



PRESIDENT'S PAGE

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Judge Carter: Fighter on a Hill

The Ronald Reagan Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Santa Ana stood like a monolith against blue sky and sunshine. It was symbolic of the monumental man I was about to meet with—Judge David O. Carter.

“From a young age, my impression of America was that we are that ‘light on a hill,’” declares Judge Carter. “We embrace character, opportunity, and a work ethic, like no other nation.”

Judge Carter’s worldviews were the imprint of his grandfather, a court bailiff who raised him from age four after Judge Carter’s father had abandoned him. “The judges were so courteous to grandpa, I thought *he* ran the courtroom,” Judge Carter smiles. “Grandpa had a 4th grade education. He worked in coal mines. He ran off to join the Army at sixteen. He fought in the Philippines, got malaria, and worked his way up to Captain, even though he couldn’t read or write. He later went back to school, and graduated in the same high school class as his daughter—my mother. Grandpa was a rock of a man.”

Grandpa’s fiery, determined spirit lives on in Judge Carter—and in his chambers, which are a showcase of patriotism, no-nonsense bravery, and daring adventures. Military memorabilia abounds, including Judge Carter’s own Marine officer’s sword, mounted across a shield. There is a stack of military and diplomatic caps, countless tokens of appreciation from American embassies and diplomatic offices, and exotic, hand-crafted chess boards from Turkey, Nepal, and Russia. A photograph from Africa of villagers eating “mice on a stick,” the way Americans might enjoy a chicken kabob.

Judge Carter’s outreach to peoples of the world reflects his values on the bench. He is known as utterly impartial and non-political (even the Public Defender’s office endorsed him—then a prosecutor—for the bench!). His civility and personal touch is legendary (so are his 7:00 a.m. call times).

I see what looks like a medieval weapon: a curved club, wrapped in black duct tape, with a profusion of spikes nailed through. Judge Carter explains that it’s an exhibit from one of his gangland cases—a barbaric weapon used to punish a gang member who “stepped out of line.”

Judge Carter is known to volunteer for some of the highest profile, and most dangerous, cases, including: The “Barbie v. Bratz” dolls battle (*i.e.*, *Mattel v. MGA Entertainment*); the Gay-Straight Alliance (ordering Orange County public schools to allow an on-campus student group to meet and discuss gay and lesbian rights—the first case of its kind); and trials of the Mexican Mafia and Aryan Brotherhood

(respectively, the largest gang case, and capital case, in Orange County’s history).

Judge Carter is a veteran of life-and-death battles. Graduating UCLA as a track athlete with a 4.0, he joined the Marines one day by walking off a beach in his swim trunks directly into a recruiter’s office. He soon was deployed to Vietnam and was rapidly promoted to Lieutenant. In the infamous battle of Khe Sanh, Lt. Carter’s platoon was ambushed by a far larger enemy force.

Lt. Carter was wounded by a grenade blast, suffered traumatic gunshot injuries to his arm, and shrapnel tore through his face and jaw. Nevertheless, he kept command of his platoon, fighting fiercely for hours, and repeatedly put himself in danger to aid his wounded men. He later received a Bronze Star Medal and two Purple Hearts for his courage under fire.

He recovered from his injuries and returned to UCLA for law school. “I had survivor’s guilt. I wanted to do something meaningful, to help people and give something back to our country.” In 1972, he joined the Orange County District Attorney’s office, rose to Senior Deputy District Attorney in charge of homicide, and handled the prosecution of William Bonin, a.k.a. the “Freeway Killer” (the first person executed in California by lethal injection). After service on the Municipal and Superior Court benches, he was nominated to the federal bench in 1998.

Judge Carter must have a twin. Because, while being lauded as the “hardest working judge,” he simultaneously performs an enormous amount of humanitarian work in some of the world’s most dicey regions. Afghanistan, Syria, Bosnia, China, Pakistan, Malawi, Malaysia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Morocco, Ethiopia, Liberia, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Borneo, and more. He travels “economy class” all the way, reaching out to local judiciary, lawyers, prosecutors, tribal leaders, educators, and women’s groups. His mission: combat human rights violations by promoting (and striving to implement) the fairness of American-style justice.

In areas where women may have little-to-no rights, or where “justice” often means swift brutality without a trial, his task is not an easy one. In his travels, there are threats of terrorist attacks,

horrific scenes of mass rape, mines and booby-traps, and regional “powers” who don’t exactly appreciate an American judge meddling in judicial matters that may affect their money-laundering operations, drug trade, or child labor trafficking. Amazingly, Judge Carter seems undeterred: “I don’t believe in backing off.”

Judge Carter states, “When others see the fairness, equality, and ideals of America’s justice system, it speaks volumes. Our strength is in our Constitution. It’s how we beat back barbarism.” Reception of his mission by locals necessitates having an intimate understanding of local customs, tribes, and power structures, of religious texts and regional norms of “justice.”

Judge Carter says to me, “It’s our obligation to help the world have more fairness and equality in their judicial systems. As a people, we can’t save the world today. But what counts is that we keep trying. Never give up the good fight.”



Hon. David O. Carter



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