA President.

“Getting board members to be active and excited about promoting the Bar and its membership was a challenge,” she says. “There were some political issues that created a rift between Board Members that was also challenging to navigate because, of course, you cannot make anyone happy in a discussion as a leader where you do not take a position.”

But she adds, “disagreement is what makes the Board aware of what’s going on in our community and helps us to see many sides of an issue.”

According to Alan J. Sedley, the greatest test he encountered when he was handed the President’s gavel in 2012 was “the challenge of how to have the Bar be seen as an indispensable go-to organization to the near two million Valley community residents.”

“I took a stab at this from the outset, asking my Board to use their best efforts to spread the word that the SFVBA should be regarded by the public as a “Must Have – Must Need” resource for legal guidance and legal assistance in the Valley, and beyond,” he says.

“I believe that I achieved that goal; the Bar referral service blossomed during my tenure, as did the re-emerged affiliate Valley Community Legal Foundation. Attendance at the annual Judges’ Night set a new record at the time, and volunteerism by Bar members at any number of community functions flourished as well.”

Challenges Out of the Blue

Sometimes, though, challenges come in different, and entirely unexpected forms.

“I was president of the Bar in 2020, the year of the pandemic,” says Barry P.



The City Municipal Building in Van Nuys was dedicated in 1933. The SFVBA was the motive force behind establishing the Valley’s first Municipal Court in the new building.

Goldberg. “Most of the Bar’s programs were live events like Judges’ Night and other events. Live events were all cancelled and a main source of the Bar’s revenue dried up.”

As a result, Goldberg was forced to sideline his goal of growing more revenue to meet increased expenses during an unprecedented time in the Bar’s history.

“I had to fairly crunch numbers and budgets in order to make it to the end of my term,” he says, a process that involved “both boosting online programs and increasing memberships and making drastic cuts along the way. Those deep cuts included payroll reduction, renegotiating rent terms, and relying on the digital [rather than print]

publication of *Valley Lawyer*.”

Commenting on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the Bar, Kira Masteller feels that “the Bar has managed well through COVID by continuing to provide MCLE programs and networking events.”

Pre-pandemic, she adds, “The Bar was working hard to open up more in-person events with its new inviting [office] space and networking opportunities. It was going very well, but they have really been thrown for a loop in supporting the expense without those events.”

The Bar, adds Masteller, “is going to have to get creative yet again to keep going and providing its Members and the community with resources

and opportunities to get together as lawyers and share experiences, resources and opportunities to be of service.”

The massive cuts in the Los Angeles Superior Court’s budget created another unique hurdle for the Bar to straddle, according to Adam D.H. Grant, who led the Bar in 2014.

“The cuts resulted in the court being forced to shutter its pro bono mediation service for litigants,” he says. “The budget cuts required a dramatic reduction in the work force. Fortunately, the program had grown substantially over the years, but unfortunately, it required a great deal of administrative support.”

Gary L. Barr, who led the Association in 1992, faced another challenge, one that made headlines in the news and went to the core of the Bar’s core belief in the independence of the judiciary.

“There was a move to remove a judge over the sentencing of an individual in a criminal case,” Barr recalls. “I strongly believe in the independence of the judiciary and that a Judge should not be removed over the sentence in a criminal or a particular decision in a matter.”

The Board of Trustees, he says, “unanimously agreed with my position and the Bar publicly supported the independence of the judiciary and argued that the Judge should not be removed over the exercise of her discretion. The Bar received a great deal of publicity over its position, including television and newspaper interviews.”

The stand “not only helped the Judge who was not removed, but increased the visibility of the Bar.”

One challenge, though, is timeless—the quest for new members.

Increasing membership “and finding ways to provide more benefits for our members and to entice new members” was a primary goal of Leon F. Bennett, who headed the group in 1998.

Polishing and Modernizing

Fred Gaines saw the same challenge when he took over the reins as SFVBA President in 1999, a time when, he says, “the Valley served as a home to “smaller, suburban-type law practices” with family and bankruptcy attorneys in the majority.

“For corporate, entertainment, contract law and the like, people were still ‘going over the hill’ to Los Angeles proper of Century City,” he



Liz Post was named Executive Director of the SFVBA in 1994 and served in that position for the following 25 years.

says. That all changed, however, when “we saw a major shift in that with the development of the Warner Center office complex and the number of law firms establishing themselves on the Ventura Boulevard corridor in Encino and Sherman Oaks.”

