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Straight Shooters

Irvine's Connor, Fletcher & Hedenkamp's mantra is: 'I can handle truth, however bad it is.'

By **Meghann M. Cuniff**
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IRVINE — For a firm with a long list of laudable courtroom achievements, an evening at an elementary school stands out among its defining moments.

The attorneys from Connor, Fletcher & Hedenkamp LLP remember having tears in their eyes as they watched the June 2019 unveiling of a state-of-the-art gymnasium, which they secured through a lawsuit over a nearby garbage dump that polluted the Huntington Beach school for years. The fiercely negotiated settlement required defendant Rainbow Environmental Services to pay \$18 million to enclose its garbage-processing operations along with the \$4 million gym that earned so much student admiration.

“It was really amazing just to watch the looks on their faces as they went into this brand-new gymnasium,” partner Matthew J. Fletcher said in a recent interview at the firm’s office in Irvine. “And it was built because of something lawyers did for a community when no one else helped them for decades.”

The settlement also called for Rainbow to pay the Ocean View School District’s \$2.1 million in attorney fees, giving the firm a windfall after three years of litigating on a contingency basis. That’s a staple



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From left, founding partner Edmond M. Connor, partner Douglas A. Hedenkamp, partner Matthew J. Fletcher and partner Laura Lee Blake

of the firm’s business model, which with a steady stream of paying clients allows for broad pro bono work that’s elsewhere impossible.

“We’ve been able to have what you’d call almost a big firm quality practice, where we’ve got very good cases that we’re able to bill, then the flexibility to take some on contingency, which I could never do at the big firms,” said founding partner Edmond M. Connor, describing their practice as “very eclectic.”

Fletcher said they have one strict standard: They believe in their clients and causes.

“If a case comes in and it’s got a good story, we’ve got a

good client and we’ve got a good cause, we tend to take it even if it’s outside our comfort zone,” he said.

The result is a seven-attorney boutique that competes with top firms and continuously lodges major victories, from three successful appeals involving groundwater litigation on behalf of the Orange County Water District to a late takeover of a shareholder fraud lawsuit that settled confidentially one week into a four-month trial. The partners value hard work, persistence and attention to detail, and they’re known for their preparation and determination.

“Our practice really is a lot

about just being prepared and being well prepared better than the other guy,” partner Douglas A. Hedenkamp said. “When our clients get to the deposition, that deposition is not going to be anywhere as bad as what we put them through.”

Marc J. Schneider, a partner at Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth, said the firm is “one of my go-to firms when I have something to send around.”

“They have really good judgment and also are tenacious and not scared to try a case,” Schneider said.

Connor opened the firm in 1994 after leaving Morrison & Foerster LLP, where he was head of the litigation

department in Orange County. He brought with him three associates, including Laura Lee Blake, who recently returned as a firm partner after nearly 10 years as general counsel and vice president of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association in Atlanta.

She became a name partner in 1996 with Craig L. Griffin, an Orange County Superior Court judge since 2009. The firm has sent two people to the bench: Former partner David J. Hesselstine was appointed in 2017.

Blake said Connor's early guidance and strength in decision making had a lasting effect.

"When I was a young attorney, I thought all attorneys were this way. I thought they were all tough," Blake said. "Then to leave and to work with different leaders, supervisors, even board members and seeing how they would blow in the wind ... I'd often sit back and think 'What would Ed do?'"

Connor has a deep background in real estate development and land use law, including most of the legal work for the Mission Viejo Company, the developers of Mission

Viejo and Aliso Viejo. The firm focused heavily on that in its early years then transitioned into construction defect cases as well as work for Southern California Edison, where Connor's friend and former Morrison & Foerster partner Barbara A. Reeves, now a JAMS neutral, was an associate general counsel and vice president. With little room for development left in Orange County, the firm has taken on a lot of public agency work, including litigation for water districts and school districts.

Connor prides himself on the firm's ethics and commitment to justice, saying, "The mantra is: I can handle the truth, however bad it is. I cannot handle lies."

"Our clients, I think, have respected that. They know we're pretty straight shooters. We do not cut corners. We're not dropping f-bombs around here at all. ... We're very straight-laced," Connor said.

Brett J. Williamson, a partner at O'Melveny & Myers LLP, said Connor's land use expertise is helpful in atypical litigation such as a pro bono effort to build a homeless shelter in San Clemente. Williamson and Connor teamed with

Keller/Anderle LLP and Irell & Manella.

In 2017, Orange County Superior Court Judge Robert J. Moss ordered the city to lift restrictions on shelters to comply with a 2007 law requiring every city to zone for emergency shelters in a way that allows them to be built without obtaining further approvals. The city paid Connor's Emergency Shelter Coalition \$1 million in attorney fees, which recently paid for 10 acres in San Clemente on which the group plans to open a shelter.

"They all have really big hearts," Williamson said. Plus, "their lawyering is just fantastic."

"We like to think of ourselves at a place like O'Melveny & Myers as sort of unparalleled if you will in terms of our litigation capabilities," Williamson said. "And I would always welcome our partnership with Ed and Doug and Matthew."

Noelle R. Minto, a partner at NM Law APC, said the firm worked two longstanding cases for her that exemplified its strengths. That includes flexibility: One client wanted a peacemaker, the other wanted a fighter. Connor, Fletcher & Hedenkamp embraced each

role with ease, Minto said, with Fletcher always available to clients while staying focused on specifics.

"They have personal relationships and friendships with the lion's share of their clients, and that's because they truly do live, eat and breathe those cases," Minto said. "Whatever their process is for quality of work, it's impressive."

Hedenkamp said the firm is "very judicious" about filing summary judgments and demurrers, which has resulted in a record of mostly wins. Fletcher said they spend a lot of time on discovery and "will file that motion to compel and keep pushing until we get what we know that they have."

Opponents assume because the firm is small, "we're not going to fight, we don't have the resources to fight, we don't have the staying power," Fletcher said. "And I think we surprise them every single time."

"We're not like baseball players where if you get a hit once every three times at bat, you're in the Hall of Fame," Fletcher continued. "We're more like a football team: We've got to win every game."

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