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Busy Litigator's Life Is About to Get Much Busier

New Bar Leader-Elect Has
An Agenda He Hopes Will
Endure After His Tenure

By Joel Cone

Special to the Daily Journal

IRVINE — If you have something that needs to get done, give it to the busiest person you know: Edmond Connor.

His business litigation practice keeps him so busy, even Connor admits that outside of spending time with his wife, Sue, their four young children, and swimming to keep in shape, his life centers around work.

Over the years, the 47-year-old litigator has gained a stellar reputation for his lawyering skills. But he is equally known for his humanitarian efforts, devoting countless hours to representing the homeless and other disadvantaged citizens in Orange County.

Now, his life is about to get even busier. On Thursday, he will have his installation as the president of the Orange County Bar Association for 1998.

"I think you could say that my partners and I are holding our collective breath to see how the time commitment will impact our practice," Connor said during an interview. "I'm hoping we can reach a peaceful coexistence between the commitments of the presidency and the daily demands of my practice."

But, he added with confidence, "Others in the past have weathered this time-commitment storm, and I expect to do so, too."

At his installation, Connor said, he plans to announce an agenda for the coming year involving every aspect of the legal community, including local law schools. It's a strategy he hopes will endure long past his tenure in office.

"He seems to do everything with a smile and a dash of humor, and I greatly admire that," said attorney Eva Marie Boyd who has worked with Connor in various bar-related activities. "He's the



Edmond M. Connor
President
Orange County Bar Association

Profile

Edmond M. Connor
President
Orange County Bar Association

Career Highlights: Partner, Connor, Culver, Blake & Griffin, 1996-present; sole practice, 1994-96; partner, Morrison & Foerster, 1988-94; partner, McKenna, Conner & Cuneo, 1980-87; associate, McKenna & Fitting, Los Angeles, 1975-1979

Law School: Stanford University, 1975

Age: 47

cream of the crop when it comes to his educational background. I like the heck out of him. I think we're very fortunate."

In practice, Connor considers himself a generalist, litigating business cases on the federal and state level in everything from real estate development, land use and environmental matters, to lending and banking, construction defects, securities, property rights, liens, wrongful termination, unfair competition, antitrust, fraud, products liability and professional liability.

A 1975 graduate of Stanford Law School, Connor began his career working for big-name firms, doing mostly defense work for large corporate clients. For the first six years, he practiced in Los Angeles at McKenna & Fitting, before opening the Orange County office of McKenna, Conner & Cuneo as a partner.

"[A favorite case of mine] was the dream case of being sent to Paris, France, and the Riviera in my second year as an attorney to collect declarations on leaking roofs in France," Connor recalled. "It was a large chemical company in the U.S. that had produced a roofing insulation product that was allegedly causing roofs of commercial and industrial buildings in France to leak."

His commitment to doing volunteer work also started in Los Angeles with Public Counsel, an organization after which Orange County's Public Law Center program was fashioned. He also taught English as a Second Language on a volunteer basis in both Los Angeles and Tustin, and was involved with the Share Our Selves organization in Costa Mesa, which gives food and assistance to some 30,000 people a month.

In 1988, Connor moved to Morrison & Foerster, where he opened that firm's Orange County office as a partner.

While at Morrison, he defended a South Orange County developer against 10 cases in eight years over construction of the San Joaquin Hills toll road from Newport Beach to San Juan Capistrano. He prevailed and the road opened in early 1997. Now, Connor happily states, he uses it himself regularly.

Jeff Shields, whom Connor hired while still at McKenna and who joined him at Morrison, considered Connor a mentor in his early career.

Orange County Leader Committed to Needy



ROBERT LEVINS / Daily Journal

EDMOND M. CONNOR — "I'm hoping [my partners and I] can reach a peaceful co-existence between the commitments of the presidency and the daily demands of my practice."

"He is an outstanding litigator in every sense," Shields said. "He is a perfectionist in his work and his work product. He has admirable skills that I gleaned from him watching his talent for litigating, his writing style and his ability to analyze witnesses and cases. Ed is well known for injecting his sense of humor even in courtroom situations. He's always used it judiciously."

