

Santa Barbara County Unity Bar Celebrates its Founding with Judicial Appointments Secretary Luis Céspedes

BY TERESA M. MARTINEZ

On November 7, 2023, the Santa Barbara County Unity Bar celebrated its founding at its inaugural event. We were honored to be joined by California Judicial Appointments Secretary Luis Céspedes who engaged in a fireside chat with Santa Barbara County Superior Court Presiding Judge Pauline Maxwell, who hosted the event at her home in Santa Barbara. In addition to Secretary Céspedes, California Senator Monique Limón, representing California Senate District 19; Das Williams, Santa Barbara County Supervisor for the First District; and Jonnie Williams, PsyD, of Evolve Equity Psychology, also addressed the attendees, who included judges, attorneys, elected officials, court staff, and representatives of Unity Bars, from all over California. The speakers discussed the importance of diversity in representative government, in the justice system, and to democracy itself.

Secretary Céspedes, who was born and raised in Santa Maria, California, was appointed by Governor Gavin Newsom as California's Judicial Appointments Secretary on December 10, 2020. As described by Governor Newsom, Secretary Céspedes "has championed the cause of civil rights, equal justice, diversity and inclusion throughout his storied legal career, has been engaged in seeking justice for Californians from an early age." At age 15, Secretary Céspedes went on strike with César Chávez and the United Farmworkers Union demanding better wages and working conditions for farmworkers. Secretary Céspedes would go on to serve as a Law Clerk and Case Analyst at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, as a Senior Consultant for the California State Assembly Office of Majority Consultants, an Administrative Assistant to State Assemblymember Vic Fazio, a Principal Consultant for the California State Assembly Committee on Health, and an attorney being admitted to the California State Bar in 1981. In 2018, Secretary Céspedes was named "Distinguished Attorney of the Year" by the Sacramento County Bar Association.

During his remarks, Secretary Céspedes shared the story of the formation of the first Unity Bar in California, the Unity Bar of Sacramento, which he cofounded in 1987 along with Jerrie Chong then-president of the Asian Bar of Sacramento who was also in attendance at the event, and Renard Shepard, then-president of the Wiley Manual Bar.

Secretary Céspedes explained that instead of minority bar associations competing for judicial appointments, they would come together in solidarity, to support diverse candidates to the judiciary.

Secretary Céspedes shared Governor Newsom's commitment to increasing the diversity of the judiciary to reflect the demographics of California's diverse communities. He underscored the requirements of the State Bar to consider a candidate's legal experience broadly, as set forth in the Government Code section 12011.5, subdivision (d). Additionally, Secretary Céspedes discussed the importance to break bread with those with whom we disagree to find common ground.

Senator Limón discussed the importance of diversity on the bench as an access to justice issue. She stressed the need to increased diversity on the bench, not only in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, but also in terms of lived experiences. Senator Limón highlighted that the face of the bench is changing across California, a change that is supported by the California State Legislature.

Supervisor Williams highlighted that the Santa Barbara County Superior Court recently reached gender parity on the bench with the recent appointment of Christy Imel and also recognized that the Court still has more work to do to reflect the ethnic diversity of Santa Barbara County. Dr. Williams encouraged attendees to reflect on what changes each one of us can make within our own spheres of influence and to lean-in to the healthy discomfort needed to effectuate real change. She suggested that attendees mentor a young person to help guide them towards careers in law.

Building off of the decades-long work of the Sacramento County Unity Bar, the Santa Barbara County Unity Bar was recently established as part of a Statewide effort to help ensure that the California judiciary reflects the rich diversity of California. In solidarity with this Statewide effort, the mission of the Santa Barbara County Unity



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Bar is to encourage, foster, and promote the expansion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the legal profession and on the judiciary to reflect the demographics of our community thereby increasing access to and confidence in the judicial system. In attendance at the event were six enthusiastic, diverse and driven UCSB students and members of the Phi Delta Phi Legal Fraternity. These students were involved and instrumental in the Inaugural Event from the planning stages through the night of the event. Their energy, enthusiasm and participation were welcomed by the esteemed guests and they, in turn, had the opportunity to meet lawyers, judges and justices who were gracious and willing to give these young, future members of the legal profession advice and guidance. Engaging with and fostering students is one of the many ways that we can ensure that future generations of lawyers and judges reflect California's dynamic diversity.

The evening was made possible by the generous donations of our event sponsors, whom we would again like to thank for their generous support, including, Brownstein, Hyatt, Farber, Schreck; Bamieh & DeSmeth; Janean Acevedo Daniels; Klein, DeNatale, Goldner; Mullen & Henzell; Brandon Veltri Real Estate; Herring Law Group; Myers, Widders, Gibson, Jones, & Feingold; Law Offices of Greg McMurray; Garcia Legal; Law Offices of Michael T. Lyons; the Law Offices of Luis Esparza, San Luis Obispo County Unity Bar; and the Kern County Unity Bar.

If you would like to learn more about the Santa Barbara County Unity Bar, please visit our website at SantaBarbaraCountyUnityBar.com or email us at SantaBarbaraCountyUnityBar@gmail.com. ■

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