

A portrait of Michael L. Baroni, a man with dark hair, glasses, and a goatee, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and orange patterned tie. He is smiling and looking directly at the camera against a plain white background.

MICHAEL L. BARONI
NOT YOUR TYPICAL LAWYER
—NOT A TYPICAL PRESIDENT

by DAVID S. COHEN

With the new year, the common changes are afoot. New members of the board, new officers, and a new president. However, this year's president promises to be different.

Michael Baroni is not your typical lawyer, and he is not going to be your typical OCBA president. Forget that Michael's plans for the year sound at first to be the typical, "Truth, Justice, and the American Way." The year ahead will be anything but typical.

Ask anyone who works with Michael, and they will tell you that he is not your typical general counsel. Rather than be constrained by the "way we always did it," Michael manages legal affairs at Palace Entertainment differently. While many lawyers deal with the aftermath of events, Michael looks for ways to prevent them. In his role, he analyzes causation factors of liability, and then creates robust, proactive attack-plans to prevent claims and litigation. He also knows that the best way to create top-tier results is to gather the best possible talent (safety experts, litigators, etc.), and foster a team-oriented effort. As a result, general liability and workers' compensation losses have plummeted at Palace Entertainment and costs have been reined in.

In recognition of his work, Michael's peers at the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) named him and Palace Entertainment one of their 2016 "Value Champions." That is no small feat when you consider the group has over 30,000 members worldwide. Moreover, he has been recognized multiple times by prestigious publications and groups like *Corporate Counsel* magazine, the *Orange County Business Journal*, *Inside Counsel* magazine, the OCBA, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, the California State Assembly, and many others. Indeed, we could write a column solely on the honors and achievements he has earned.

Just as Michael does not take a typical approach to practicing law at Palace Entertainment, his management style as OCBA president will be different. Michael is very proud of his career track record of instilling ethics and professionalism, setting standards of civility, and fostering kind and supportive team-oriented behavior. He does it by clearly setting and communicating the standards of behavior, and encouraging these standards (through training, one-on-one coaching, and—where warranted—appropriate discipline). Michael does not get on his high horse when doing so. Rather, his mantra is,

"Always treat people with respect, kindness, and in a manner that allows them to keep their dignity."

The path people take to run a local bar association is often similar. Start volunteering as a law firm associate, continue as a partner, and make enough connections and pay enough dues to get elected. That is not the Baroni way. Michael will be only the second General Counsel to serve as OCBA President in the last 106 years. The last and only other General Counsel who served as OCBA president was the late, legal legend Donald Gray, who served in the role in 1999.

Michael has three pillars for the year ahead. His life experiences forged these goals.

Pillar One—Support & Honor Law Enforcement

Michael recognizes that recent stories paint a vilified picture of police officers. "I want to integrate District Attorneys and law enforcement. We need to promote the reverse narrative that has been in the media, that most cops are racist and trigger-happy." Michael

As Americans, we have more critical values that connect us than divide us.

points to statistics to show that overwhelmingly, members of law enforcement are good people, with extremely tough and dangerous jobs, who fight for what is right.

Michael developed a sense of right and wrong, and a desire to champion the good, growing up on the mean streets of New York City. "I've been mugged several times. Once, I was chased for half a mile through Central Park by a pack of kids like animals chasing prey." Is it any wonder he became a sprinter, competing in Division 1 track & field at Boston College? (As a "BC Eagle," he also threw the javelin and triple-jumped, won a poetry prize, and was named an All-American student-athlete). He continues, "I've also witnessed criminals stab friends, and seen a homeless man beaten to death with pipes." Indeed, Michael shares the constant tension of watching for violence that came with his childhood in New York City. While some get beaten down or caught up in the violence, it had the opposite effect on Michael as it fueled his desire to succeed and solidified his inclination to stand up for what is right. He once chased down a man

who assaulted an officer, tackled him, and held him until the cop could cuff the culprit. That moral compass guides his burning drive as he pushes to make the world better. Michael sees no stronger force for maintaining the good in our society than police and law enforcement. He believes that it is critical for cops to have society's support, and that they deserve as much support as possible.

