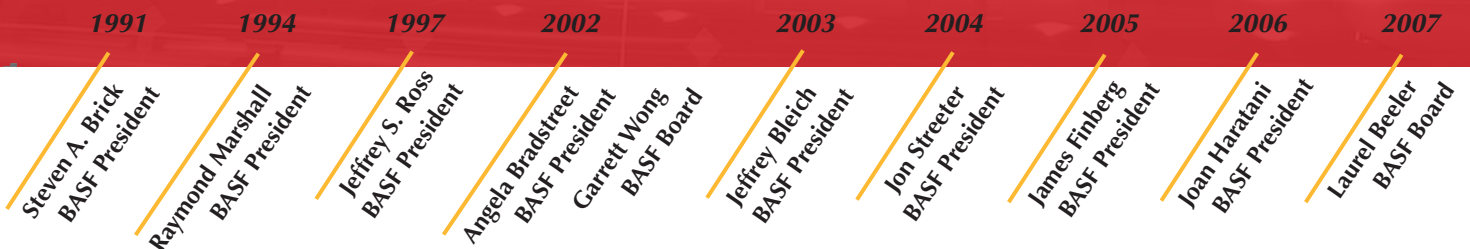


# THE BAR ASSOCIATION OF SAN FRANCISCO: A Path to Personal and Professional Growth

Erik Cummins

## The BASF Path...



Scrolling through the list of leaders of The Bar Association of San Francisco, you'll find it hard not to note the many prominent attorneys who have served the 138-year-old organization as presidents, officers, and board members.

Many on this august list have gone on to lead in government and law firms. Others have become prominent judges, law school deans, rainmakers, and world-renowned trial advocates, while yet others have served as award-winning icons of the nonprofit and legal services communities.



A recent sampling includes former President Jeffrey Bleich (2003), whom President Barack Obama named as his ambassador to Australia last year. Several, including former presidents Jeffrey S. Ross (1997) and Steven A. Brick (1991) and board members Garrett Wong and Laurel Beeler have been named judges or federal magistrates. And then there's former President Angela Bradstreet (2002), who became California Labor Commissioner in 2007.

With so many success stories, it is tempting to draw a connection between

-serving The Bar Association of San Francisco and professional achievement.

But in conversation with several former leaders, it's clear that being active in the bar is not so much a direct route to success as it is a path to developing a more fulfilling and satisfying career in the law.

Take the case of former President Jon Streeter (2004)—a well-known trial attorney with Kecker & Van Nest.

When Streeter first got involved in the bar in the late 1980s, it wasn't for a lack of something to do. Then a senior associate at Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, Streeter was billing more than 3,000 hours in some years—a demanding feat for any lawyer.

"I worked really hard in the early '90s," Streeter recalls. "The sheer effort and stamina it took was only possible because of the level of satisfaction I was getting doing the public interest things I was doing at the bar association and with my pro bono cases."

Early on, Streeter joined the board of the California Minority Counsel Program, an organization under BASF's umbrella of services. And he went on to help the bar develop its first set of Goals and Timetables for Minority Hiring and Advancement at Bay Area law firms, a concept that soon spread to many other bar associations throughout the United States.

"I had the sense that we were doing something transformative and that would be very consequential," Streeter says. Working alongside a group of commercial litigators, he says, "We all showed a desire to make an impact beyond the dollars and cents of our particular matters."

As a result of ramping up his volunteer activities, he adds, "I discovered that a very engaged level of activity outside the practice was very satisfying. I also found people who were kindred spirits and developed a professional network that really enhanced my experience as a lawyer and made me a better lawyer."



**JON STREETER**

All of it, he says, was a source of sustenance. "People talk about burnout," he says. "I think lawyers who don't discover ways to continually energize themselves can get bored. This was my way of avoiding it."

Early in his practice at the public defender's office, Garrett Wong's supervisors, Public Defender Jeff Brown and Chief Deputy Peter Keane, strongly encouraged him to get involved in the bar.

That work led to the founding of the Chinatown Legal Clinic in 1989—a drop-in legal clinic that provides legal advice and referrals to residents in need. Then Wong joined the steering committee for the California Minority Counsel Program.



**GARRETT WONG**

That service gave him access to Fortune 100 companies looking to diversify the ranks of their outside counsel. Wong also served on numerous criminal and civil litigation committees, as well as on the bar's board of directors.

When he was appointed to the bench in 2005, he recalls that one unintended benefit of his volunteer work with the bar was that he knew all the members of the local bar's judicial evaluation committee.

"I was a known quantity," says Wong, now a San Francisco superior court judge. "I had a lot of op-





opportunities to meet people and network and build my practice and help accomplish an appointment.”

When he talks to young attorneys about the bar, Wong says, “I tell them it’s a great way to network. You may not get immediate referrals, but active participation allows you to develop a reputation among the legal community—especially if you are a doer and you follow through.”

