

By Michael D. White

Overcoming Challenges: LACBA Looks to the Valley for Leadership



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ITS 142 year history, the Los Angeles County Bar Association (LACBA)—one of the largest voluntary metropolitan bar associations in the country—is being led by two Valley-based attorneys, one of whom is a Past President of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association.

“When I was president of the SFVBA in 2008, the Los Angeles County Bar was very strongly centered in downtown Los Angeles and the big firms were very active,” says Tamila C. Jensen, who now serves as President-Elect of the 15,000 members. “It would have been very surprising if a couple of Valley lawyers from smaller firms were even considered for those positions.”

Jensen, whose solo Granada Hills practice focuses on elder law and real property, currently serves with LACBA President Ronald F. Brot, founding

senior partner at the family law firm of Brot-Gross-Fishbein, LLP in Encino and a longtime, active member of the SFVBA.

Both assumed their positions with LACBA on July 1, 2019, as the organization was digging out from a time when internal strife had damaged it to the point that, according to *Metropolitan News-Enterprise* co-publisher and attorney, Jo-Ann W. Grace, the Bar had been “alienating those who were members of the association based on kinship to one or more of its specialty sections, which were being regimented and ill-served.”

Grace made her comments about LACBA’s past the following September when the law-oriented newspaper

named Brot one of its “Persons of the Year.”

Grace said Brot “was one of the first to sound an alarm, initially unheeded, that LACBA was on the wrong track...There did, however, develop a wide awareness that Brot was right; a reform movement was formed and it gained offices in a contested election—the first in 25 years—in 2016.”

With “tact, inventiveness, and spirit, Brot is continuing and building upon the wise reform efforts of his immediate predecessors as president, Mike Meyer and Brian Kabateck, in the quest to return LACBA to fiscal soundness, responsiveness to members’ needs, and relevancy—and, as they did, he has made huge strides,” said Grace.



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Primary Challenges

What challenges remain? At the very top of the list is to attract young attorneys to join and become involved.

“Most Bar associations are facing the same issues and several studies conducted by the ABA confirm that,” says Jensen. “In 2009, when I was president of the SFVBA, the issues that the Bar faced were dealing with cash flow and coming up with ways to have a more diverse Bar. We were depending heavily on the larger firms, and there continues to be a large number of them in the Valley that have been very supportive of the Bar over the years.”

Those large, established firms, she says, “continue to be absolutely vital, but it’s equally critical that we do all we can to attract young attorneys by providing the kinds of benefits and services that attract younger lawyers.”

Brot—who holds both his undergraduate degree and J.D. from the University of Michigan—regularly attends meetings of the National Association of Bar Presidents where, he says, the subject of appealing to new lawyers “is raised every

time we meet. It’s only recently that I think the focus is on the wrong issue. I think there was a successful formula for the Bar that existed for more than 140 years.’

The model as to how the Bar was organized worked, but, he says, “as what we call ‘Big Law’ evolved, and as a new generation of younger lawyers with different goals and aspirations started their practices, the Bar failed to change. The Bar stayed what it was and how it was, and when numbers started to decline, it wasn’t responsive to the needs of its members.”

That situation, says Brot, “continued at LACBA until just the last few years when we saw that we really needed to be different to attract younger lawyers. In 2019, we reached out through a Task Force to reach out to the large firms, individuals, and the bar associations throughout the county, including the San Fernando Valley Bar Association, to find out what people expect from the Bars they are asked to join. Rather than a Bar telling a young lawyer, ‘This is what you need,’ we are reaching out to find out what they want.”

As a result, LACBA recently launched a new app that provides ready access to Bar resources and facilitates sign-up for events and programs on a cellphone.

“We’re also providing outreach and provide programs at various law schools, in particular at this point, Loyola,” says Jensen. “We have a very active young lawyers section that is led by young attorneys who try to design programs that are suitable and attractive to their fellows. Membership in that section is free for the first two years. That gives them the opportunity to take advantage of the benefits and participate. That gives them a foundation so that as they become more settled, they can move into other areas. I think we’ll be seeing more of that over the next couple of years.”

Jensen, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, earned her law degree from the University of California, Davis—School of Law and holds an LLM

in Transnational Commercial Practice from Lazarski University in Warsaw, Poland.