Pillar Two—Stop Human Trafficking

Being on the wrong end of fear taught Baroni the danger of being vulnerable. Sadly, many people use fear and violence to control others for their personal gain. Many times, it involves the most vulnerable people in society but affects everyone. "There is a huge, horrifying underbelly of society in human trafficking, and it bleeds into our everyday life through property, drug, and violent crimes." Michael continues, "I have a deep-rooted disgust for criminals who wreck society for innocent, well-intentioned people."

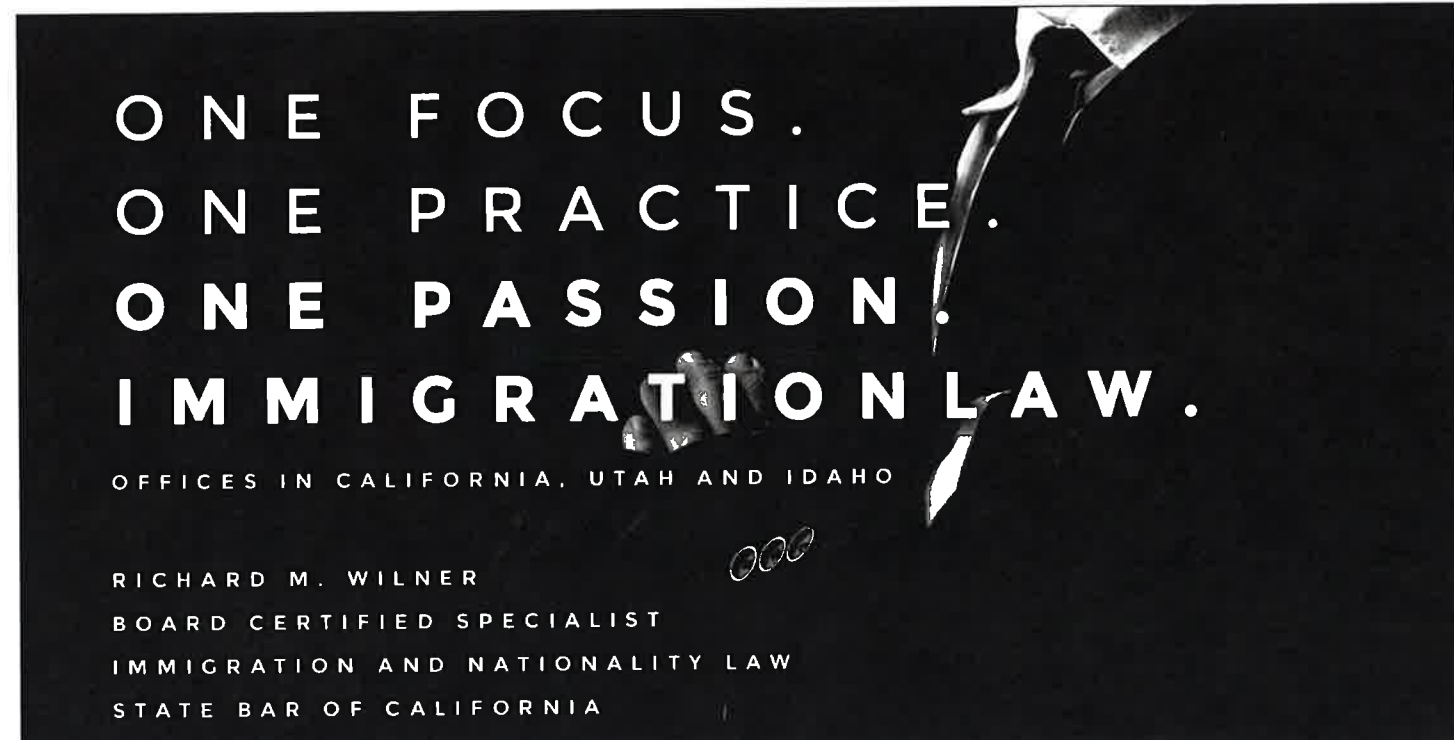
As president, Michael intends to shed light on human trafficking and help lawyers stop it. "We need to mobilize the might of the OCBA to help combat human trafficking, and to assist with victim assistance and rehabilitation." Michael hopes that others find the effort as meaningful as he does. "I have been enriched by getting involved in charitable events—especially those involving children in poorer areas.