A classic example of his humor, Shields remembered, was when the two of them were about to leave Morrison to go out on their own. It was not the best of times for Morrison.

"We made a video — it was Ed's doing — about how things got so bad that partners at the firm were taking moonlight jobs, like working at fast-food places. He was the driver of one of those giant Oscar Mayer wienermobiles. We showed it at the annual partners' meeting," Shields said.

But it wasn't until he left the big-firm life in 1994 and went out on his own, eventually forming Connor, Culver, Blake & Griffin, that Connor was able to experience a new challenge professionally: representing plaintiffs.

"What that forces you to do is really look at the world through other glasses in terms of actually representing the side that's seeking compensation instead of the side that's trying to deny compensation," he said. "At the big firms, you tend to represent the big companies. It's challenging and fun to do the other side now."

Among his clients is a large community college district, which is a plaintiff in Orange County's massive bankruptcy litigation.

"I feel sorry for anyone who has to litigate against him. He's very intense, very bright, and a powerful advocate," said Sterling Brennan, a former associate under Connor's tutelage at Morrison & Foerster. "I learned many important lawyering lessons from him. He is the type of lawyer that if I had a significant legal problem and needed the resources of a highly skilled lawyer, Ed Connor is the type of lawyer I'd go to."

Glenda Sanders, a partner at Latham & Watkins' Orange County office, went up against Connor in court while he was still with Morrison.

"I have tremendous respect for him as a lawyer and as a person," Sanders said. "I think he is a clever lawyer who looks at problems afresh. That is, he has a fresh perspective on the way he approaches problems. He is a very rigorous opponent who fights hard."

Connor also takes some cases on a contingency-fee basis, something he couldn't do before because, he said, big firms can't handle it economically.

"Our aim is to do more trial work, try our hand at some contingency cases, and get out there in the world. But our mainstay is representing the corporate client," he said.

Born in Omaha, Neb., Connor knew he wanted to be a lawyer since high school, where he participated in statewide debate competitions and in doing dramatic interpretations.

"It gets you out there where you realize that you have some interest and hopefully some talent in using the spoken word," he said. "Everyone has the dream of being a young Daniel Webster. I chose to be an English major [at Georgetown University] for that reason, because I wanted to spend the rest of my life working with words."

But it was his Jesuit upbringing at home and school that he credits for making him the person, lawyer and humanitarian he is today.

For eight years, Connor has served on the board of directors of the Public Law Center. As its president, he hired Scott Wylie away from running the homeless programs for the Los Angeles County Bar Association to become the center's executive director.

"He has a lifelong commitment to serve the folks who are vulnerable and need help," Wylie said. "And he does it for all the right reasons.

"The thing that I really admire the most about Ed as a person and as a lawyer is that he comes to any task that he does with a real clear vision of how it should help other people," Wylie continued. "It's rare in any community, but in the legal community specifically it's hard to find someone so completely committed to social justice and the poor."

One case in particular stands out. It was during the 1991 recession, when homelessness was acute and numerous people were camping out around the Orange County Courthouse. One night the Santa Ana Police Department executed a major operation to rid the area of the homeless by arresting them on what Connor called "trumped up charges," corraling them at the Eddie West Stadium, chaining them, numbering them with magic marker on their arms, and then putting them on a truck and dumping them out a couple miles away from the civic center area.

When these alleged infractions came up for prosecution, Connor, along with attorneys Jennifer King, Donald D. Dickerson, Brett J. Williamson and William B. Grenner, put together a task force to represent the accused homeless people.

"I thought it was overreaching to prosecute these poor souls. We claimed discriminatory prosecution and won. It was a rush to judgment. We held a pretrial hearing in front of Judge Nomoto [now Superior Court Judge Barbara Nomoto Schumann] in Municipal Court. Judge Nomoto was very courageous at the time because public sentiment was against the homeless," Connor said.

