

“THE BARRISTERS CLUB AT NINETY”

OR

“WHY NOT BECOME A BARRISTER?”

Adam I. Kaplan

Ninety years is a long time. Ninety years ago, in 1927, Calvin Coolidge was president, it cost a quarter to go to the movies, and alcohol was illegal. Ninety years ago was also when The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) decided to expand its ranks and form a club within a club for newer members of the bar. The leaders of this newly formed group included Mathew O. Tobriner, who later served as an associate justice on the California Supreme Court, and Stanley A. Weigel, who later served as a district court judge for the US District Court for the Northern District of California.

First Street looking south from Market, c. 1928. Photo: Chris Carlsson

As Kenneth Johnson explained in his 1972 centennial retrospective of BASF, “[f]rom the beginning, the Barristers’ Club was, and still is, a success.”¹ The club is just as successful today, as it celebrates its 90th anniversary. This year also marks the 145th anniversary of BASF and the 40th anniversary of its Justice & Diversity Center (JDC). While there is a lot to celebrate, there is still a lot of important work to be done.

“Anniversaries need not be mere exercises in nostalgia,” as then BASF President Charles H. Clifford explained in 1972. “[L]ooking forward as well as back,” he continued, “using an anniversary as a point of constructive pause, seems a more likely way to avoid complacency and to assure continued improvement in the quality of the life being celebrated.”²

I could not agree more, although some nostalgia is in order.

A review of the Barristers Club’s reports over the decades shows that Barristers, from the beginning, have dedicated themselves to improving themselves, the profession, and the community. And having fun all the while.

THE BARRISTERS CLUB AT TEN YEARS

In 1937, Barristers Club President James L. Feely “boldly determined to enroll as members EVERY young attorney in San Francisco.” A 1937 article titled “Why Not Become a Barrister” explained the benefits of the Barristers Club in terms that are equally applicable today:

Why Become a Barrister? One good reason is that the Club offers all young attorneys the opportunity to really become acquainted with one another at the beginning of a usually long career before the Bar. Such friendship, if it accomplishes nothing else, makes the practice of the law more enjoyable.

Another equally good reason for becoming a Barrister is the fact that there is a lot of work to be done in respect to making the profession a better one both from the viewpoint of attorneys and the public generally. . . . The Barristers’ Club is the ideal vehicle for such work.³

Barristers Club events in 1937 included a meeting with California Senator Walter McGovern, who discussed important legislation that the California legislature passed the previous year, and an evening presentation by an FBI special agent, complete with door prizes and free cigars, cigarettes, and refreshments. Barristers also gathered that year for breakfast meetings, the “Low Jinks Receptions for newly admitted members,” and the annual golf tournament.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Barristers Club formed an Industrial and Labor Relations Committee to consider how best to settle labor disputes and avoid “the needless loss to labor, capital, and the public generally.” The Court Relations Committee studied probate court systems in other California cities and considered potential changes to San Francisco’s probate courts. The Barristers Club also helped secure California legislation addressing the persistent problem of predatory abuses by loan sharks.

THE BARRISTERS CLUB AT FORTY YEARS

The Barristers Club continued to serve the Bay Area legal community through the 1960s. A report from 1967, the club’s fortieth year, explained its efforts to improve the administration of juvenile courts and their commitment procedures and to provide trial and appellate legal services for the indigent. The Barristers Club also cosponsored the San Francisco Junior High Schools Forensic League Debate Tournament, with more than a dozen Barristers serving as volunteer judges. A 1967 report of the club’s “Play Time” described a Barristers Club theater party, which presented Edward Albee’s *Tiny Alice*, and an annual gathering for the Giants-Dodgers baseball game, with pregame cocktails and

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a buffet at Dante’s Inferno (I don’t know when Dante’s closed down, but I’m sure it was fun!).

In 1969, the American Bar Association recognized the Barristers Club as “The Outstanding Young Lawyers’ Organization” in the large cities category, citing a number of the club’s activities the previous year. One of these activities was the prison observer program at the Santa Rita Jail in Dublin, which, as BASF’s centennial retrospective explains, “was occasioned by the mass arrests that arose out of the student riots in Berkeley and the alleged denial of civil rights.”⁴

