



CAALA President

Mike Arias

ARIAS SANGUINETTI WANG & TORRIJOS, LLP

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CAALA Plaintiff Trial Academy helps develop great trial lawyers

THE PTA SHOWCASES THE BEST ASPECTS OF CAALA MEMBERSHIP

One of the first things I knew that I wanted to do when I was elected to CAALA's Executive Committee in 2013 was to help improve the trial skills of our members – young as well as the more seasoned. That's always been my true North – it still is – and it will always be.

I assumed members joined CAALA for a lot of good reasons, however, I hoped that one of the main reasons they joined was to become the best plaintiff trial lawyer they could be. I wanted to help CAALA provide more programs for members to accomplish this goal.

With the invaluable help and support of CAALA's Deputy Director Cindy Cantu, I brought together a small group of CAALA leaders – Michael Cohen, Minh Nguyen, Christa Ramey, Doug Silverstein – and together we worked to create a unique program that would improve the trial skills of our members. I believed that this program, combined with CAALA's other skills-based programs, would greatly contribute to the collective success of all our trial lawyers.

The program we created was launched in 2014 and we named it the CAALA Plaintiff Trial Academy ("PTA"). There were 32 CAALA attorneys in the first PTA class and 16 outstanding, highly experienced CAALA trial lawyers volunteered their time to serve on the faculty. Each was an expert in one part of the PTA curriculum; some were members of CAALA's Hall of Fame, some were Trial Lawyers or Appellate Lawyers of the Year, and all were great lawyers. These attorneys collectively committed their valuable time to make the PTA program possible.

Right now, we are in the middle of the sessions for the fifth class of the CAALA PTA; the final session will be June 27. The PTA has been fine-tuned since the first class, but it still has the same concept – to bring together CAALA's best trial lawyers to teach newer or less experienced members how to be

better trial lawyers. Each class now proudly graduates 36 trial attorneys.

The CAALA PTA is an intensive program with 15 separate sessions that take place in the evening or on Saturday mornings and are presented over six weeks, covering every aspect of trial advocacy from pre-trial preparation to closing arguments to recognizing post-trial appellate issues. At the very last session, we bring in a prominent sitting judge to talk about "What Is a Good Trial Lawyer" from the judicial perspective.

Looking at the program today, looking back at the program we created five years ago, getting to know many of the 136 attorneys who have graduated from the program and watching their progress and success, I'm proud to say the PTA is one of the most important achievements of my time as a CAALA leader.

One benefit that I did not anticipate was that each PTA class has become its own family of trial lawyers. The attorneys who went through the program together have bonded and stayed close and I have been privileged to stay in touch with many of them. There is a sense of pride and camaraderie that is gratifying to see and very special to be a part of. They are there for each other, and each PTA class gets together regularly to share ideas and help each other with their cases. Their pride in being PTA graduates is also evident when they stand to introduce themselves – as has become a tradition at CAALA meetings – and proudly announce they are PTA graduates and the year they graduated.

The attorneys who volunteer their time to be on the faculty also represent the epitome of CAALA leadership. These are very busy trial attorneys, but not only do they volunteer to spend anywhere from six to nine hours in a week teaching at the PTA, many of them spend extra time working with and helping the students. The selflessness of their commitment is truly inspirational to watch and

sets a standard that ensures the future of the CAALA PTA.

It has also been gratifying to hear many graduates proudly update everyone in their class and credit the PTA experience in their trial successes. Many have credited the PTA for making them better trial lawyers: it not only gave them skills to succeed but the confidence to try more and more cases. There are many examples where even during the PTA sessions students have sought out help from faculty and class-members on a trial that they were involved in.

While many PTA grads have had great verdicts and accomplishments, I was especially proud to see Christopher Montes de Oca – a graduate of the inaugural PTA class of 2014 – awarded the honor of CAALA's Rising Star at this year's CAALA Gala Installation & Awards Dinner.

Recently, I had the honor to have two PTA grads – Griselda Rodriguez (Class of 2016) and Derek Tran (Class of 2017) – as part of my trial team in an employment case that resulted in a significant verdict, including punitive damages. And I am not exaggerating when I say that the verdict we obtained would not have been possible without their hard work, insight and trial skills. It made me proud to hear them say that many of their trial lawyer skills were first developed during the PTA classes and they were able to use those skills in this trial.

When I reflect on my initial vision for the PTA and then compare it to the results and experiences of the four PTA classes since 2014, I realize that the PTA represents all that is good about CAALA. Teaching our newer members how to become better trial lawyers, providing the resources to make our members better at what they do, giving back by volunteering to help others while building lasting camaraderie and relationships – this is what CAALA members do that makes our trial lawyer association different from any other.