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# CONTRA COSTA LAWYER

Volume 38, Number 2 – March 2025

The official publication of the Contra Costa County Bar Association



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**2025 CCCBA Board of Directors** - Back row: Samantha Sepehr, Ann Battin, Jonathan Lee, Kristen Busby, David Pearson, Ariel Brownell Lee, Ray Robinson  
 Front row: Emily Nashban, 2025 Board President Sutter Selleck, Rachel Margolis Chapman, Ritzi Lam, Punita Bhasin and Indy Colbath.  
 Not pictured: Mike Pierson, Pa'tanisha Pierson



## Photos - Installation & Awards Luncheon



Congratulations to the winners of the 2024 Diversity Awards that were presented January 31 at Contra Costa Country Club in Pleasant Hill.



Above right, Punita Bhasin accepts the bronze level award from DEI Committee member Kristen Thall Peters.

Below right, Peters presents the gold level award to Benjamin Sanchez of Littler.



Presiding Judge Christopher Bowen delivered a state of the court address, and administered the oath of office to the board and section leaders.

Right, Board member Ariel Brownell Lee and 2025 CCCBA Board President Sutter Selleck take the oath.



# INSIDE

## Attorney Wellness: A Perennially Timely Topic

by Shannon Wolfrum, Co-Guest Editor



Each time I have come to a crossroads in my career, I have been called to continue in the field of family law. To keep practicing effectively in this emotionally charged area, I have employed strategies which are best distilled to one guiding principle: To be fit to help others, one must be fit themselves.

Of course, one has to be at their best to do their best. Intuitively and logically, lawyers know this, but how do we actually achieve wellness? If you have ever pondered this question, this issue has some insights for you.

When I was asked to guest edit this edition of the Contra Costa Lawyer with co-editor, Mary Grace Guzman, I excitedly accepted the opportunity. I am passionate about the subject of attorney wellness for many reasons.

From a global view, confidence in the judicial branch of government is essential to our Democracy. Interacting with a lawyer is often the primary contact a person will have with the justice system during their lifetime. If we serve our clients well, they will have increased confidence in the system.

Taking a more personal view, attorneys can and should aspire to experience satisfaction and joy in serving our clients. It is arduous work to obtain a license to practice law, even harder to gain proficiency in our chosen field, and hardest yet to stick with the work year after year. There is no shame in enjoying the fruits of one's labor, even while laboring. Plus, if we enjoy our work, it will show in our work.

Going back to my career as a family law attorney, I have come to accept that in most instances, property is hard to attain and easy to lose. While no one wants to give up more than they have to in a divorce, provided that each person is left with their rightful portion of assets and debts, then justice has been served. There are some cases

that tug at the heart where a person is left with less than they need to get by and they do not have the ability to recoup the loss. Yet, ultimately, almost always, the client is an adult who has self-determination, resources, and ability to improve their circumstances.

In contrast, the well-being of a child is non-tangible and children are subject to the decisions the adults in their lives make for them. In child custody work, the happiness and safety of a child has a rippling impact. What happens in a child's life affects the individual child, the child's family, the child's social circle, and ultimately all of society.

On occasion I have wondered if continuing in my particular area of law was sustainable. Assisting a client with retaining their lawful share of an estate can be stressful on its own; however, when a client's child is involved, the work takes on a more serious dimension. No attorney or judge who has worked in this field will dispute the work can lead to sleepless nights, at a minimum.

Again, this is why the concept of wellness for attorneys has been vital to me. I have been inspired to find ways to continue to do my best at the work I feel called to do.

In my pursuit of wellness, I have explored a variety of avenues. I started with the idea that the goal was to take care of body, mind, and spirit.

For my body, I love the outdoors and nature. I get out as much as I can to hike and kayak. For my mind, I read non-law related books, watch documentaries, and listen to podcasts. For my spirit, I find peace by spending time in nature. I find meaning by giving back through teaching, mentoring, and maintaining supportive connections with my colleagues. No one understands

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## Inside: Attorney Wellness

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what it's like to be a lawyer better than another lawyer.

It has also helped me to think about how taking care of myself benefits my clients. Some years ago, I woke up at three am, worried about a court appearance I had in the morning. I was upset not only about the hearing, but about how my lack of rest would impact my performance in court. A thought struck me, "My client deserves a well-rested attorney." I decided that instead of giving up on sleeping, I would use the "Calm" App, which I had but rarely used, to listen to a "sleep meditation." I was able to go back to sleep until it was time to get up and get ready. In the morning, I thought if I needed surgery, I would want the surgeon to be rested and feeling good. Certainly, a client in court feels the same about their lawyer.

My journey to being well is a journey, not a destination. I will always be searching for new ways to be more at peace.

In this issue, the contributors share their ideas about wellness and how they have taken care of themselves in their pursuit to practice law with their well-being intact. I hope you enjoy reading their work as much as Mary Grace and I have enjoyed working with the authors.

With the wisdom gained from an extensive tenure in the legal world the Hon. Richard S. Flier (ret.) details six principles for how he thrives in his career. Judge Flier tells us what he has learned over decades from being a Hearing Examiner, a Deputy District Attorney, a Super-

rior Court Judge, and a Neutral for ADR Services, Inc. It is an inspiring piece that makes me look forward to coming to work tomorrow.

Jennifer King writes about how having healthy boundaries at work increases her mental clarity and makes her practice more rewarding. She offers seven ways that setting healthy limits can improve your experience as an attorney.

Exploring an often-overlooked concept, Kristen Tabone's piece on the intersection between financial wellness and work-life balance offers points to ponder about how our financial health is a vital component in our overall well-being.

Ania Bednarczyk shares how early in her career inspiration from one of her mentors led her to practice meditation and mindfulness. Reading her article was a catalyst for me to re-start my imperfect, but sincere efforts to meditate.

Hengameh Kishani details her experience with balancing being lawyer and a mother. She passes on her tips for ensuring adherence to the California Rules of Professional Conduct while giving her all to the truly critical and important work of being a parent.

Finally, co-editor Mary Grace Guzman articulates the power of saying yes to commitments while also knowing when to graciously decline opportunities. She shares her insights into the balance between being open to chances to further one's career and yet not stretching oneself too far.

It has been a pleasure to co-edit this issue with Mary Grace. I hope the issue gives you a little extra nudge to take a walk, look up at the sky, and marvel at all the hard work you did to become a lawyer and all the good work you will do in the future.

*Shannon K. Wolfrum has practiced family law exclusively since her admission to the Bar in 2004. She is a Certified Family Law Specialist with a solo practice in Walnut Creek.*

*Shannon is an active member of the Contra Costa County Bar Association, serving on the Board of Directors for the Family Law Section since 2016.*

*One of Shannon's passions is teaching. She is an adjunct professor at Monterey College of the Law, teaching Contract Law to first-year law students. She also co-chairs the Mentoring Group for the Family Law Section. She has taught continuing education courses through the Contra Costa County Bar Association and CEB.*

*In her downtime and in pursuit of wellness, you can find her with her partner hiking, kayaking, cooking, baking sour-dough bread, and wrangling her three dogs and one cat.*



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## FEATURE:

# Longevity of a Legal Career

by Judge Richard Flier (Ret.)



