



A call to action: The importance of involvement and leadership

MY INTRODUCTION TO THE LAW AND CAALA, AND HOW TO BEST USE THE ASSOCIATION TO BUILD YOUR CAREER

“Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence.”

– Sheryl Sandberg

As trial lawyers, we work hard daily for justice for our clients. Many of us represent people who are seriously injured, harmed, or abused. As we litigate their cases, we may encounter novel issues or situations that lack a clear-cut answer. Seeking input from others may be critical to find a solution. Sometimes, that assistance can come from being a member of an organization, such as CAALA, which puts on educational programs, has listservs and a document bank, offers case-collaboration meetings, and other resources.

I first learned about CAALA when I was in law school. During summers, I worked as a law clerk at a firm then known as Greene, Broillet, Taylor & Wheeler (Greene Broillet, et al.) as one of eight law clerks. Before hiring us, they told us they would not be hiring any attorneys, but as summer law clerks, we would receive a wealth of experience and networking opportunities that would lead to attorney positions at other well-respected law firms. We all gladly accepted our law clerk positions.

That experience opened my eyes to what it meant to be a trial lawyer representing clients with catastrophic injuries. I went into law school wanting to be a district attorney so that I could try cases. But my first torts class, coupled with my work at Greene Broillet, et al., led me to discover my true passion as a plaintiff’s trial lawyer.

As a law student, it was easy to feel intimidated by trial lawyers, especially the ones who are among the best in the field. However, to my pleasant surprise, I soon learned that the attorneys at the firm were kind people who were passionate

about obtaining justice for their clients. When Bruce Broillet – one of the best storytellers I have ever heard – would ask my opinion about a case, I felt so important. All of the law clerks were a close-knit group and to this day, I am still friends with many of them. While we worked as law clerks, we discussed that having someone like Bruce Broillet or Browne Greene asking us for our opinions made us want to work even harder to help our clients.

The importance of CAALA

My time at Greene, Broillet, et al. also introduced me to CAALA. Several of the firm’s partners were CAALA past-presidents or were on the leadership track to becoming future CAALA presidents. I knew early on that I wanted to get involved with CAALA because I saw firsthand the many benefits that CAALA offered. Christine Spagnoli and Geoff Wells invited me to CAALA board meetings, introduced me to CAALA leaders, and showed me how to get involved with CAALA.

I started off by volunteering to serve on the CAALA Education Committee. Back in the day, CAALA used to hold a silent auction during the CAALA Las Vegas convention. I also volunteered to assist with the silent auction. Soon after, I became an appointed CAALA board member. While serving as a board member, I participated on various committees. This participation led to invitations by leadership for me to serve as a vice-chair or a chair of different committees, which I happily accepted.

I had learned so much from CAALA and its members, that I wanted to pay it forward by running for the Executive Committee and one day serving as the CAALA president. But I wanted to take the time to serve as the chair or vice-chair

of as many committees as possible so I could learn as much as I could about the inner workings of CAALA.

That process also helped me to learn more about my leadership skills and style. I agree with the following saying: Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others. Before I ran for CAALA secretary on the Executive Committee, I wanted to make sure I was ready for the leadership roles that followed, including as CAALA president.

Becoming a CAALA officer

To become the president of CAALA, a person must first run for the secretary position on the Executive Committee. The CAALA board votes at the September board meeting each year on the secretary election. The CAALA board knows that by voting for someone to be the CAALA secretary means this person will be a future CAALA president. A person moves through different positions on the Executive Committee before becoming the president such as: secretary, treasurer, VP of policy and procedure, vice-president, president-elect, then president. Additionally, a person continues to serve on the Executive Committee for three more years as the past-president. Serving on the Executive Committee is a nine-year commitment and something not to be taken lightly.

Being on the Executive Committee is time-consuming, but you have a key role in making important decisions that impact CAALA’s members, our legal practices, our clients, and the community. The CAALA board is also essential in this process. The Executive Committee and the CAALA board are committed to CAALA’s Mission & Vision: Empowering Attorneys/Advocating for People. We believe in justice, protecting the right to

trial by jury, excellence in advocacy and education, inclusion, integrity, professionalism, and civility.

We also meet with leaders of the Los Angeles Superior Court, the Association of Southern California Defense Counsel (ASCDC), and LA-ABOTA to promote civility, to collaborate on implicit bias programs and other matters that are important to our members and their practices. We also collaborate with leaders of other organizations such as the Consumer Attorneys of California, Los Angeles County Bar Association (LACBA), and other organizations, including affinity bar associations, to pursue common goals.

Diverse perspectives only strengthen an organization and the practice of law. We can learn from each other, give different opinions, listen with an open mind, and learn to disagree in a respectful way.

