

Mobilizing for Justice in Our Community

The following are excerpts from Merri Baldwin's remarks at her December 15, 2016, installation as the 2017 president of The Bar Association of San Francisco.

Merri A. Baldwin

I am so honored to serve as the president of The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) and its Justice & Diversity Center (JDC). I have been working up to this moment for three years with the help of all of the great staff at BASF and JDC, as well as the other incredible people I have been privileged to work with through this bar association.

This is an important time to be a lawyer. We face great changes as a country, changes that will have real and potentially devastating impacts in San Francisco. Many people in diverse communities face physical threats as well as potential loss of legal protections and financial and other support. To say times are uncertain is an understatement.

Yet as much as many of us are concerned about what lies ahead, that anxiety and uncertainty are magnified exponentially for those in our community who are the most vulnerable. Those are our clients at the Justice & Diversity Center. Our clients need JDC; they will need us even more in the next few years; and these clients need you.



From left, BASF/JDC Executive Director Yolanda Jackson and BASF/JDC President Merri Baldwin at the December 15, 2016, installation luncheon.

First, though, I will tell you a little about me. When I was heading off to Smith College, my two older sisters decided that I needed a suit. We did not have a lot of money, but they saved up, took me to Jordan Marsh, and bought me a brown tweed suit so that I would be ready for anything. I still have that suit hanging in my closet and perhaps with some major alterations I could have fit into it for this speech.

My mother would have loved to be here but could not make the trip from Cape Cod, and we miss her. My partner Kris Hermanns is here and in addition to putting up with me, which should win her some reward somewhere, Kris works on LGBT issues in urban and rural communities where that support can make a crucial difference especially in a young person's life, and I am inspired by her every day.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge and thank my work "family": my colleagues at Rogers Joseph O'Donnell over the years. You are an exceptional group of lawyers and people.

NOW ON TO THE NEXT PART: THE CHALLENGES WE FACE AND WHERE WE GO NEXT

First, I want to reflect briefly on where we are and give a short overview of some of the issues we face.

- ▶ We are looking at significant changes in the area of immigration enforcement, with the very real threat of significant numbers of deportations, immigration raids, and a huge increase in people facing removal proceedings. Many people in San Francisco could be affected, including neighbors, coworkers, and our children's classmates.
- ▶ Homelessness continues to be a significant challenge in San Francisco, exacerbated by the skyrocketing price of housing. Not only are people being squeezed out of housing, there is nowhere they can go. If we lose

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Section 8 housing benefits, a bad situation for people who truly have almost no options will only get worse.

- ▶ Cuts to court funding and related programs continue to threaten the administration of justice here in California. That problem likely will only worsen as federal funding to the state is slashed, causing cutbacks at the state level.

As one immediate example, funding for counsel for juvenile dependency hearings has been dramatically reduced, resulting in a significant projected budget gap. Dependency hearings involve vulnerable children and their families, many of whom are living in extreme poverty. Legal representation for families and children in dependency hearings helps keep families together, reduces unnecessary entry into the foster care system, and ensures quality care for children. We are working closely with San Francisco Superior Court to try and leverage funding and will continue those efforts.

The need for legal services in all these areas and more will only grow. Thankfully, many of us want to help to do what we can to address these growing problems.

WHAT EACH OF US CAN DO

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We know there is a greater likelihood of a fair and just outcome when people are represented.

My theme for this year will be “Mobilizing for justice in our community.” We will do this through several initiatives that build on our existing strengths:

➤ IMMIGRATION REPRESENTATION TASK FORCE

Immigration will be a critical focus in the next year nationally and locally. BASF has long been involved in legal representation for people in immigration proceedings through our Attorney of the Day program at the immigration court, assisting unrepresented immigrants in removal proceedings. For the last year, BASF has also served as the lead attorney for the San Francisco Immigrant Legal Defense Collaborative, a group of community-based organizations that provide representation to people in removal proceedings, particularly unaccompanied minors and families.

Because of the increased need for legal representation for both detained and nondetained respondents in removal proceedings, we are forming the BASF Immigration Representation Task Force. This will be made up of board members, immigration attorneys, and community leaders and will focus on how to best support the work of the San Francisco Immigrant Legal Defense Collaborative and

maximize the opportunities for legal representation of immigrants facing removal proceedings.

➤ ENHANCING VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

The second area of focus for next year is enhancing volunteer opportunities and outreach. JDC is a direct provider of legal services and is the second-largest pro bono program in the state and the largest program in Northern California. Not only that: JDC celebrates its fortieth anniversary in 2017. To mark that occasion, we want as many of you as possible providing legal services directly to those who need them. To help achieve that goal and enhance that incredible success, we will both provide additional volunteer opportunities and make it easier to access existing opportunities.

➤ HAP VOLUNTEER OF THE DAY

JDC's Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) provides critically needed direct services to more than two thousand clients a year through attorneys, legal advocates, and social workers. HAP provides eviction defense, benefits advocacy, and immigration services to its clients, operating out of its own building in the Civic Center. Because of HAP, fewer people are homeless, and those that are know they can get help that they really need.

We have created the "Volunteer of the Day" program at HAP for 2017, whereby lawyers and paralegals can volunteer to spend a Tuesday afternoon at HAP. Volunteers will shadow attorneys and staff as they do client intakes and provide legal services.

➤ WOODSIDE LEARNING CENTER

My last initiative for the year focuses on students. For the past few years, BASF volunteers have worked with detained youth at the Log Cabin Ranch, a minimum security facility in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Lawyers and judges garden and do woodworking with the students, helping the students understand that we appreciate them as young people and want to help them succeed.

Building on that work, we will be doing a workshop with detained youth at the Woodside Learning Center, the school run jointly by San Francisco Unified School District and the [San Francisco] probation department. This comes about as a result of a conversation I had with a teacher at Woodside after making a presentation to her class a few years ago. She mentioned it would be a great idea to teach the students debate skills, equipping them with a new set of tools, ones that could help navigate the barriers they will continue to face.

As it so happens, I was on the debate team in high school and college. Being on the debate team helped me find my own voice, especially in high school, and it helped lead me to my career as a litigator.

I am happy to announce that, through volunteer lawyers, we will run a series of debate workshops this year for students at Woodside, starting in March. This will involve working directly with the students, both boys and girls, teaching them how to debate.

While we face great uncertainty and change, we can take strength from the fact that in other moments where we have faced challenges, BASF and JDC have provided a forum for us to come together and work for positive change. BASF will continue to work for diversity, equity, and fairness; to fight against injustice and intolerance; and to speak out whenever necessary. Please know that BASF is doing what it can to be ready for what lies ahead; all we need in that effort is you and your support.

Thank you for allowing me to represent you as the president of BASF and JDC. I look forward to working with each of you as we mobilize for justice, one client, one issue, one student at a time.

Merri A. Baldwin is cochair of the Attorney Liability and Conduct Practice Group and a member of the Complex Commercial Litigation Practice Group at Rogers Joseph O'Donnell. She is a State Bar of California board-certified legal specialist in legal malpractice law. She serves as the 2017 president of The Bar Association of San Francisco and its Justice & Diversity Center and can be reached at mbaldwin@rjo.com.