

Unity Bar of San Luis Obispo County— A Conversation with Justice Hernaldo J. Baltodano (California Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, Division 6)

with Tara Jacobi

Tell us about the Unity Bar.

The Unity Bar of San Luis Obispo County is about community. Comprised of judicial officers, lawyers and law students, we believe in inclusivity, serving others and positively impacting our legal profession, judiciary and access to justice. We have partnered with the Women Lawyers Association of San Luis Obispo County and stand on the shoulders of giants who came together to form the Sacramento Unity Bar.

Thirty-six years ago, attorneys Luis Céspedes, then President of La Raza Lawyers, Jerry Chong, President of the Asian Bar Association of Sacramento, and Renard Shephard, President of the Wiley Manuel Bar, formed the Sacramento Unity Bar. When these bar leaders assumed their respective offices, their three bar associations were engaged in fierce competition for what they perceived to be too few judicial appointments for distinguished minority attorneys.

But Céspedes, Chong and Shephard intended to, and did, end bar competition for diverse

judicial appointments by the governor.

"All we wanted to do was to force an alliance between the three bar associations to work together, support each other and not believe it was every bar association for itself—and the hell with everyone else," Jerry Chong said at the 25th annual Unity Bar Dinner in 2012. "And we affirmed our pledge to work together, to protect, defend and advance the interests of all three bar associations. It was, 'All for one and one for all.' I don't think any of us expected what the Unity Bar has become."

The Sacramento Unity Bar has inspired generations of lawyers and judges across California, including in San Luis Obispo County, to become actively involved in community outreach, promoting unity on many fronts. Today, our Unity Bar is strengthened by sister Unity Bars across California, including the counties of Sacramento, the Inland Empire (San Bernardino and Riverside), Merced, Santa Barbara, Kern,

Orange, Yolo, the Central Valley (Fresno), Tulare and San Diego.

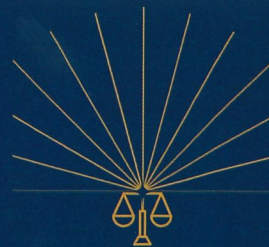
No one would have, or could have, imagined in 1987 that visionary Luis Céspedes would become the governor's Judicial Appointments Secretary in December 2020. As Céspedes aptly observes, "Now more than ever, the work of the Unity Bar is critical" for educating the public on the importance of our judiciary in an era of significant divisiveness and conflict.

The larger cities in California seem to have Unity Bars. How will San Luis Obispo County's Unity Bar compare?

Having practiced law and served as a judicial officer in San Luis Obispo County for many years, I believe that our Unity Bar is well situated to contribute meaningfully to the Unity movement. Although our legal community is small in numbers, it is a dynamic one—comprised of judges, lawyers and support staff who care deeply about making

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SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY



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the world, and our community, a better place.

It is also incredibly collegial. Here, at home, we care about each other. We also have a community-based law school in San Luis Obispo, which draws upon local attorneys and judicial officers to serve as adjunct faculty and whose mission is focused on making law school more accessible and affordable for our residents. Collectively, these qualities lend themselves to fostering a collaborative community that is close-knit and open to growth and self-reflection.

Despite only having been in existence for just a few months, our Unity Bar put on a successful Inaugural Event on October 5. The theme was "Access to Justice: Stronger Together." We attracted judges, lawyers and law students from across California. In addition to San Luis Obispo County judges Craig van Rooyen and Matthew Guerrero, and Unity Bar members Lisa Sperow, Melissa Chabra, Gregory Gillett and law school Campus Dean Erica Flores Baltodano, we hosted Judicial

Appointments Secretary Luis Céspedes, Unity Bar Founder Jerry Chong, Unity Bar Leader Jessie Morris, and Associate Justice Shama Mesiwala from the Third District Court of Appeal.

Through the generous sponsorship of local attorneys and law firms, numerous students from San Luis Obispo College of Law, Cuesta College, and beyond were able to attend. We heard inspiring remarks about increasing access to justice, finding common ground with others, lifting others up and the qualities that make excellent judicial officers.

What do you see as the greatest threat to diversity in the legal profession? And why?

Tribalism. One definition describes it as "loyalty to a tribe or other social group, especially when combined with strong negative feelings for people outside the group." Not only is tribalism the antithesis to inclusivity, but it also undermines public confidence in our most sacred institutions, including the judiciary, because it shakes the citizenry's belief in its legitimacy and effectiveness of our halls of justice.

Perhaps Justice Thurgood Marshall summed it up best when he said this about tribalism: "The legal system can force open doors and sometimes even knock down walls. But it cannot build bridges. That job belongs to you and me. Afro and White, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, our fates are bound together. We can run from each other but we cannot escape each other. We will only attain freedom if we learn to appreciate what is different and muster the courage to discover

what is fundamentally the same. America's diversity offers so much richness and opportunity. Take a chance, won't you? Knock down the fences that divide. Tear apart the walls that imprison. Reach out, freedom lies just on the other side."