1974



2005



2023

So, when the inquiry went out to pen an article about “Longevity,” my name was on the list of suspects. I am approaching my 80th birthday, I was a trial attorney for over a decade, a Superior Court judge for 20 years, a neutral for 20 more years and I still enjoy the law business.

There are many aspects of longevity other than merely the dash between the dates. For example, there is “internal luck.” Were you born with good genes? Did you experience any birth or health conditions that impacted your life?

There are also issues of external luck. During my lifetime, I experienced mumps, measles, chicken pox and whooping cough. No medicines or shots were available during those first few years at the end of World War II. Most importantly, before I was a teenager, the Salk Polio vaccine had been developed, so the

nightmare of polio was taken off the table. Other external risks include mandatory seat belts and warnings about smoking and cancer. Most recently, there was Covid which was especially worrisome for my age group.

Perhaps the biggest life/death risk my generation faced was being drafted into the armed services. Viet Nam was a reality about the time I was in college/law school. I have visited my high school recently and viewed the list of my classmates whose lives were shortened by that conflict. I considered myself fortunate.

Dealing with these risks, the best thing about this life’s ride is the quality of the horizons between then and now. An attorney once asked without any flavor of derogation, “How could you stay in law so long? Aren’t you tired of it?”



Simple answer for me is, “No, I enjoy this life, the people in the legal community, the work so critical to a democracy.” Personally, I have never regretted a moment that I became a lawyer. My work as a hearing examiner, deputy district attorney, judge and neutral has been challenging, but the rewards and experiences were incredibly positive for me. Even my commute to work has never been longer than 20 minutes!

**First Principle: Age is an artificial construct to mark the passage of time.**

Hastings College of the Law is my law school. Our tenured law professors were all 65 years old or older (“The 65 Club”). They were recruited from their original law schools due to mandatory retirement. That was a great loss for those schools and a wonderful boon for us. Collectively, we learned Torts from Prosser, Real

Property from Powell, Trusts & Estates from Simes, and Criminal Law from Perkins, among others. They were living proof that life does not end at some arbitrary age.

**Second Principle:  
Seek work where you want to live.**

My first legal job was as a “Hearing Examiner” based in San Francisco. We were state attorneys who conducted “Fair Hearings” to determine if social welfare applicants/recipients (AFDC, AB, ATD, etc.) received appropriate treatment by their resident counties that administered the various programs. There could be six to eight of these hearings a day. We would then write a proposed decision for the state directors of these social welfare departments based upon factual findings and the state regulations. These people were living close to the edge of life. We were given the

responsibility of making recommendations which would have a direct impact on the nature and amount of aid. It was a sobering experience, and we matured very quickly on this job.

**Third Principle:  
Seek a job that you want.**

I had always wanted to try cases. When the opportunity arose in Contra Costa, I jumped at the chance.

The work of a criminal law lawyer is never ending. From filing, to motion practice, to trial work---the work hopper is always full. The amount of freedom and responsibility that went with the work was gratifying. I worked at the Richmond DA's office. Our case load included a rich sampling of theft crimes, assaults, drugs, sex crimes and murders. We were allowed to handle more serious

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# Longevity

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cases as we became more experienced. The usual rule was after three years in municipal court a deputy could advance to felony trials in Superior Court. This was a great job! The work allowed personal development and there was constant contact with other deputies, defense attorneys including public defenders, and a complete range of judges, police officers, and court attachés.

## Fourth Principle: Take a leap of faith.

My work as a Superior Court judge had a steep learning curve. Coming from a criminal law background, the whole body of civil law and procedure had to be mastered. There was also a mental adjustment from advocate to judge. Once again, my fellow judges provided a lot of support. The attorneys I trusted provided a good measure of guidance. The cases were challenging but interesting. I also had the opportunity to serve on the first "Fast Track" panel in Contra Costa.

## Fifth Principle: If you enjoy what you are doing, you never have to work for a living.

My work in ADR is based upon my experience as a lawyer and judge.

The best part of this work is recognizing a legal problem, listening to the clients' concerns, and working on solutions that are win-win solutions for all sides.

## Sixth Principle: Examine your horizons fairly.

My life's ride as a lawyer has allowed me to gain knowledge and skills from all aspects of law. I personally experienced the change from laissez faire civil litigation to court-controlled "Fast Track," from indeterminant sentencing to determinant sentencing in criminal law, from personal appearances to Zoom appearances. I had the opportunity to know each of the persons bearing a courthouse name. More importantly, I had the honor of appearing before and serving with some of the best jurists and attorneys in the state. There will be a time for me to get off this ride, but not yet!

As for you and your travels in law, how do *you* feel about your occupation choice? Do you enjoy it? It can be stressful work, but there are rewards. How do you counteract the negative aspects of work? Do you have a supportive personal situation at work and in your private life?

**Final thought . . .  
"Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon."  
(Susan Ertz)**

## Richard S. Flier

- **Neutral**, ADR Services, Inc. - 2005-present
- **Superior Court Judge**, Contra Costa County - Elected 1984, Reelected 1990, 1996, 2002. Retired from the Bench 2005
- **Deputy**, Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office - 1973-1984
- **Hearing Examiner**, State of California, Office of Administrative Hearings - 1972-1973
- **Hastings College of the Law**, J.D. - 1971
- **University of California, Berkeley**, B.A. - 1967

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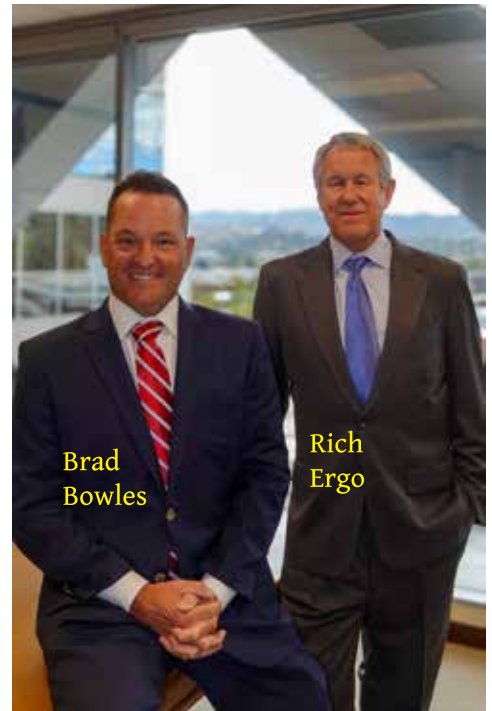
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To see Mr. Ergo's full biography, click on <https://www.bowlesverna.com/attorney/ergo-richard-a/>

Mr. Bowles has 25 years' experience in representing plaintiffs in personal injury matters, specializing in wrongful death and catastrophic injury matters. He routinely represents clients in state and federal courts throughout California, including as court-approved Class Counsel. He also represents clients in courts throughout the U.S. in individual actions, multi-district litigation and class actions.

