

New consumer attorneys leader wants to return honor, integrity and civility to plaintiffs' bar

By Malcolm Maclachlan

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Geoffrey S. Wells knows how to play the long game. So does his firm.

Wells spent six years in leadership with the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles before he became the group's president in 2014. Then he did the same thing with the Consumer Attorneys of California for eight years.

"I've learned a lot by being in the room and listening and learning and seeing how the whole thing operates," said the partner with Greene Broillet & Wheeler LLP in El Segundo. "That kind of leadership ladder is very, very helpful because many of the things that we have to deal with as a president of these associations are things you don't really learn in law school. You need to learn kind of by being in the room."

When Wells takes the reins as the new president of the CAOC on Saturday night, he will be the fourth person from his firm to do so, joining partners Browne Greene in 1987, Bruce A. Broillet in 2001 and Christine D. Spagnoli in 2009. The firm marked its 50th anniversary last year.

"They all inspired me to run," Wells said. "Our firm is a big deal in the annals of the CAOC."

"Geoff is a phenomenal trial lawyer and also a phenomenal leader," Broillet said. "He has the capacity to size up and understand what needs to be done very quickly, and then the ability to help people coalesce around a common goal."

Broillet and Spagnoli led the CAOC during difficult periods. Broillet be-



Caption to go here | Justin L. Stewart/ Daily Journal

came president during a recession just weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while Spagnoli was sworn in during one of the worst years of the global financial crisis. Wells will lead the organization during a tough California budget year at the dawn of the second administration of President Donald Trump.

The CAOC has traditionally been aligned with Democrats. Trump appointed more than 230 conservative judges to the federal courts in his first term, and the U.S. Department of Justice could drop cases against businesses involving everything from firearms sales to vaping products.

"It becomes even more important to be able to hold corporations

accountable for things like defective products and toxins, and for the way they handle their employees," Broillet said. "And the only way that's going to be achieved is through the civil justice system in California and across the nation. Otherwise, the individual, the consumer, the employee, the worker, they're just going to be run over by big business."

But Wells said he plans to initially focus on challenges closer to home. He pointed to the continuing fallout from the downfall of another former CAOC president, Thomas V. Girardi, who has been convicted of fraud and disbarred for stealing millions of dollars from clients.

"I'm going to start with something more basic than that because we've had our issues with the attorneys that practice here, with the Girardi matter," Wells said. "So, one of the things my focus this year is going to be on is to return the honor, integrity and civility to the practice of law for the plaintiffs' bar. That is something I really believe in strongly."

Wells declined to discuss the organization's 2025 legislative agenda, noting the board would be discussing that at its annual convention in San Francisco this week. But his comments could suggest the CAOC could get involved in legislation around the California State Bar. It has consistently opposed the bar's

efforts to explore allowing non-attorneys to own shares of law firms or offer legal services.

He added that he looks forward to working with Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration to protect court funding. Newsom cut \$97 million from courts in his final 2024-25 state budget, though this was a smaller percentage than for some other state agencies.

"He's always been open to listening about the importance of access to justice for all of our citizens," Wells said. "He has always been

open to trying to do the best he can do for court funding. We have budget issues now, so the Court funding is going to be even more important."

Growing up, Wells didn't know any attorneys. His family moved to tiny Bainbridge Island, Washington, population 24,000, when he was 14. His parents took a ferry every day to their printing business in downtown Seattle.

He pitched for the University of Washington baseball team. Thanks in part to a few years of coaching

youth baseball, he said, he can still throw a ball 75 miles per hour.

Because of the grind of a 60-game schedule, it took him five years to accumulate enough credits to graduate. That fifth year changed his life. He took a class on media law and the First Amendment with professor Gerald Baldasty and was quickly inspired to go to law school.

Big verdicts followed, including a \$36 million award to a child seriously injured by a school bus. Wells has been with the firm for 32 years, something he admits is

unusual in the current era of professional mobility. He said he looks forward to helping younger lawyers the way his older colleagues at Greene Broillet helped him.

"I'm a big believer in mentoring and inspiring the next generation of lawyers," Wells said. "I really think it's important that we have the next generation of lawyers look and talk and be a lot more like the people that we represent."

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