



CAALA President  
**Genie Harrison**  
GENIE HARRISON LAW FIRM

## If the cause is just, I'm all in

Unlike many of you, I did not join CAALA at the beginning of my career. In fact, I did not know about CAALA until about my 15th year in practice; and then only because CAALA found me. At first, I didn't think I fit the CAALA mold, but that's because I was wrong about the CAALA mold.

I was, and remain, a civil rights attorney, focused on those who abuse their power and target others because of gender, race, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, medical condition, and the like. I have also handled police abuse, fair housing, and jail condition cases. If the cause is just, I'm all in. But I do not handle PI cases. At the time, I thought that, and not being a jet-rich white guy, meant I wasn't CAALA material.

In 2007 I was in the midst of a years-long battle to reform the Los Angeles City Fire Department due to its systemic gender, race and sexual orientation discrimination and retaliation against employees. My cases were often featured on talk radio and in the press, which led Past President Christine Spagnoli and Executive Director Stuart Zanville to cold-call me. They told me about CAALA and invited me to be part of this plaintiff lawyers' tribe. Next, Carl Douglas agreed to speak for me for Trial Lawyer of the Year on the condition that I "get involved, because CAALA *needs* you." Thirteen years later, I am CAALA's President.

Like any productive, long-term relationship, CAALA and I have had our disagreements. In my view, CAALA has been slow to evolve on certain issues, especially on diversity and inclusion. But I could not simply say that and expect others to do the hard work of change, so I ran for President to "be the change I wanted to see." Five years after I won my spot on the board, as I begin my presidency, I see a very different CAALA.

For the first time in CAALA's 72-year history, three of its six officers are women – me as President, Ibiere Seck as 2nd

Vice-President, and Elizabeth Hernandez as Secretary. Moreover, we are diverse. Though this is progress, it is also long past the time for this kind of first to be a distant event in CAALA's history. As President, I intend to solidify CAALA's evolution into a stronger, more diverse and inclusive organization.

During Ricardo Echeverria's last Executive Committee meeting as CAALA President in December 2017, I requested, and he approved, the establishment of CAALA's first Diversity Committee. The committee is now appropriately titled "Diversity & Inclusion" and it ensures that CAALA's commitment to diversity and inclusion is reflected in its membership, among its speakers, among the leaders it helps nurture, on its Board of Governors and among its officers. During 2021, the D&I Committee will cement its influence and help frame educational programs, both in terms of content and vetting qualified diverse speakers.

CAALA's Women in Law Committee discussions have included some members' frustration about both the number of women speakers at previous CAALA events and the topics assigned to them. As a result, new feminist voices have risen, which I view as the kind of "good trouble" about which Rep. John Lewis so famously spoke. After listening to their substantive points about representation, I audited ten years of CAALA speakers at our Convention, at seminars, and at the PTA program. On average, women comprised 30.7% of CAALA's Vegas speakers, 32% of seminar speakers, and 21% of the PTA faculty.

These outspoken women are leaders and I have placed them in leadership positions on several CAALA committees. To the women who raised their voices about these issues, you are now in a position to be the change you want to see.

The Education Committee did a phenomenal job in 2020 changing tack as a result of COVID and presenting more than 80 individual webinars, proving that

challenging times can bring productive change. In contrast to 2010-2019, the 2020 seminars featured, on average, 52% female speakers.

CAALA will soon roll out an exciting video library, which has been a dream of mine for years. We have collected nineteen professionally produced videos from terrific CAALA lawyers on topics ranging from the remote practice of law to arguing punitive damages. The videos will be searchable by length, subject, and speaker, and is a remote resource for members when and where you need the help.

The business of justice will be challenging until safe and effective vaccines are widespread and the courts dig out from the COVID-created backlog. CAALA continues to work closely with the Los Angeles County Superior Court leadership and other bar leaders to develop a remote settlement program, press for more hearing availability on motions, and get civil trials back up and running. You will hear more about this from LASC leadership who have accepted my invitation to report directly to our members and Board throughout 2021.

I'm incredibly honored to be CAALA's 2021 President. I know that we face challenges to our ability to work, our health, and access to justice. But I look at this as a time of opportunity. This is CAALA's chance to solidify a new way of doing business, with new faces, fresh ideas, and a renewed commitment to meet the needs of our members.

In 2007, I did not think I fit the CAALA mold, but that's because I was wrong about the CAALA mold. CAALA wants leaders who are non-conformists, strong, and outspoken. More than ever, CAALA values *you* – each of you has an important voice and perspective, and much to contribute. As I begin my year as your President, I echo what Carl Douglas told me in 2007, "CAALA needs you."