To see Mr. Bowles' full biography, click on <https://www.bowlesverna.com/attorney/bowles-bradley-r/>

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For more information, please contact Rich Ergo at [rergo@bowlesverna.com](mailto:rergo@bowlesverna.com), Brad Bowles at [bbowles@bowlesverna.com](mailto:bbowles@bowlesverna.com) or Legal Assistant, Kathy Trujillo, at [ktrujillo@bowlesverna.com](mailto:ktrujillo@bowlesverna.com).

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# Strategically Saying Yes

by Mary Grace Guzman, Co-Guest Editor



As a young lawyer in 2010, I struggled to find my footing in my new career. I did not have any job prospects or traction within my legal community because it was the end of the Great Recession and legal jobs were scarce. Though I had a law degree and a bar license, I felt dejected and lost because I had a child to support and no job prospects. At this time, I didn't know the importance of our legal community and how to establish myself to grow my career. I didn't know where or how to start my lawyer journey.

In my first year as a lawyer, I attended a Santa Clara Alumni night at a San Jose Giants baseball game. I was thrilled to see former classmates and my professors. This space felt safe and familiar. At the event many of my fellow classmates were also struggling with establishing our careers because it was 2010 and our economy was recovering. I soon found myself in a conversation with one of my professor's wives who was a respected civil rights attorney. As our children played, she sincerely asked me how I was doing. In that moment, I felt safe and I explained my struggles and fears and how I was applying for work but "not getting anywhere." She then told me "go to your local bar association and just say 'yes' to any and all opportunities." She explained to me that saying yes to seemingly random volunteer opportunities would help me establish myself within my legal community and eventually help me find my legal career. She was one of the first lawyers to give me permission to be a lawyer with less than perfect grades and claim my space in our legal community.

## Learning to Say Yes

After this chance meeting, I left feeling confident in my ability to offer something to my legal community. I still did not feel like the smartest person in the room, but I

had something to offer, my time and effort. I then began my journey of saying “yes” to just about any opportunity that I could find. I volunteered when Judge Zuniga and Judge Becton hosted the “Color of Justice” where they invited high school students from Richmond and Antioch for a career day. I, the less-than-perfect student, found myself sitting at a table with Contra Costa judges helping in all of the planning of that event. Just months earlier, I would have never dreamed of such an incredible opportunity. All because I asked how can I help, when someone offered me the opportunity and I said “yes.”

Soon I found myself joining various committees and sections of the Contra Costa County Bar Association. I also landed my first job with Fishkin & Slatter. My mentors, Jerry and Lindsay, began creating opportunities for me to speak or write articles. They were always clear with me that participation was optional, but I again said “yes.”

My commitment to saying “yes” to my legal community helped grow my practice, gave me opportunities to present on legal ethics, and took time away from the grind of being a single parent. I also started to develop professional and personal friendships all from my willingness to say “yes.”

## Learning to Say “Yes” Strategically

After fifteen years of saying “yes” to many opportunities to present CLEs, write articles, offer pro bono representation, or even take on new responsibilities in my role within my firm, I am now finally feeling a bit spread too thin. I am no longer the hungry newly-minted lawyer hoping to earn a living and feed my child. I am now a lawyer in the middle of my career, overcommitted and an empty-nester seeking new ways to fill my cup that does not revolve around the career that I so dearly love.

I am now learning to strategically say “no.” Frankly, like many lawyers, I am afraid to start to say no because I do not want future opportunities to dry up. Though my role as an in-house lawyer does not require me to develop a book of business, I do fear that learning to strategically say no will negatively impact my career that I worked so hard to establish. With that said, I also recognize that my priorities have changed, and I want to have a little more time to spend on exploring my life outside of my career. I also am finding myself working longer hours within my firm because I service not only our west coast but also east coast lawyers.

So now I am embarking on my new journey to learn to strategically say yes, a more positive spin on “no.” I have

created two buckets. The first bucket is saying yes when I will do all the work myself. The second bucket is when I will decline but offer to find someone who can step into the opportunity. When declining an opportunity, as a more established attorney, we should encourage younger lawyers to step into the spotlight.

## Ways to Strategically Say “Yes”

- Decline the opportunity, but offer to find a younger lawyer to take your place. Then offer to guide the younger attorney through the opportunity. Example: sharing prior CLE materials for a younger attorney to build from.
- Partner with a younger attorney and assist them in the opportunity. Example: accepting a new client, working together to meet the client’s needs, assigning a younger attorney special projects, and allowing the younger attorney to take the lead in client meetings.
- Decline a leadership role, but find another capable lawyer to sit in your place. Example: When possible, encourage diverse lawyers to take leadership roles unrelated to issues involving diversity.
- Rather than saying no to a new project or client matter, say “yes” with conditions based on your existing commitments. Example: “Yes, I can do it, but my earliest availability is *insert date*?” This allows you to control your time, but also is a gauge to determine if the deadline is a real emergency or created by the client or supervising lawyer.
- For nonclient opportunities, such as CLE presentations or volunteer work, plan your commitments at the beginning of the year. These goals can be aspirational.

Saying yes to opportunities has shaped my career beyond my expectations. I look forward to passing future opportunities to newer attorneys and focusing on my other passions.



*Mary Grace Guzmán is a Professional Responsibility Counsel in the Office of General Counsel at ArentFox Schiff LLP where she advises firm lawyers on their professional responsibilities and risk management needs. She serves on the State Bar of California, Committee of Professional Responsibility and Conduct. Ms. Guzmán regularly provides MCLE programs throughout California and has been a monthly blog contributor for the Continuing Education of the Bar (CEB), writing about legal ethics and risk management.*

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**Direct Exam 1** - Core concepts – bring everyone to same baseline

**Direct Exam 2** - Challenges / Potential difficult situations

**Cross 1** - Core concepts bring everyone to same baseline

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**Experts 1** - Core concepts bring everyone to same baseline

**Experts 2** - Challenges / Potential difficult situations

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# The Meditation Advantage for Lawyers

by Ania Bednarczyk



When I was a young law student over a decade ago, I interned at the Department of Justice for a well-respected and now-retired lawyer, Mike Underhill. He was an experienced litigator in a complex and technical area of environmental maritime law. He handled cases of local and international significance with confidence and elegance. He was the lead attorney handling the government's case against BP for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the largest oil spill disaster in U.S. history. It was no accident he was selected to lead the team. Mike meant business. He took center stage in many other pressure-cooker cases of notoriety. It is almost guaranteed that anyone reading this article has encountered his work one way or another.

