

SECTION

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CRAIG Y. FUJII / For The Times

Legal Largess

Hold the lawyer jokes. As the new president of the Orange County Bar Assn., Ed Connor, above, has a goal this year—to recruit 200 more volunteer lawyers to represent those most desperately in need: indigent children.

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Lawyer Wants to Raise Bar on Volunteering

■ **Activism:** Orange County association's president says attorneys can do more to help the community.

By STEVE CARNEY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO—Ever since Irvine attorney Ed Connor was a teenager at a Catholic high school in Nebraska, helping others in need has been a fundamental personal goal.

Now that he's the 1998 president of the Orange County Bar Assn., Connor hopes to persuade his fellow lawyers to take up the mantle of volunteerism as well.

"Lawyers have been gifted, for whatever reason, with a combination of luck, divine providence and hard work," said Connor, 47. "What lawyers have to recognize, they really have a kind of obligation to share their blessings with people who are less fortunate."

He wants the Orange County bar to focus particular attention

on the needs of poor children. Specifically, he wants more attorneys to do volunteer work on behalf of children through the Public Law Center, a nonprofit legal aid organization sponsored by the bar association.

"Ed is one of the most complex people I've ever had the pleasure of meeting," said Scott Wylie, executive director of the center. "He is the quintessential skilled litigator, and at the same time he's got this great big mushy heart, and they typically don't go together."

For example, Connor wants to help families who no longer receive welfare because of reforms and who might not know their children still are entitled to aid. Those families often need the help of an attorney to guide them through paperwork and appeals.

"He wants to make sure the
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LAWYER: Pro Pro Bono Bar President

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kids don't fall through the cracks," said Judge Kathleen E. O'Leary, presiding judge of the Orange County Superior Court. "He sees these unrepresented members of society and feels it's important to give them a voice."

In addition, Connor wants to make it easier and cheaper for relatives, such as grandparents, to assume guardianship of children when the parents die, go to prison or disappear for other reasons. Without legal guardian status, even grandparents are prohibited from enrolling a child in school, approving medical treatment or adding the child to their health insurance.

But Orange County's fee to assume legal guardianship is the highest in the state: \$1,085, more than twice the state average.

"They can much better use that to raise the child," Wylie said.

Helping relatives assume guardianships, Wylie said, might help children avoid foster care and possibly trouble later on.

"There are lots of times where an attorney is necessary to help a child," Wylie said. "Especially in a time where we're less and less able to handle family issues without going to the courts."

Wylie said Public Law Center officials hope Connor's efforts will encourage 200 new attorneys to volunteer for the center this year, adding to the 1,250 lawyers who donated 19,000 hours of service last year. They helped 4,000 clients, a figure Wylie hopes to boost to 4,500 this year.

One recent case involved a Santa Ana woman whose daughter died of AIDS, and whose 6-year-old grandson, also afflicted, is hospitalized at Children's Hospital of Orange County.

"Since Mom had died, there was no one left to give consent for procedures," Wylie said, so the center is helping the woman become her grandson's legal guardian.

If a committee Connor and O'Leary have formed succeeds in reforming guardianship rules, Wylie said, "that will do more good for the people of Orange County than any other work we do."

Connor also wants to mobilize his volunteer attorneys to appeal



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"I don't want to sound like a goody-two-shoes," Ed Connor says. "People do a hell of a lot more than I do."

Profile: Ed Connor

Age: 47

Hometown and current residence: Born in Omaha, Neb.; now lives in San Juan Capistrano

Family: Wife, Sue; four sons, ages 7, 8, 9 and 11

Education: Graduated summa cum laude from Georgetown University in 1972; received his law degree from Stanford University in 1975

Background: Joined the Los Angeles law firm McKenna & Fitting in 1975; came to Orange County in 1981 to open the branch office of McKenna, Connor & Cuneo; formed his current partnership, Connor, Culver, Blake & Griffin, in 1996

Quote: "The legal system is not easy to maneuver. There are some people who cannot afford to maneuver their way through that system, and they can get chewed up in it."

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for reinstatement of federal Supplemental Security Income benefits for handicapped children who lose them.

"These are kids with severe mental and learning disabilities, and they're all from poor families. The fear is poor families won't be able to afford care for them and will have to put them in foster care or institutionalize them," Connor said.

As with all bar association presidents, his elevation to the top spot was assured when he was elected

secretary in 1994. Every secretary then advances to treasurer and president-elect before assuming the presidency.

Connor, a partner in the Connor, Culver, Blake & Griffin firm in Irvine, specializes in business litigation. In 1991, he was named one of three nationwide winners of the American Bar Assn.'s Pro Bono Publico Award, for his work providing legal help to the homeless.

He said his social conscience was stirred early by his devout Catholic upbringing and his recognition of

the advantages he has had.

At the Jesuit prep school he attended in Omaha, Neb., Connor painted homes in a blighted neighborhood. He also tutored while at Georgetown University and worked on behalf of African famine relief while studying law at Stanford. And since he started practicing law in Southern California, Connor has taught English as a second language.

"I don't want to sound like a goody-two-shoes. People do a hell of a lot more than I do," he said. Nor, he said, does he want to "fault anybody else" for not volunteering.

"I feel a very personal feeling of obligation there. It has to be a personal commitment."