THE BARRISTERS CLUB AT FIFTY YEARS

The Barristers Club presented its fourth “Annual Show” in 1972, which featured a “bright and colorful musical comedy” called *Jealous Mistress*. Intrigued, I reached out to the play’s writer and director, Morris D. Bobrow. “Morrie” responded immediately and enthusiastically. He explained that he has “fond memories of [his] Barristers’ years, especially because of the shows we put on, involving lawyers, judges, legal secretaries, and even friends and relatives of all of the above.” After its Barristers Club debut, *Jealous Mistress* was presented for local audiences and at the ABA’s Annual Convention (Chief Justice Warren Burger was also featured at the convention). Bobrow sent me the

original program and the ABA’s front-page write-up. And what was this play about? He explained:

The title comes from the quote by Supreme Court Justice [Joseph] Story, “The law is a jealous mistress.” The plot involved the culture clash between George Gavel, a prominent attorney, quite conservative and traditional, and his new partner, his son, Jerry Gavel, a young hippie/radical type. The story was a loose adaptation of a short story by O. Henry, “The Hypotheses of Failure.”

The ensemble was so enthusiastic and close that it went on to perform many satirical revues after that, mostly as fundraisers for a charity—Legal Assistance for the Elderly—under the title of “Briefs,” emceed by Willie Brown, Barbara Boxer, and other community leaders.

I’m not surprised that, as the BASF centennial retrospective recounts, “[o]f all the shows put on by the Barristers all agreed that this was the best.”

In 1977, the fiftieth anniversary of the Barristers Club, the club’s board of directors unanimously endorsed a new minority law student program, initiated by the BASF Committee on Employment of Minorities in Law, which involved eighty to a hundred legal employers in San Francisco. The program was established to “act as a clearing

house of employer and student information” and was aimed at increasing the pipeline of minority candidates from the seven ABA-approved law schools in Northern California.⁵

THE BARRISTERS CLUB TODAY

The Barristers Club, today as strong as ever, continues to fulfill its commitment to professional growth, community service, and serving as an advocate for its members. Among other activities, too numerous to recount, Barristers are still organizing Mock Trial programs in local schools, still proposing legislation, and still mentoring new generations of leaders and spearheading major new events, such as the Annual Boat Cruise (now in its fourth year).

Indeed, the Outstanding Barrister Awards for 2016 honored three club leaders for their respective efforts in each of these areas (Marie Ma, Gap Inc.; Andrew McDevitt, Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger; and Mark Conrad, Conrad & Metlitzky). In recent years, other club leaders, including past presidents Sebastian Kaplan, Fenwick & West; Mark Conrad; Valerie Uribe, Esq.; and Blair Walsh, Abramson, Smith & Waldsmith; as well as President-Elect Drew Amoroso, Move Legal; Secretary John-Paul Deol, Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton; and board members Jessica Ryland, Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith; Tim Burr, Lyft; and John Hamasaki, Hamasaki Law, have organized or presided over perennially successful events such as the Barristers Diversity Reception, the Judges Reception, and the Barristers Club Annual Meeting. The club also continues to host numerous social events throughout the year (albeit with less tobacco than in the old days). Of course, none of this would be possible without Barristers Club Director Kallie Donahoe, BASF Deputy Executive Director Jack Hannan, and BASF/JDC Executive Director Yolanda Jackson.

I’m thrilled and honored to serve as president this year. I look forward to building upon the Practical Skills Initiative set in motion last year, working with BASF President Merri Baldwin to channel Barristers’ energy and enthusiasm



Adam Kaplan, third from left, with his Munger, Tolles & Olson colleagues at the December Annual Membership Luncheon

toward her important initiatives, and getting a few of my own ideas off the ground (stay tuned for the Barristers Family Picnic).

To echo the words of the club’s 1937 publicity committee chair, “[l]et’s make the Barristers’ Club truly representative of every young attorney in San Francisco and then buckle down to some work that will result in a constructive and material contribution to the San Francisco bar.”⁶

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Notes

1. Kenneth M. Johnson, *The Bar Association of San Francisco; The First Hundred Years 1872/1972* (San Francisco: The Bar Association of San Francisco, 1972), 84.
2. Kenneth M. Johnson, *The Bar Association of San Francisco; The First Hundred Years 1872/1972* (ibid.), iii.
3. William F. White, “Why Not Become a Barrister?,” *San Francisco Bar Vol. 1 No. 6* (December 1937): 4.
4. Kenneth M. Johnson, *Bar Association of San Francisco; The First Hundred Years 1872/1972* (ibid.), 136.
5. Nelson Dong, “BASF, Barristers Club Endorse Minority Recruiting Program,” *In Re Vol. 8 No. 6* (September 1977): 3.
6. William F. White, “Why Not Become a Barrister?” (ibid.), 4.