Mike had the kind of qualities one would expect of a lawyer of his caliber: hard working, organized, diligent and thoughtful. He mentored law students and offered internships to students from his alma mater. He was somewhat of a legal celebrity and on the cover of lawyer magazines. When I was still a law student, he gave me advice on how to do well in court. Years later, I still think of his words; "Channel your nervous energy into focused thought," he once told me. "Don't try to minimize your nerves, use your nerves to your advantage." It was an insight that made me a better litigator immediately.

It surprised me to learn that on most days late in the afternoon, I would find this titan of a lawyer sitting on the floor of his office in silent meditation. Eyes closed, legs folded, posture straight – quiet and focused. I knew enough about him to know that meditation was not merely a quirky facet of his brilliance, like Einstein's disheveled hair. No, there was something more to this he was tapping into. I didn't understand it, he didn't mention it, and I didn't ask him about it. I just knew that if a guy like him was meditating every day, there had to be something to it.

About 13 years later, I tried meditation for the first time. I had been a family lawyer for over 10 years, and prior to that, I worked on death penalty cases. My work had taken me to one of the most high-conflict areas of the law, filling my waking life with stressful events, stressed-out people, relentless deadlines, and difficult legal issues. Sound familiar? I needed to try something in my life to help me manage it better.

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# The Meditation Advantage

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For the first four or five days, I could only handle about three minutes of silence at a time. My goal was to observe my thoughts like passing clouds in the sky, gently releasing them down wind before they turned into involuntary chatter. Mindfulness. Eventually I was able to increase my meditation time to 20 minutes, and then an hour. I learned to treasure the moments of silence – sometimes fractions of a second – before the next intrusive thought busted in.

Most of our thoughts are like domineering houseguests that take a seat at our kitchen tables, barging in and demanding to be entertained with endless streams of coffee, tea and cookies. Many of these thoughts are automated and not usually helpful. We are so habituated to having a constant parade of thoughts that they no longer have to knock on our front doors to get in. They climb through the mail slot, climbing over us, our furniture and each other making incessant demands for attention. The familiarity of this circus tricks us into believing these are our native thoughts.

Meditation helped me realize that openly inviting the circus over for tea and cookies was exhausting. The act of observing the circus and setting the intention to let each thought “go” slowed down the parade of unwanted guests. Even a modest amount of inner observation reduced my anxiety, increased my focus and confidence, and left room for real clarity, insights, and creative thinking. I am a better version of myself on the days I meditate. And a better lawyer.

But don’t take my word for it; neuroscientists have much more to say about its benefits than I do. In an article published in *Nature* magazine in April 2015,<sup>1</sup> researchers found that mindfulness meditation involves, “a process of enhanced self-regulation, including attention control, emotion regulation and self-awareness.” It is associated with, “changes in brain structure,” resulting in enhanced attention, improved emotional regulation and reduced stress. Research about the effect meditation has on the neuroplasticity of the brain shows that meditation helps our brains “re-wire” in beneficial ways similarly to the changes happening in the brain of a violinist mastering music.<sup>2</sup>

On the flip side of all that beautiful meditation data is the reality of what mental health looks like for lawyers. The California Lawyers Association participated in research which showed that, “lawyers with high stress are 22 times more likely to contemplate suicide, and all lawyers are two times more likely to experience suicidal ideation than the general population.”<sup>3</sup> The study showed that gender-specific risk factors affected women lawyers more. Another study showed one in every five lawyers are challenged by alcohol abuse, the majority of which self-reported that their issues started in law school.<sup>4</sup>

To combat these issues, the California Lawyers Association recommends – you guessed it – mindfulness meditation for improving mental clarity and reducing stress. Don’t get me wrong, no one is suggesting you quit your job to become a monk; however, maybe introducing daily meditation, even

for only 15 minutes a day, is worth the cost of a raised eyebrow or skeptical look. In a job that prizes mental clarity, focus and memory, wouldn’t it make sense to put a pause on the circus going on in your head even just once a day?

1. Tang, YY., Hölzel, B. & Posner, M. *The neuroscience of mindfulness meditation*. *Nat Rev Neurosci* 16, 213–225 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3916>

2. Ricard, Matthieu, Lutz, Antoine, Davidson, Richard J. “Neuroscience Reveals the Secrets of Meditation’s Benefits”. *Scientific American*, Vol. 311 No. 5 (November 2014).

3. <https://calawyers.org/california-lawyers-association/impaired-colleague-addressing-attorney-competence-warning-signs-and-getting-help/>

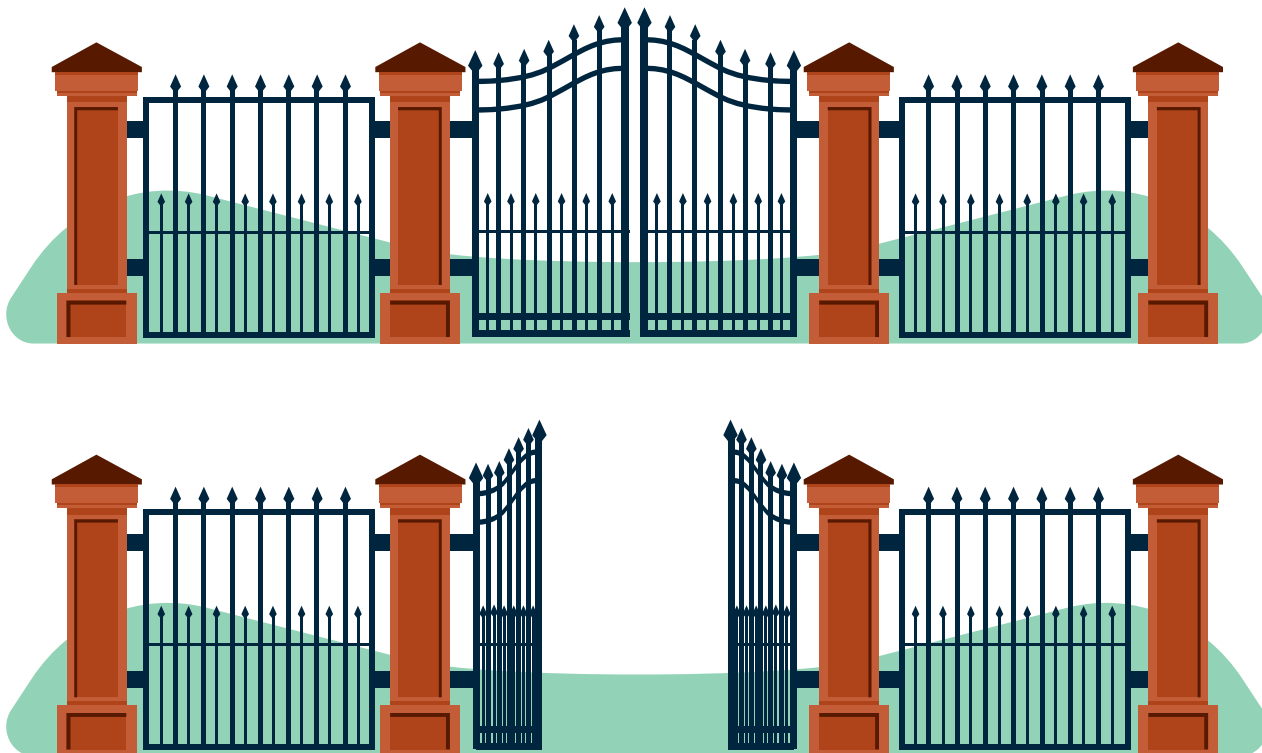
4. <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/workforce-addiction/white-collar/lawyers>