Paying it forward

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

Leadership is a means of giving back or paying it forward. The simplest way to define “pay it forward” is that when someone does something for you, instead of paying that person back directly, you pass it on to another person. There are many ways that a person can get involved with paying-it-forward activities. A person can start by looking for opportunities to do something kind for a stranger, such as paying for their coffee or groceries. On a larger scale, a person may volunteer her or his time for an organization, such as CAALA.

When I was growing up, I had no idea that being a lawyer was an option for me. My family did not know any attorneys, and I never thought of being an attorney. It was not until I went to college that the thought of being an attorney started to be more realistic. Unlike many of my friends who knew the profession they wanted to pursue when they started college, I did not have a clear understanding of what I wanted to do.

By my junior year at UCLA, I participated in a mentorship program and was paired with an attorney – the first one I had ever met. I could not wait to ask him about what is involved in law practice. But to my disappointment, he complained nonstop about his job. He told me that being a lawyer is miserable. He spent most of the hour telling me to run far away from the legal profession. I left the meeting with my “mentor” feeling disheartened and I wondered if other attorneys were as miserable as this gentleman. I wondered why he even bothered to meet with me. I soon realized that I needed to find out from other attorneys if they felt the same way as my so-called “mentor.”

I then had an internship with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF). The attorneys I met at MALDEF were incredible and so passionate about their jobs and their mission. It was refreshing to know that there were attorneys who felt they were making a difference in a positive way.

You don’t learn to practice law at law school

Law school did not teach us about how to practice law. We had to learn that on the job. But discovering that organizations could help provide guidance and ways to improve our skills made a huge difference. As trial lawyers, storytelling is essential. Connecting with the jury is key. We also need to find a way to connect with our clients. How can we tell our client’s story effectively if we are not able to obtain the complete story from our client and other witnesses?

We are not taught in law school how to make those connections. As practicing attorneys, it is invaluable to either learn tools or refine those tools so that we can do the best for our clients to bring their story to life in front of the jury. My involvement with CAALA helped me to grow as an attorney, while having an incredible network of support. Being involved with committees initially as a regular member, and then as a board

member, has provided me with the opportunity I wanted to pay it forward. As an Executive Committee member and future CAALA president, I am able to give back to others in a more impactful way so that we may all do the best for our clients, for each other, and for the community.

For anyone who wants to get involved with CAALA or any other organizations, I encourage you to pursue that goal. There are many ways to get involved. With respect to CAALA, start by participating on a committee that interests you. The CAALA Education Committee meetings are held every month before the board meetings. Some folks who attend the Education Committee meetings also stay and attend the board meetings. It’s a great way to get to network with other CAALA members and obtain a better understanding of how to help with CAALA’s Mission. There are other committees including Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI), Judicial Pipeline, Membership, New Lawyers, Political and Legislative Affairs, Vegas Convention Planning, Wellness, and Women in Law. In addition, CAALA has a Plaintiff Trial Academy and Legal Support Staff Committee. You are also welcome to write an article for CAALA’s Advocate magazine or submit your name or the names of others to be considered as potential speakers or moderators for CAALA seminars and webinars.

It does not take a lot to give back a little. If someone helped you with your cases, consider doing the same for someone else. It can be something as simple as introducing yourself to a new attorney who may not really know anyone at an event or mixer, finding out the area of law they practice, and connecting that person with other attorneys. If you want to give back even more, there are countless ways to do that by getting involved in legal organizations.

Having a voice

“Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn’t be that women are the exception.” – Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Having a voice empowers individuals and encourages them to actively participate in a cause, goal or objective. Diverse viewpoints can spark new ideas and lead to more creative solutions. We all have a voice, but not everyone may feel comfortable expressing their opinions. There are ways to feel welcome in using your voice. CAALA's Women in Law Committee is a great way for women of different backgrounds and experiences to come together to support each other. Also, the CAALA Women in Law conference that is held every year is about empowerment while learning about different tools to use in our legal practices.

We all have a story. Sharing our stories with others is helpful because there is so much we can learn from each other, we can provide support or guidance, and we can make a difference. The attorneys at MALDEF who shared their stories with me during my summer internship at UCLA gave me the courage to believe that I could do what I had considered to be the impossible, and that was to be an attorney. I met attorneys who had the same or similar cultural backgrounds as me and similar stories. At that time, the president and general counsel of MALDEF was a woman who had been doing an incredible job leading the organization. The mentorship I received from the attorneys at MALDEF led me to law school.

As the first person in my family to attend law school, I had no idea what to expect. The mentorship I received from the attorneys at Greene, Broillet, et al. opened my eyes to the practice of law, where I knew I could help make a difference while helping people from different communities and backgrounds. Once I became an attorney, I joined CAALA not only to grow as an attorney and to eventually give back, but I wanted to have a voice.