Friends and peers of Joan Haratani, former president of the Asian American Bar Association, asked her to get involved in BASE. “We hadn’t had a representative at the bar for a long time, and we had never had a female of color,” says Haratani, BASF president in 2006. “It was a great opportunity for community service and to show that other Asian Pacific-Islanders could lead.”

“I wanted to break through and promote women in nontraditional roles,” she explains.

Being a leader also exposed Haratani to skills beyond her traditional role as a trial lawyer. “I learned how to build consensus, how to get agenda items through, how to communicate ideas effectively, and to be fair and firm,” she says. “These skills are fantastic to learn and are directly transferable to my practice.”

With the departure of BASF’s executive director and the death of VLSP Director Tanya Neiman during the first four months of her tenure, Haratani admits she never worked harder in her life.

“After that year, there is nothing you can throw at me that I can’t handle to-

day,” says Haratani, who is a litigation partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius. “I have a spine of titanium and I am extremely confident now.”

“If you have the same old life every day, you don’t grow that much,” she adds. “The bar association forces you to grow.”



James Finberg, a litigation partner at San Francisco’s Altshuler Berzon, is a former bar president (2005) who began his service to the bar as a young associate. Then with Morrison & Foerster, Finberg started by taking cases pro bono with the Volunteer Legal Services Program. He later served on BASF’s Judiciary Committee and joined the bar’s board of directors in the late 1990s.

“The amazing thing about The Bar Association of San Francisco is that it is involved in so many things,” Finberg says. Among his top priorities as president was providing legal services to people who cannot afford them.

“That is an unacceptable situation,” he says. “If the system of justice is only for the wealthy that’s a system that’s not working.”

For him, the bar association was a great vehicle to help right those wrongs and make a positive contribution to the community. “Those of us fortunate to be lawyers have an opportunity to give back,” he says.

Helping families in need also gave him skills he would not have otherwise gained as a young lawyer at a large firm. “As a young associate, you probably don’t get to argue in court that often, and [VLSP] gave me an opportunity to do that,” Finberg says.



Laurel Beeler, a former prosecutor with the Department of Justice, is among the most recent bar association graduates to be appointed to the bench. On January 4, she started work as a magistrate for the U.S. district court in Oakland.

Beeler was a member of the bar's board of directors and she served on many bar committees, including those addressing criminal rules and practice, juvenile justice, and the federal court system—all of which drew a diverse group of participants from all sides of the practice, including prosecutors, private and public defense attorneys, court representatives, and members of law enforcement.

“That kind of collaboration across organizations can be extremely productive,” Beeler says. “Working with lawyers and judges across the spectrum of the criminal justice system was an important part of my evolution as a lawyer.”

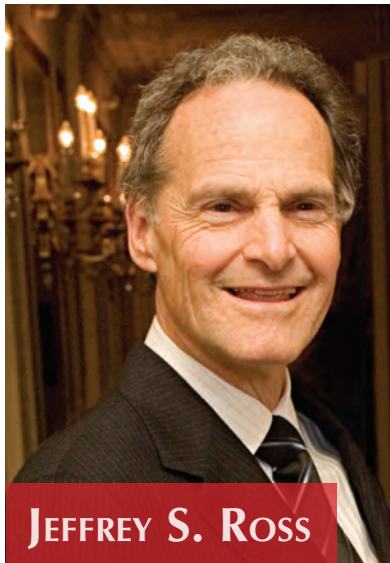
Former President Jeffrey S. Ross (1997) was appointed to the San Francisco superior court late last year.

Ross began his work with the bar association almost immediately after he started practice in 1976. Among his early activities, he got involved with the Juvenile Justice Section and a criminal law committee addressing municipal court rules. In 1983, he was president of the Barristers Club and later served on BASF's Judiciary Committee and the VLSP board.

As president, Ross established the Law Academy, a joint project with the San Francisco Unified School District that continues today. The program, which is held at Balboa and Mission High Schools, brings a law curriculum to



LAUREL BEELER



JEFFREY S. ROSS



RAYMOND MARSHALL

English and social studies students. It offers lawyer mentors and training programs and provides paid summer jobs at law firms and legal organizations.

Students “could see the connections between an enhanced education and career opportunities,” he says, “and we saw an immediate increase in the number of students going to college.”

Raymond Marshall, a litigation partner at Bingham McCutchen, served as BASF president (1994) and president of the State Bar of California (1998–99).

“The practice of law is still a relationship business,” Marshall says. “With the bar association, you get to form a lot of relationships you normally wouldn't outside your regular practice. You get to work with people on a common cause and you get to work with a lot of different folks. That's all very good for personal and professional development.”

Besides, he says, “Just practicing in big law is not enough. I thought there was more to do.”

So what does Marshall tell young associates about the bar association?

“It's a lot of fun, it's very rewarding, and the time they spend will pay them many benefits, personally and professionally. And hopefully they can develop as a person.”

*Erik Cummins has been a writer and journalist for twenty-two years, spending eighteen of those years as a legal affairs reporter for the Daily Journal in San Francisco. He can be reached at cummins.erik@gmail.com.*

*All member photos by Jim Block*