**Ania Bednarczyk** is a partner at Bednarczyk & Valerio, LLP, a family law firm located in Walnut Creek, CA, providing legal services to clients in divorce, domestic violence, and parentage matters. Ania is a member of the Contra Costa County Bar Association and the Alameda County Bar Association. In 2024, Ania co-presented a class for family law and appellate lawyers entitled “Unraveling the Statement of Decision Process in Family Law Cases,” presenting the class in multiple counties throughout the state of California. Ania previously served as the Chair of the Judicial Appointments Evaluation Committee in Alameda County. When not representing clients in family law matters, she contributes time to unrepresented litigants as a volunteer settlement attorney at the Contra Costa County Superior Court. Ania has received many awards for her work as an attorney and for her contributions to pro bono legal services.

# Boundaries are Beautiful

by Jennifer King



Legal practice can be an incredibly rewarding career, but it also comes with challenges which, at times, may test your mental health and passion for the profession. There is a potential for burn out from the long hours, emotionally-charged cases, and the constant pressure to meet your client's expectations, not to mention the pressure to meet your expectations of yourself.

After more than a decade practicing family law and running my own firm, I have learned that maintaining balance and enthusiasm for my career requires intentionality. It is my pleasure to share some practices which have helped me stay grounded and continue to find joy in my chosen profession.

## Building Structure and Boundaries

Early in my career, I learned the importance of setting boundaries. One of the most impactful changes I made was to make conscious choices about when and how I would be accessible to attend to clients and work.

For example, I stopped giving my personal cell phone number to clients unless absolutely necessary. When I do share my personal number, I set an expectation with my client that I have shared the information for a limited purpose, such as coordinating a court appearance. This small adjustment has made a significant difference in preserving my personal time, which allows me to recharge, so that I am

able to bring my fullest attention at the times when it most matters.

Within my first two years of practice, I learned to turn off email notifications on my phone. This allows me to check messages on my terms, preventing constant disruptions and giving me a sense of control over my day. Even minor adjustments like these can provide much-needed relief in emotionally taxing areas of law.

Boundaries are not just about protecting time, boundaries protect mental energy. Knowing I do not need to be immediately available at all hours gives me room to regroup, reflect and rest. The purpose of this is so I present my best self for clients.

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# Boundaries are Beautiful

Continued from page 17

I share this with you as a lesson I wish I had embraced earlier.

## Leaning on Resources and People

As many lawyers do, I opened my firm in 2011 with essentially no business experience. I quickly realized I could not do it all alone. I sought mentors who generously guided me through complex legal and business challenges. For the first few years, I frequently reached out to colleagues for sample pleadings, advice and insight. Those conversations were invaluable and helped shape the way I practice today. I found my colleagues to be gracious and supportive, willing to assist time and time again, if I just reached out and asked. It is my pleasure to support newer attorneys now.

Continuing legal education plays a vital role in my practice. Keeping pace with evolving laws and best practices sharpens my skills and deepens my expertise. Ongoing learning ensures I provide the highest level of representation for my clients, especially the children I advocate for in my role as minor's counsel.

## Embracing Technology

One of the best investments I've made is in technology. From web-based forms to complex workflow systems, technology streamlines much of our daily work, allowing us to operate efficiently. In family law, processes can quickly become repetitive and time-consuming. By automating and systematizing what we can, my team and I have freed up valuable time to

focus on more substantive legal work and client interactions.

Technology is not about cutting corners; it is about working smarter, not harder. Allocating overhead costs to improve internal systems is one of the best decisions I've made for the long-term sustainability of my practice.

## Building a Team You Trust

No matter how organized or tech-savvy you are, success in law depends on the people around you. I am fortunate to work with an incredible paralegal, Brigitte L. Anderson-Atkins, and associate attorney, Noel Guth. We've worked together for years; they feel more like family than colleagues. I trust them with not only

*Boundaries are not just about protecting time, boundaries protect mental energy. Knowing I do not need to be immediately available at all hours gives me room to regroup, reflect and rest. The purpose of this is so I present my best self for clients. I share this with you as a lesson I wish I had embraced earlier.*

the details of our cases but also the firm's livelihood.

A cohesive team dynamic fosters openness and innovation. I encourage my staff to question processes and suggest improvements. This collaborative spirit enhances efficiency and brings a sense of shared purpose to our work. Creating a positive work environment benefits everyone, clients included.

## Giving Back

I am deeply grateful for the attorneys who guided me when I was

starting out, and I believe in paying that forward. Over the years, I've mentored aspiring lawyers, including high school students who interned at my firm. Some have gone on to attend top-tier law schools and pursue exciting careers.

Giving back doesn't just benefit mentees; it helps me reconnect with the reasons I entered the legal field in the first place. Teaching, mentoring, and sharing knowledge reignite my passion for the law and remind me why this work matters.

## Pursuing Joy Outside of Law

Maintaining mental health is not just about managing work; it is also about enjoying life beyond it. I regularly reflect on whether my time aligns with my values. Practicing family law is a significant part of who I am, but I do not want it to consume my identity.

I carve out time each week to visit my parents for dinner and competitive card games. I make a point to stay connected with close friends. Outside of work, I have pursued hobbies that bring me joy. A few years ago, I took up scuba diving, which has become a passion shared with two of my best friends. We have traveled to dive spots worldwide from Africa to Fiji and beyond. Knowing there is an adventure on the horizon keeps me motivated during the more challenging work stretches.

## Accepting the Ebb and Flow

At one point, I feared that turning down cases would jeopardize my business. I worried about layoffs, lost income, and the potential closure of my firm. Over time, I've accepted that the flow of work is naturally cyclical. I have grown comfortable with the idea of keeping my practice small and selective.

By limiting the number of cases we take, my team and I offer higher-quality representation. This shift has improved client outcomes, reduced stress and increased job satisfaction for me and my team.

### Final Thoughts

To me, practicing law is a marathon, not a sprint. To sustain a long and fulfilling career, it is essential to establish boundaries, lean on others, embrace innovation, and cultivate joy outside of work. By fostering a healthy balance, we can continue to grow as attorneys while safeguarding our well-being. In safeguarding our well-being, we provide better services.