Having a role in organizations and in leadership not only gives us a voice, but we also get to express opinions, concerns or input from our members and the community. If you want to see change,

you can be the change by taking action and having your voice heard. Coming up with new programs, providing the names of different speakers who know their topics, and creating opportunities for others that will have a lasting impact are some great ways to contribute.

Mock trial in elementary school

One example I would like to share is from 2024 when I served as the president of the Mexican American Bar Association of Los Angeles County (MABA). MABA held an inaugural mock trial with elementary school children at Roosevelt Elementary School in Lynwood. The students were in the fifth and sixth grades. We provided the kids with a discrimination fact pattern that took place at an elementary school: A student was suspended for shaving her head after she saw members of the boys' swim team do the same thing. Her mother sued for discrimination.

During the mock trial, the students served as the parties' attorneys, as witnesses, the bailiff, the court clerk who administered the oath to the witnesses, and the jury. An attorney served as the judge. Another attorney gave the opening statements for each side because the students wanted to see how to do one. The students who played the roles of attorneys conducted direct examinations of different witnesses. One student also volunteered to conduct a cross-examination on the spur of the moment. The members of the jury deliberated and reached a verdict. Every student in the class played a role.

The following week, the students sent thank you cards to the attorneys who organized the mock trial. One of the students said she wants to be an attorney when she grows up. The teacher said the students in her class who were usually quiet were the first ones to volunteer to play the attorney roles. The mock trial was the first time the school students were able to actively participate in different roles in the legal profession and it ignited an interest and belief that they too may pursue a career as an attorney.

CAALA member, Cynthia Santiago, who also served on the 2024 MABA board, played the role as the judge. Cynthia and I organized MABA's inaugural mock trial. If we want to see more diversity and inclusivity in the legal profession, then it is important to start introducing that profession to the students at an early age and especially while they are in elementary school. Involvement in organizations provided us with the opportunity to hold the mock trial.

School visits are also important. About a month before the mock trial, CAALA's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee chair over the past two years, Griselda Rodriguez, who is also a MABA member, attended a school visit with other CAALA/MABA members, including Cynthia Santiago. The boys and girls at the elementary school were engaged and spent the hour asking numerous questions about the legal profession.

CAALA's current chair of the DEI Committee and longtime CAALA member, Ronni Whitehead Otieno, is the immediate past president of the Black Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles (BWL). All of these incredible leaders have taken the time to participate in organizations and their contributions have had a significant impact.

Time commitment

Trial lawyers live busy lives. Before COVID, we would spend a lot of time on the road traveling to and from in-person court appearances, depositions and meetings. In addition, we would spend countless hours working on our cases at the office. Throughout COVID, we replaced in-person appearances and meetings with remote ones. However, having remote appearances and meetings did not necessarily cut down on our work hours. For many of us, the remote appearances and meetings actually increased our work hours by allowing us to have more depositions or meetings in one day because of the time we saved on travel.

It is the nature of our practices that we need to dedicate considerable time to

working hard for our clients. And we also have personal lives. Many may think, how does anyone have the time to get involved in organizations or take on leadership roles in those organizations? Is there really enough time in the day? Yes, it can be done. It does take some commitment, organization, prioritizing and having the support.

Support is essential

Leaders aren't born, they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. And that's the price we'll have to pay to achieve that goal, or any goal.

– Vince Lombardi

It takes a village. Whether you have your own legal practice or you work for a law firm, having the support you need to manage your workload and to lead an organization is essential. Find a way to get the support you need so you have it in place when it is your turn to take on leadership roles.

Conclusion

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” – John Quincy Adams, sixth President of the United States.

Actively participating in an organization and taking on leadership roles helps to make a difference not only for yourself, but for others. It is a time commitment but so rewarding. I have developed close friendships through my involvement in CAALA and other organizations over the years. Having a strong support system is invaluable. Finding your voice and paying it forward have lasting impacts and can open doors for others.

What I learned in the beginning from my days as a law clerk, then as an attorney, and throughout my involvement in CAALA and other organizations is that an effective leader empowers people, giving them the opportunity to achieve

their highest potential. I learned that when you lead with support, you foster loyalty and high morale, and in return, you'll be rewarded with high productivity and happy people. Through involvement in organizations, we can make a real difference while developing close friendships and a strong support system who we can turn at any time.

Elizabeth A. Hernandez is an attorney at BD&J, PC in Santa Monica. Her areas of practice include catastrophic injury and wrongful death cases. She is the 2025 CAALA president-elect. She was the 2022 recipient of the CAOC Robert E. Cartwright, Sr. Award, given in recognition of excellence in trial advocacy and dedication to teaching trial advocacy to fellow lawyers and to the public. She may be reached at BD&J, PC at elizabethhernandez.caala@gmail.com.