“When I started my practice in Fresno years ago, it was more social,” she says. “Then I practiced in Indiana for a while and then came back to Los Angeles. At that point, the firm I was with didn’t encourage us to participate in the Bar because they didn’t want what they felt were distractions from our spending time on legal work. There wasn’t much encouragement to attend Bar events or be active in other ways. None of that is nefarious or bad; it’s just the way it was. Today, I see that law firms are much more supportive of



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their younger attorneys getting involved and participating. It’s actually easier today for them to be involved and their firms see that because their senior lawyers see the value in it.”

The key to remember, says Brot, is that “new attorneys are not waiting for ten years of Bar membership before they get involved. They want to make more of an impact sooner than later. Their career horizon is much closer than ours ever was and I’m not so

sure that's a bad thing. They have an integrated view of their personal and professional lives and I think that's great."

His goal? "To see how we can play to that and add to their legal experience in a useful, positive way, rather than pushing them in some given direction."

What the Future Holds

Greater and more proactive cooperation with smaller bars such as SFVBA—a plan lacking in the past—is a major goal, says Jensen. "Our plan is to develop events that we can cosponsor and try, periodically, to have a LACBA program in the Valley that we can work together on. We want to provide opportunities for both our memberships to participate together."

In a unique locale like Los Angeles, she says, "there are a lot of competing opportunities; affinity bars are very active and very attractive. But, I think both LACBA and SFVBA will be around for a long time to come as they both flesh-out their roles, which may not be the same as they were 20 years ago, but are still relevant. I am amazed at the variety of experience and the wealth of opportunities that they offer. I think that though our membership levels may be slightly down and some programs may not be viable anymore, both will prosper."

Recalling his early days in the practice of law, Brot remembers entertaining the notion that "the Bar played a more prominent role in influencing how law was practiced, how core policies were formed, and how social justice was administered."

The size of the Bar, he says, "supported the perception that the Bar was part of the daily life of lawyers in Los Angeles and I think that over time, the Bar clung to that notion, when, in fact, it was like giving a party with music playing and there was nobody on the dance floor. The

Bar didn't listen closely to its members over the last ten or twenty years and so the prominence of the Bar in everyday life was diminished."

As a result, he says, "the size of the membership hasn't swelled in proportion to the increasing number of lawyers coming out of law school. But, despite all that, I have to say that, though the numbers aren't where we'd like them to be, there is more enthusiasm, energy and buzz in the County Bar than I've seen in the last ten years."



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That upswing in energy is attributed, he adds, to the creation of several new sections and a new program to help attorneys dealing with the stresses inherent in the profession.

"We have a new Privacy and Cybersecurity Section and we're one of the first local bars in the country to have a Cannabis Section. We are seeing a lot of interest in our different practice sections creating networking opportunities. We've also rolled out a new Lawyer Assistance Program to help attorneys deal with the issues of

alcohol and drug addiction and mental health."

A Bridge to the Future

What does a career as a family attorney and a heritage of community service, passed down from his parents, do to prepare someone to head a group with the scope and breadth of the Los Angeles County Bar Association?

Family attorneys, Brot said in an earlier interview with *Valley Lawyer*, "have the opportunity to help people through what I feel is the darkest period in their lives. Some people say we deal with people when they're at their worst. I never say that. I feel we deal with people going through the worst, doing their best. We want to help our clients navigate their way through the situation they've found themselves in and that may not be pain-free, but, like going to the dentist, you endure what you have to and trust that it will work out in the end."

Over the years, he says, "I've learned to be a listener and, regardless of the emotions that have been swirling about, I need to make reasoned decisions. We have so many well-intentioned people in the Bar with so many different feelings and perspectives, you'd be surprised at the passion that our very-engaged Board brings to their work. I need to listen and I need to be empathetic with them as I would be with a client."

On the last day of his presidency, Brot says he would like to see "a reenergized organization comprised of members working collectively toward advancing their careers and better serving the disenfranchised members of our community."

"I'd like there to be a recognition that we can accomplish more together than what individuals can do alone. If we can help this new generation of lawyers find strength in numbers, a sense of communal purpose, and shared and individual satisfaction through the opportunities that are presented by our association, I will consider my time as president as a bridge to the future. I won't be so presumptuous to hope for anything greater." 