I hope these insights resonate with those navigating the inevitable stresses of legal practice. Our profession is demanding, but with intentionality and care, it can remain deeply rewarding over the span of a long and enjoyable life.

**Jennifer L. King** was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. Curious about human development, she earned a B.A. in Psychology with departmental honors from the University of California, Berkeley. This passion drove her to commit to advocacy at the University

of Illinois, where she earned her J.D. cum laude. As a law student, Ms. King took a deep interest in domestic violence. She gained experience at the University of Illinois's Domestic Violence Clinic and the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Clinic and found that her investment in psychology enable her to bring a unique perspective, skill set, and compassion to her legal work. These experiences, in particular, inspired her to begin her family-focused practice after graduation.



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# The Interaction Between Work-Life Balance & Financial Wellness

by Kristen Tabone

Newer attorneys are asked “What area of law do you want to practice?” Some say, “I want to help people, so I want to be a Public Defender” or work in public interest law. Others are focused on making money and want to go into big law or personal injury.

New lawyers often do not know what area of law they want to practice, and ask their peers or mentors for advice. In a Facebook group for law student and established attorneys, law students post questions about grades and court-appropriate outfits. Other posts inquire about what areas of law and career paths pay the biggest salaries. Seasoned attorneys share advice from their experience in various practice areas and firm sizes. Attorneys often suggest picking an area that makes you happy over a specific salary goal, because you will be sacrificing many hours working on client matters.

Newer attorneys can find happiness by following their passions, which can range from social justice work to corporate work. Research has shown a jump in new attorneys pursuing public interest legal careers, from just over 8% in 2022 to almost 9% in 2023, according to the American Bar Association’s employment outcome data. Public interest lawyers may not earn the big salaries of their private practice counterparts, but public interest



work can offer benefits such as loan forgiveness, better work-life balance, or an opportunity to advocate for one’s social justice passions.

Newer attorneys are also practical, given their debt incurred from law school. The American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division (ABA YLD) published a Student Debt Survey Report in September 2024. This report indicated that 75% of young attorneys who borrowed money reported that their debt altered the career plans they had

when entering law school. Apart from a change in their career plans, 76% of the attorneys reported their debt had caused them to delay getting married or having children, while over half indicated their debt prevented them from reaching savings, investment and retirement goals.

With student debt having such a deep impact on the lives and careers of young attorneys, how are they to succeed?

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## Work-Life Balance & Financial Wellness

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### Is Work-Life Balance Attainable?

The question for all attorneys is “Do you have a good work-life balance?” The Cambridge Dictionary defines work-life balance as “the amount of time you spend doing your job compared with the amount of time you spend with your family and doing things you enjoy.” Attorneys are known for their long hours and the consequential stress. Articles have been written about attorneys needing to create boundaries between their work and personal lives. The demands on attorneys vary depending on practice area, firm culture, and the professional and personal support they have.

While attainable, work-life balance looks different for every attorney. Some attorneys may prefer to work until 10 pm or work seven days a week. Other attorneys may prefer ending work at 5 pm or not working on weekends. Work-life balance is not a futuristic concept, but this balance is a process, not a goal.

Part of this process is recognizing how financial situations impact the feasibility of work-life balance. Can you financially handle not working too much or going out on the weekends? Are you constantly thinking about your debt? These are the often overlooked questions that should not be ignored.

### The Impact of Understanding Finances

As a younger attorney going into my third year of practice, I have become

increasingly aware of my finances. As we grow up, we are taught to be mindful of our budgets, to save, and to think of our future. But it is not until you start receiving your first bigger paychecks that you realize how you deal with your hard-earned money will affect you in different ways. Having a healthy relationship with our finances can also have lasting impacts on our daily decisions and mental health. While you may enjoy certain expenses in the moment, like spending \$2,000 on concert tickets, you may regret them later on. You may take two years to pay off your credit card interest from the concert expense.

*Having a healthy relationship with our finances can also have lasting impacts on our daily decisions and mental health. While you may enjoy certain expenses in the moment, like spending \$2,000 on concert tickets, you may regret them later on.*

Part of having a healthy relationship with our finances includes understanding them. Everyone should understand their firm’s 401(k) plan, if available, how to save and build money, and how to reduce debt. New attorneys should take advantage of the resources at their disposal, including speaking with someone at your firm or a financial planner, reading books, or attending financial planning presentations. In July 2023, the Contra Costa County Bar Association held a presentation with a financial planner, James (“Jimmy”) Diehl of MassMutual, called “Your Financial Planning Overview: From Student Debt to Retirement.” Despite the general information presented, that event gave me the opportunity to connect with a

trusted financial planner. After the presentation, I spoke with Jimmy and received great financial advice on managing and growing my finances, given my situation. I had previously read various library books on investing and watched multiple social media videos of “regular” people managing their finances through things like high yield savings accounts, but wanted more definitive answers. I was in my second year of practice and lucky enough to not be overburdened with work. Recognizing the importance of planning ahead, I was ready to make financial changes.

Working as an attorney is known to be one of the most stressful jobs. Not all areas of law have the same stress level, but the compound effect of stress from the job and stress from finances, can lead to several issues. In the ABA YLD’s 2024 Report, 68% of borrowers found that debt was a source of stress and anxiety and 67% of the young attorneys, with and without loans, reported feeling stressed about their finances. Additionally, about half of the respondents who owed \$100,000 or more in student loans reported that debt makes them feel depressed or hopeless.

New attorneys must remember that having a good work-life balance is possible, if you are intentional. Whether you are in the field of law you always wanted to be in, in a financially necessary field, or if you have debt, the key to your wellness is to keep learning and growing. Wellness is not simply about working hours. Learning about your finances and how your financial decisions impact your personal and professional life is a continuous process that can lead to big results.

1. [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal\\_education\\_and\\_admis-](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admis-)

sions\_to\_the\_bar/statistics/2024/class-of-2023-online-table.pdf

2. [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/young\\_lawyers/2024-student-loan-survey.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/young_lawyers/2024-student-loan-survey.pdf)

3. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/work-life-balance>

**Kristen Tabone** joined M.S. Domingo Law Group as an Associate Attorney in 2022. She handles

estate planning, probate and trust administration and litigation, and conservatorships. Kristen is a first-generation college and graduate student.

She obtained her BA in Sociology with a concentration in Criminal Justice in 2017 from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo (graduating Magna Cum Laude in three years) and her Juris Doctorate in 2021 from Golden Gate University School of Law (graduating in the top 12% of her class). While attending GGU, Kristen received the Witkin Award for Academic Excellence in Writing and Research, Business Associations, and Entertainment Law, the CALI Excellence for the Future Award in Evidence, Golden Gate's Women's Employment Law Clinic, and Advanced Torts, consistently appeared on the Dean's List, served as an Associate Editor on GGU's Environmental Law Journal, and graduated as a Public Interest Law Scholar. Kristen was admitted to the California State Bar in 2021 and is a member of the CCCBA and the Robert G. McGrath American Inn of Court.