The shift in the make-up of the Valley’s legal community offered not only opportunities to grow membership, but “we found ourselves heading into the new century with the need to upgrade our computer system, energize our programs, and enhance our image,” he says.

Gaines gives much of the credit for “polishing and modernizing” the organization to former Executive Director Liz Post, who came aboard

in 1994 and went on to serve as the organization’s “motive force” for 25 years.

He also lauds David Gurnick, the SFVBA’s only two-term President—1994 and 2013—for that “polishing and modernizing.”

“I was on the Board and served as an Officer in ‘94 when David was President,” Gaines says. “Our Executive Director had left and we were without one for quite a while. David was going in every day, opening the mail and making sure everything was running, all while conducting his own legal practice. He was instrumental in keeping things afloat and hiring Liz. All of us who’ve come after owe him an awful lot.”

One of the accomplishments that Gurnick best remembers came in his 2013 term.

It was, he says, “a fortuity born of tragedy as the SFVBA was able to give \$100,000 to the Valley Community Legal Foundation.”

The funds, he recalls, “were part of a referral fee our Attorney Referral Service received from a tragic personal injury case. We recognized the gravity of loss that generated the money, and were grateful to turn it into something good by giving it to the Foundation.”

For Robert A. Weissman, Bar President in 1996, it was building the reputation of the SFVBA as an organization that gave back to the community by learning from the success of other groups.

“I recognized from activities in other organizations that to get them done, I had to start well before becoming President,” he says, citing the Bar’s Blanket the Homeless program as an example.

“I felt that our association needed to be known for “giving back.” Without the help of our then Lawyer Referral Service Director and [future SFVBA Presidents] Mark Blackman and Christine Lyden, the project would never have continued. It’s now a flagship program of the SFVBA and has continued for 25 years!”

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Advice for Future Presidents

Speaking to presidents yet to serve, Carol L. Newman, Bar President in 2016, says: “Reach down in the organization and lift up the people whom you believe would be the best leaders—be proactive, not reactive.”

Lee K. Alpert, who led the organization in 1986, feels strongly that if someone doesn’t have the time to give their all to the position, they should pass on the opportunity to serve as President of the SFVBA.

“This is an organization that has been around and survived for decades and established new relationships with the judges, the communities and members of our profession and others,” he says.

“It takes time and leadership to maintain it and grow it...Take pride in what you do as it will speak to who you are and the Bar and its members have earned and deserve your very best efforts. Be proud of your profession and

show it by your actions. Consider a long-range plan and remember it is not all about you; it is about the best interests of the organization and its members.”

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–Lee K. Alpert

David R. Hagen served the Bar as President in 1997. He succinctly stated, “Don’t sweat the small stuff. The SFVBA, as an organization, is bigger than any

president or Board member’s term. It has been around for a long time and will outlast any of us.”

Robert Weissman advises incoming Executive Officers to “plan ahead because everything takes longer than you think. Determine as much as possible about what you desire to accomplish before you become president and begin implementing it. Determine what assistance you’ll need and have it lined up or in the process of being obtained before you become president.”

“Don’t just serve,” he adds. “Serve with a plan you’ve already begun executing before you become president and bring that plan to fruition during your term.”

Caryn Sanders advises that new SFVBA presidents “use the three years as an officer to get a head start on developing a plan or goal for your presidency and to reach out to people that can help you with that plan or goal in advance as one year goes really fast.”

According to Adam D.H. Grant, SFVBA President in 2014, incoming Bar presidents should learn to “delegate and appreciate.” He encourages them to “rely on the amazing trustees who sit at the table for your support and delegate to them as if you were doing yourself. And always remember to tell the staff as frequently as possible how much you appreciate their dedication and hard work.”

Two-time Bar president David Gurnick that new Bar leaders “make sure to nurture the leaders who will follow in the traditions of warmth, respect and integrity of our Bar Association.”

“Realize that the Bar is a truly collaborative effort of the trustees, members and staff, and you should recognize the strengths of the people around you and tap into those strengths. You should not take yourself too seriously; you should enjoy the experience.” 