How, specifically, does the Unity Bar of San Luis Obispo County plan to advance diversity, equality and inclusion in the legal field?

The Unity Bar can only be as effective as the community in which it lives. That community includes all of us. So, for diversity, equality and inclusion to mean something, we must make the time to engage with each other.

Indeed, one of the reasons for hosting an Inaugural Event was to provide a space to do just that—to break bread together, engage in dialogue, discuss what diversity means for us in the legal profession, and how we can incorporate community service and education into our respective legal roles.

This community engagement can take many forms: pro bono work, coaching mock trial students, judging mock trial competitions, supporting local legal services providers, contributing to the San Luis Obispo County Bar Association Scholarship Fund, modeling civility, mentoring junior lawyers and law students, teaching at our local law school, and being intentional about creating space for kinship.

A former federal law enforcement officer said it this way: "It's hard to hate up close. It's hard to hate someone once you sit and stare into their eyes and start to understand where they're



Justice Hernaldo J. Baltodano

coming from, and why they feel the way they do. We have to get up close if we are to bend these lines. We must start seeing one another more clearly. We have to resist stereotypes. We have to look for information beyond anecdotes. And we must understand that we need each other."

How can readers join the Unity Bar of San Luis Obispo County? What types of activities or events is the SLO County Unity Bar planning?

The Unity Bar will continue partnering with its sister Unity bars, the Women Lawyers Association of San Luis Obispo and the San Luis Obispo College of Law to create spaces for civil dialogue and kinship through social mixers. We will engage in

community outreach to encourage young people to pursue a legal education and educate them and our broader community about the work we do as lawyers and judges.

We will also recommend the best and brightest to the bench. The Government Code emphasizes a judicial candidate's broad legal experience, including litigation and nonlitigation experience, industry, judicial temperament, honesty, objectivity, community respect, integrity, health, ability and diversity of life experiences. See Government Code Section 12011.5, subdivisions (d), (o).

We also plan to mentor law students and junior attorneys, encouraging them to consider judicial careers. Earlier this year we collaborated with the Kern

County Unity Bar and hosted a virtual conversation with Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu. And on September 18, our Unity Bar and the Santa Barbara County Unity Bar coordinated a joint presentation titled "Journey to the Bench" with the current Chair of the Judicial Nominees Evaluation Commission, the Presiding Judge of the Santa Barbara County Superior Court, and an appellate justice from the Second District Court of Appeal.

To participate, it's as easy as visiting www.slounitybar.com to sign up to receive information about upcoming events.

Thank you for having this conversation about the SLO County Unity Bar. ■

Unity Bar's Inaugural Event October 5, 2023

by Gregory Gillett

Photos courtesy of Kerrin Adams

On October 5, 2023, the newly formed Unity Bar of San Luis Obispo County held their inaugural event at The Cliffs Hotel in Shell Beach, featuring keynote speaker Hon. Luis Céspedes, Judicial Appointment

Secretary, Office of the Governor. Joining Secretary Céspedes were Associate Justice Shama Mesiwala (3DCA), Associate Justice Hernaldo Baltodano (2DCA), Presiding Judge Craig van Rooyen, and Judge Matthew Guerrero. Cosponsored by

the Women Lawyers Association of San Luis Obispo County, the well-attended event included attorneys and judges from 10 counties throughout the state, with the largest judicial delegation from Santa Barbara County.

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Bar President and Unity Bar founding member Gregory Francisco Gillett opened the evening by sharing the vision of the Unity Bar.

For more information on the Unity Bar, go to www.slounitybar.com.

“We are here tonight to support judicial candidates who reflect our community, but we are also here to set the expectation that these judges, after appointment, remain engaged in their community.

We are here tonight to bring together lawyers, judges and the justice community through education, training and inspiration.



SLO Bar Association President
Gregory Francisco Gillett

We are here tonight to support law students who are in school while maintaining full-time employment and raising a family.

We are here tonight to be present in our K-12 educational system and be examples to our children, to show them that being a lawyer or judge is a noble profession and that anyone, despite their background, their story or their circumstance, can not only become a lawyer but that they can become a leader.

And most importantly, we are here tonight to show our community that justice, true justice, is an ideal worth fighting for. Although it is an imperfect path, if we come together with open hearts, intellectual honesty, the willingness to work and—dare I say—love, justice will prevail.”



Keynote Speaker Hon. Luis Céspedes,
Judicial Appointment Secretary,
Office of the Governor



SLO Bar Association Vice
President Melissa Chabra



IS PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE



KHOULOU PEARSON has joined the firm as a litigation associate where she will focus on business and real property disputes. Prior to joining Glick Haupt Marino LLP, Khouloud worked as a prosecutor in New Mexico. After moving back to California and passing the California bar, Khouloud shifted her focus to civil litigation and administrative law. Khouloud was raised in San Luis Obispo and is dedicated to serving her community. She currently serves as the President of the Board of Directors for the San Luis Obispo Legal Assistance Foundation, a member of the Templeton Recreation Foundation, and recently was appointed to the Templeton Community Services District Board of Directors.