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## COMPETENCE REDEFINED:

# The Reality of Being a Competent “Lawyer-Mom”

By Hengameh Kishani



On June 10, 2022, my life changed overnight. Within 24 hours, it felt like everything turned upside down. Ironically, it wasn't just my life that had shifted—my inside had suddenly become my outside. I gave birth to my first child.

The minutes, hours, days and weeks that followed my son's birth blurred together in a haze of emotion and adjustment. Within three months following this metamorphic event, I was back at work full-time as a litigator. I faced the same professional expectations as before, but now I had an entirely different set of personal responsibilities to juggle. In fact, it felt like I was clocking into a second job while still clocked into the first one.

Yet, I was not only expected to, but required to, adhere to the rules of professional conduct and provide competent representation to my clients. But how could I do this when my mind felt foggy, my emotions were all over the place, and my body was exhausted?

California Rules of Professional Conduct Rule 1.1 provides that



“a lawyer shall not intentionally, recklessly, with gross negligence, or repeatedly fail to perform legal services with competence.” For the purposes of this rule “competence” means to apply, in addition to the learning and skill, the “mental, emotional, and physical ability reasonably necessary for the performance of such service.”

While Rule 1.1 and related state bar case law sets forth clear standards for legal competence, it subtly leaves an important question unanswered: *what does it mean to have the mental, emotional, and physical ability in your personal life that is reasonably necessary to be a competent lawyer?* The absence of a detailed explanation may suggest that the answer should be inherently obvious. But is it?

In those first few months back at work, I remember feeling like I was failing at everything. At work, I felt distracted, thinking about the time I was missing with my son. At home, I struggled with wondering if I was giving my work the attention it deserved. The pressure to keep up with my contemporaries while being the perfect “Instagramable” mom was overwhelming. I felt like I floated through the days, disconnected from both my professional goals and responsibilities and my personal joys. I felt as though no one truly understood what I was going through and surmised that other “lawyer moms” were doing it all effortlessly. I felt alone.

When people asked how I was doing, I naturally overshares. I candidly would say, “This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” To my surprise, I quickly learned many “lawyer moms” felt the same way. However, perhaps pressure and guilt forced us to hide behind a façade of having it all together. Yet, there’s a unique power in admitting your challenges and being met with empathetic soli-

arity. When I shared my challenges, I realized I was far from alone.

The social expectations to “have it all together” can leave you feeling like you’re wearing a mask, but when you reveal the cracks in that façade, something powerful happens. You begin to find others who are in the same boat, navigating the same difficult terrain of balancing career and family, and you begin to realize that your feelings – though deeply personal – are not unique.

In a profession where competence and confidence are paramount, it might seem counterintuitive to embrace vulnerability. Lawyers are trained to project strength

*When people asked how I was doing, I naturally overshares. I candidly would say, “This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” To my surprise, I quickly learned many “lawyer moms” felt the same way*

and control. Admitting to your struggles and being overwhelmed doesn’t diminish your capabilities. On the contrary, it highlights your humanity.

Perhaps Rule 1.1(c) of the California Rules of Professional Conduct also applies to the great balance of parenting and lawyering. It provides that a lawyer who does not have the sufficient learning and skill when the legal services are undertaken may nonetheless provide competent representation by “associating” with another lawyer who is reasonably competent. Through association with others, we not only gain support, but also learn valuable strategies to navigate challenges.

Sharing our struggles can create a sense of community, which can provide the support and strength needed to navigate multiple roles with competence. What’s the secret to being a competent attorney-mom? *Your community.*


The old saying should include “it also takes a village to raise a working mom.” A competent attorney-mom is not an isolated individual; she’s supported by a network. This network doesn’t look the same for everyone. It could consist of your significant other, your friends, your siblings, your colleagues, other moms, or even your therapist. Support doesn’t diminish your competence – it enhances it.

Being a working mom doesn’t have to take away from your competence as an attorney. Indeed, motherhood has sharpened my skills as a litigator. I am more able to manage multiple high-stakes situations simultaneously than ever before. The balance is never perfect, but with the right support system, it is sustainable.


Parenthood is a multifaceted role, and the challenges go beyond finding a network. Guilt, for example, can be an ever-present shadow. One particularly poignant moment occurred during my own postpartum journey. I was explaining to my therapist that I feared that my son might one day resent me for leaving him with someone else to go to work. My therapist, a working mom herself, offered a perspective that transformed my thinking: “Or, he may be proud that his mom is not just an amazing mother, but also a bada\*\* attorney. Maybe, one day, he’ll look for that same strength in a partner.”

Through juggling the demands of both parenthood and a legal career,


Continued on page 26 ►

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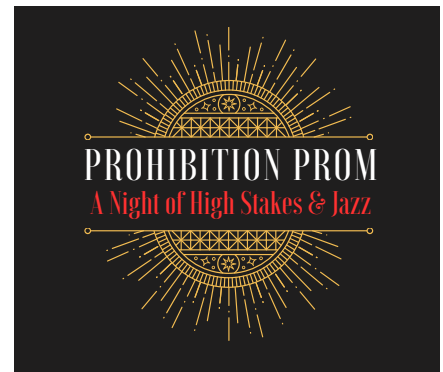
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In addition to her teaching duties, Professor Tyler is an author. She coauthored a book with the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg entitled "Justice, Justice Thou Shalt Pursue: A Life's Work Fighting for a More Perfect Union". She was Justice Ginsburg's law clerk and hosted her for a visit to Berkeley Law in 2019.

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## CCCBA is ready to celebrate at the Prohibition Prom!

Mark your calendar for Saturday, May 3 and plan to join the CCCBA at Round Hill Country Club. Tickets are on sale now at [www.cccba.org/attorney-events](http://www.cccba.org/attorney-events) and there are amazing opportunities to sponsor this event!

This is your night to step into the speakeasy and let the law take a back seat. It will be an evening of jazz and casino games, dinner, dancing – all set in a 1920s speakeasy and atmosphere.

Contact Sarah Marin for sponsorship opportunities for this party for the legal profession at [smarin@cccba.org](mailto:smarin@cccba.org) or (925) 849-8849.

## Competence

Continued from page 25

you deepen your understanding of the art of prioritization. Every day is an exercise in decision-making and evaluating how to allocate your limited time. What becomes clear is that you can't do it all. But by navigating these challenges with intention, you also have the opportunity to grow as an attorney. For example, you can refine your communication skills, learning from the practice of guiding a child who is discovering how to express themselves, and in turn becoming more adept at articulating your own needs and boundaries – not only with clients but also with opposing counsel

and colleagues. Being a competent attorney *and parent* goes beyond simply checking boxes or meeting deadlines. It requires cultivating the emotional intelligence to balance your roles, the courage to seek help when you need it, and the wisdom to understand that true competence isn't about achieving perfection. Embrace the journey and know that you are enough – both at work and at home.



