



PRESIDENT'S PAGE

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Serge Tomassian: Fostering a World of Mutual Respect

July is when we celebrate our nation's independence—the legal separation of our thirteen colonies from the grip of Great Britain. Since then, America has stood at the pinnacle of inspiring the hopes and dreams of people from all around the world. People come together as Americans to pursue their dreams in a land of freedom and opportunity.

Lawyers were at the forefront of creating America's foundational structures (25 of the 56 signers of the Declaration, and 32 of the 55 framers of the Constitution, were lawyers). Since then, lawyers have continued to lead in building our civil and justice framework—most notably, to fight for civil rights and equality under the law.

One lawyer who brings people together regardless of political and cultural differences, to foster unity and share an understanding of America's influence in the world, is Serge Tomassian. Serge is a founding partner of Tomassian, Throckmorton & Inouye LLP, and long-time member of the OCBA. He served on the OCBA Board of Directors for six years and chaired the OCBA Construction Law, Legislative Resolutions, and Mentoring committees. He also Chairs Orange County's World Affairs Council (WAC), of which he has been a member for thirty years.

A typical WAC meeting is “like a gathering at the U.N.,” says Serge. Indeed, in one recent meeting, there were nearly 100 Syrians. In other meetings, there may be dozens of Sikhs. At WAC, one can meet people who hail from an array of countries such as India, Tibet, Russia, England, Spain, Bahrain, Uganda, Iran, and others. Under Serge's leadership, WAC has grown in membership, and featured such illustrious speakers as a Saudi Prince, the former head of the CIA, leading congressmen (e.g., Democrat Adam Schiff and Republican Ed Royce), ambassadors to the Middle East, and others who share their captivating stories gleaned from “security clearance” adventures.

With such a diverse group, and speakers who are highly opinionated on their version of politics and world affairs, one might be surprised to learn that the WAC events are extremely collegial. This is primarily due to Serge's leadership in setting a positive tone.

Serge says, “People need to listen to each other respectfully, without seeking to impose their viewpoints on others, without force, fear, or intimidation.” Serge offers frequent reminders to the membership to share ideas with respect, to ask questions of the speakers but to never preach at or argue with them, and to remember that we are all bound together as Americans. At one table, you may find people of differing faiths (e.g., Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu). You may find

another table split between liberals and conservatives. But all will be engaged in polite, political discourse. And everyone stands in unison to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. “It's an important ritual that binds us,” says Serge.

Serge feels that lawyers have a special obligation to foster such cultural respect and unity:

Lawyers must be adversarial, yet we should always do it civilly. We should never personalize our differences or attack others because we have differing viewpoints. We need *civil* discourse and open discussion of ideas. In fact, one of the greatest American principles is to be able to passionately disagree but to do it civilly, without the threat of violence, personal attacks, or intimidation tactics.

Serge's fascination with the amicable blending of diverse cultures began early in life. His household featured four languages: French, English, Italian, and Armenian. His family took numerous voyages on ocean liners, back and forth to his native France; Serge was mesmerized by the thick crowds waving goodbye as ships left the docks, and by the symphony of languages onboard the ship. He worked a paper route as a boy, and became an avid reader of newspapers, excitedly discussing foreign affairs stories with his father (owner of a barber shop).

His office is a collection of souvenirs and memorabilia, including representations of an Istanbul Mosque, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a Knights Templar statue, a Sikh turban, and Armenian woodwork. And plenty of globes!

Serge was mentored in world affairs by Sir Eldon Griffiths of British Parliament. Along the way, Serge has met a slew of U.N. representatives, four-star generals, Palestinian leaders, Israeli diplomats, ambassadors, religious leaders, security forces, foreign ministers, Kurdish leaders, our nation's highest ranking officials (NSA, members of the National Security Council, chiefs of staff, etc.), and CEOs of global companies.

Through it all, Serge has cemented his belief in the obligation for us to “speak with moral clarity.” He says, “As lawyers and Americans, we can't compromise our values just so we don't offend. We must always stand for truth and accuracy. Don't ever be silenced just to appease those who oppose you.” He highlights

the Armenian genocide as one of history's examples for the need to speak with “moral clarity”; if “we don't condemn human atrocities, then we tacitly legitimize them.”

Asked for final thoughts, Serge emphasizes, “We are all Americans. And America is the greatest nation ever conceived. Is it perfect? No. Can it be improved? Absolutely. But not if we attack and divide one another. We need to embrace and appreciate the shared values that bind us, and work in unity.”

As we celebrate our nation's independence this July, let the fireworks and family moments remind us that, as lawyers in Orange County, we can truly help to shape the world. Just ask Serge.

For OCBA members interested in global affairs and the practice of law, please check out the OCBA International Law Section at ocbar.org.



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