When you see the impact you have on others' lives, it adds meaning to your life."

Pillar Three—Inclusion

Baroni, the son of an immigrant, realizes that any organization benefits from different viewpoints. He is proud to note that for the first time, the OCBA board is made of more women than men. There is a great array of religious and ethnic backgrounds and the full spectrum of political perspectives. However, for all the progress that has been made, there has never been a focus on assisting OCBA members who are dealing with extreme illnesses or disabilities.

Michael plans to create a support group for lawyers with disabilities. No matter if a disability is temporary or permanent, it can be life-changing. He explains: "Many of our members have disabilities or are going through life-affecting illnesses and do not know where to turn. The goal is to establish a support group which can provide information and assistance, resources to help them succeed and to cope with their individual challenges."



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Michael prides himself on getting more people involved in the OCBA, and he hopes the trend continues. He chaired the products liability section soon after he became involved with the Bar. He found it exciting to plan programs that attorneys found useful. He got a lot more people involved, and quadrupled attendance at events, by getting the right speakers on cutting-edge topics for events. He also founded the Entertainment, Sports & Marketing Law section, which immediately pulled together the most diverse group of practitioners of any section, featuring headline speakers such as radio sensation Bill Handel, UFC fighters, and football Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon. Michael's goal is to continue the trend of "breathing new life" across the organization.

"A lot of what I have brought has been behind the scenes—administration, process, and policy, to help ensure the integrity and opportunity for everyone to get involved. One of the best skills that you can have when effectuating change is humility. Talk little, but say a lot. Make sure that you have a well-pondered plan with what you do. Build consensus with humility, diplomacy, and letting people be heard, then act when the time is right. Take decisive action—but

again, only after carefully pondering things and letting everyone be heard."

Baroni has more than his three pillars planned. Like many OCBA presidents before him, he will author a monthly column for the *Orange County Lawyer* magazine. Rather than use it as a soapbox for his opinions, however, he plans to give others the spotlight. The "L'Eagle Perch" will highlight the work of others who have given of themselves, going above and beyond to make the world and the legal community a better place. It is his hope that by showcasing these champions of justice, it will inspire and motivate others.

While Michael is an incredible lawyer and leader, he also has an incredible life outside of the professional world. He describes his wife Lisa as his "joy and comfort," and the backbone of all he does. Michael and Lisa are voracious readers and love classic films made during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Both are overwhelmed with the natural beauty in California: Pelicans and hummingbirds, profusions of flowers, palm trees, seals, and sand and crashing waves.

2017 is not going to be a typical year for the OCBA because it will not be led by a typical president. Michael Baroni's ultimate goal for the year is simple: "I want to call out

the fact that it is up to each of us to be vigilant in protecting the rights and privileges of being Americans so they don't whittle away. As Americans, we have more critical values that connect us than divide us. As lawyers, we should defend those unifying values."



David S. Cohen is the General Counsel of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in Tampa, Florida and has served in that capacity for four years. Before that, he spent a number of years as the head of the legal department of Angels Baseball LP in Anaheim, California and nine years as an Athletic Trainer in the Baltimore Orioles, Montreal Expos, and Boston Red Sox organizations. David is a current board member of the Association of Corporate Counsel—West Central Florida and is a past board member and officer of both the Association of Corporate Counsel—Southern California Chapter and the Association of Corporate Counsel—Sports and Entertainment Law Committee. David sends his best to all of his Orange County friends and colleagues, and invites you to connect with him on Twitter and Instagram at @DavidCohenEsq or on LinkedIn at <http://www.Linkedin.com/In/DavidCohenEsq>.



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Register online at www.ocbar.org or call 949.440.6700, ext. 127.

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