**Hengameh Kishani** is a partner at Temmerman, Cilley, Kohlmann & Norcia, LLP, based in their Danville office, where she focuses primarily on trust and estate litigation.

Hengameh welcomes and encourages connections with other mothers, whether for support or simply to connect.  
 Email: [hkishani@tcklawfirm.com](mailto:hkishani@tcklawfirm.com)



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# CELEBRATING: Lunar New Year

CCCBA celebrated its 8th annual Lunar New Year, this year at Yaedam Korean BBQ in Pleasant Hill. Judge Glenn Kim welcomed the group and recognized Mika Domingo, James Wu, Judge Benjamin Reyes II and Judge Joni Hiramoto for launching the inaugural Lunar New Year event eight years ago.





# CALENDAR

## UPCOMING EVENTS | OVERVIEW

**March 13** | CCCBA

### **Cellphone Forensics:** Applications in Discovery and Investigations (Zoom)

**Speaker:** Tom Plunkett, ArcherHall

Noon – 1:15 pm | 1 hour General MCLE credit | \$15 members of the Barristers and Legal Support sections, \$20 CCCBA members, \$40 non members

**March 13** | Women's Section

### **Women's Section Annual Scholarship Fundraiser**

(In Person)

5:30 pm – 1:30 pm | Contra Costa Country Club, 801 Golf Club Rd., Pleasant Hill | \$65 members of the Women's Section, \$75 CCCBA members, \$85 non members  
**Sponsors:** JAMS  
Gibbons & Grillo APC | Signature Resolution | Judicate West | Pamela Ross Legal Services, PC

**March 19** | Solo Practice/Small Firm Section

### **Breakfast with the Solo/Small Firm Section** (In Person)

7:30 am – 8:30 am | Sunrise Cafe, 1559 Botelho Dr., Walnut Creek | Free for members of the Solo/Small Firm section, \$20 CCCBA members, \$40 non members

**March 20** | Elder Law Section

### **Who's On First? Defining the Key Roles in Representing Incapacitated Clients** (Zoom)

**Speakers:** Mark Schmuck | Lara Heisler | Melissa Schmitt

Noon – 1:15 pm | 1 hour General MCLE credit | Free for members of the Elder Law section, \$20 CCCBA members, \$40 non members

**March 25** | CCCBA

### **Lean In 2.0 - Exploring Progress in the Legal Profession with Judge Jill Fannin (Ret.)** (Zoom)

Noon – 1:15 pm | 1 hour Elimination of Bias MCLE credit | \$15 for Barristers, Law Students and Legal Support members, \$20 CCCBA members, \$40 non members

**March 27** | CCCBA

### **West County Judges Meet & Greet**

(In Person)

5:00 pm - 7:30 pm | Los Moles Beer Garden, 6120 Potrero Ave, El Cerrito | Free for Judges, \$25 CCCBA and ACCTLA members, \$85 non members

**Sponsors:** Alameda Contra Costa Trial Lawyers Association | Judicate West

**April 22** | CCCBA

### **A Very Civil Q&A - Bench Bar Lunch** (In Person)

**Speaker:** Hon. Danielle Douglas

Noon - 1:15 pm | Wakefield Taylor Courthouse, 725 Court St., Room 300, Martinez | 1 hour General MCLE credit | Please submit questions for the judges by April 11.

**April 24** | Wellness Committee

### **Nourish and Unwind: A Wellness Lunch** (In Person)

11:45 am – 1:30 pm | SweetGreen, 1556 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Walnut Creek | Free (buy your own lunch) | Friends are welcome

**May 1** | Senior Section

### **Law Day 2025: The Constitution's Promise – Out of Many, One** (Hybrid)

**Speaker:** Professor Amanda Tyler, UC Berkeley School of Law

Noon – 1:30 pm | 1 hour General MCLE credit | Lafayette Library, 3491 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette | Free for CCCBA members, \$40 non members

**Sponsors:** Law Office of Lorraine M. Walsh | Arvonne DeMarco and Law Student Section

For more information, see page 26.

**May 16** | Solo/Small Firm Section

### **3rd Annual Solo/Small Firm Summit: The Power of Productivity and Positivity** (Hybrid)

11:30 am – 5:00 pm | 3 hours MCLE credit | Lafayette Library, 3491 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette | \$50 Solo/Small Firm members

**Sponsors:** ABA Retirement Funds | Feldman Law Group

**May 29-31** | Education Committee

### **Learning by Doing: 3-Day Experiential Trial Practice Course** (In Person)

**Speakers:** Adam Carlson | Jonathan Lee  
Times Vary | CCCBA Conference Room, 2300 Clayton Rd., Concord | 10-13 hours General MCLE credit | \$595 CCCBA members, \$795 non members

**Sponsors:** Commercial Bank of California | US Legal Support

For more information, see page 14.



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**LOOKING FOR A FIFTH ATTORNEY** to fill a vacancy in our suite in a top drawer, two-story building at 1211 Newell, Walnut Creek, near Broadway Plaza. The available space is a corner "partner" office, 17'8" x 12'10", with a Mt. Diablo view, and includes a secretarial cubicle. The office has access to our conference room, and there is security to the suite. We provide VOIP phones and high speed internet as a part of the rent. If interested in joining us, please email Dean Christopherson at [dac@calaw.com](mailto:dac@calaw.com).

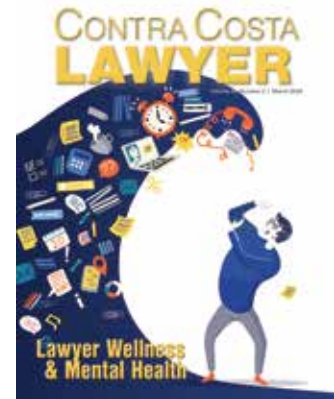
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Did you know that you can run classified ads in Contra Costa Lawyer and also on the CCCBA website? Classified ads run on the CCCBA website for 30 days. Members pay just \$85 per month for online classified ads that can include photos or graphics. For information, please contact Carole Lucido, CCCBA Communications Director at (925) 370-2542 or [clucido@cccba.org](mailto:clucido@cccba.org).

## Contra Costa Lawyer Magazine - Print and Online



The Contra Costa Lawyer is the official publication of the Contra Costa County Bar Association. It is published every other month for an audience of more than 1,500 attorneys, judges and court officials, law libraries and public officials involved with the administration of justice in Contra Costa County and has a readership of approximately 4,500 online.

Both the print and online editions of Contra Costa Lawyer have won awards of excellence from the National Association of Bar Executives.

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Contact CCCBA Communications Director Carole Lucido if you have questions on advertising, [clucido@cccba.org](mailto:clucido@cccba.org) or (925) 370-2542 or contact Development and Programs Manager, Sarah Marin for questions on sponsorship, [smarin@cccba.org](mailto:smarin@cccba.org) or (925) 849-8849.

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