After their state victory, the task force turned around and sued in federal court for civil rights violations.

"In response to our suit I thought the [police] handled it in a standup manner," Connor said. "They instituted new procedures so this wouldn't happen again. They worked with us. They set up a task force with us to talk about how the homeless would be allowed to coexist in the civic center area. I was very proud of the response, and impressed with the way the police chief handled it. I came out with a great deal of respect for the department."

For his efforts, Connor received the American Bar Association's Pro Bono Publico Award, the California State Bar President's Pro Bono Service Award and the Orange County Bar Association's Liberty Bell Award.

"He is one of the top five lawyers in the county who can marshal a team of lawyers to handle complex litigation with strike force aggressiveness," said Stuart Jasper, who has worked as co-counsel with Connor on a couple of complex litigation cases. "He's extremely aggressive, but also insightful about the legal issues and the strategic issues posed by complex litigation."

Superior Court Judge Francisco Firmat, who presided over some of Connor's cases, termed the litigator very competent, very well prepared and very articulate. "He is aggressive and witty, sort of aggressive with a smile," Firmat said.

Mark Erickson, who has been co-counsel with Connor on the defense side, when their clients were aligned on some issues and adverse on others, said Connor is not one to hold a grudge or allow the adverse issues to derail the working relationship between lawyers.

"The thing I noticed most about Ed is that his sense of humor about himself and the practice of law has evolved over the years without diminishing his substantial abilities as a lawyer. It's both a challenge and enjoyable to be in a case with him," Erickson said.

The level of preparedness and his abilities in the courtroom have won kudos from the appellate bench, as well. Justice Sheila Prell Sonenshine of the 4th District Court of Appeal considers Connor to be "wonderful, witty and winning, both professionally and politically." Her colleague, Justice Ed Wallin, called Connor "an excellent lawyer and a real personable and fun-loving guy who is loved by all."

In addition to his workload and commitment to the Public Law Center, Connor has chaired OCBA's board of directors, the business litigation section and the section's law and motion committee. He has also co-chaired the bar's Homeless Task Force, chaired its delegation to the State Bar Conference of Delegates and served as lawyer representative to the annual 9th Circuit Judicial Conference.

Retired Orange County Superior Court Judge Donald Smallwood remembered asking Connor to join a select group of lawyers and judges from the civil panel on the Bench Bar Civil Case Management Committee he had reactivated during his tenure as presiding judge in 1992.

"Ed was brash, bold, never outrageous. Never a shrinking violet. He always spoke his piece, and based on what he said we made some changes from time to time," Smallwood said.

However, there are some changes Connor does not condone. One is the demise of the State Bar in its present form. He believes it should remain mandatory.

"My position is that the State Bar provides fantastic services statewide that can't be duplicated. There is no other institution presently equipped to do the job the State Bar does. There seems to be a meat ax approach being taken here," he said.

Another movement concerning Connor is the attempt (recently argued before the U.S. Supreme Court) to strike down IOLTA (Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts) legislation, which allows for clients' trust fund interest to be pooled and dispersed to public interest law firms and legal aid societies throughout the country.

"Considering the drastic cuts that the local legal aid societies have incurred out of Washington, this would be a death blow if IOLTA funds were cut off," he said. "I'm hoping these two dark clouds are going to pass overhead, and we're going to see rainbows. But I'm afraid we're going to see some rain for some time to come."

Connor believes in improving the system, not abolishing it. He feels the same way about the potential demise of the continuing legal education program. Abolishing it would harm more people than it helps, he said, meaning not only would the lawyers suffer, but also their clients.

To Connor's way of thinking, the most important thing a lawyer can do is be responsible to see that justice is available in his or her community. That means justice for everybody, not just well-paying clients.

"If we have more lawyers volunteering their time to justice in their communities, we would not have such a bad image problem. Maybe that is naive because it requires the media to go along with that proposition. But I think the people you would help would help get the word out.

"It's something I will promote during my tenure to get lawyers to give back to the community. Justice for all is something a civilized society needs to coexist," Connor said.