



CAALA President  
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## Getting to know your incoming CAALA president

“I WANTED TO BE A LAWYER BECAUSE OF AN UGLY EVENT WHEN I WAS ABOUT FIVE-OR SIX-YEARS OLD.”

I am honored and humbled to lead CAALA this year. The president is the face of the organization for a year. Each president hopes to leave a long-lasting legacy and imprint. That said, no president can predict what issues will face the organization or our practice. Moreover, the president is not the only leader of this great organization and does not lead alone. There are many leaders who are the true unsung heroes of our organization, including many past and present officers and board members. Throughout this year, we are going to spot-light them so that we all can get to know each other better and to thank them for their contributions.

CAALA has always been and will always be a champion of equal justice for all. Our motto is “CAALA educates, connects, assists and advocates for its members.” Each of us has taken a different path to be here. I hope by sharing mine, it will inspire others and remind everyone what can be attained through hard work, perseverance, civility, honesty, collaboration, unconditional giving, vulnerability, and love.

### Fleeing the fall of Saigon

My story begins with my parents, who fled Vietnam in 1975 to avoid political persecution. My father was in the Air Force. Had he stayed, he would have met the same fate as my uncles who were killed after the fall of Saigon. My parents came to the United States literally with their clothes on their backs. They had to start over and build a new life in the U.S. They devoted their entire lives to raising law-abiding children who would make a difference in the lives of others.

I grew up in a one-bedroom house in Long Beach. My mother was a homemaker. My father was a shipyard welder in San Pedro until he was laid off in 1987. From there, we fell on hard times and relied on public assistance to survive. When I received a new pair of shoes, it was only new to me. My father worked odd jobs to make ends meet. To help out, I started working when

I was 15 years old. I worked at Mrs. Field’s Cookies to pay the bills while maintaining my grades and playing baseball and football. I earned \$4.25 an hour.

I managed to graduate high school at Long Beach Poly, where I met my wife. Yes, we were that yearbook couple. I got into UCLA. It was during college that I first experienced homelessness. I could not afford gas to drive back and forth from Long Beach to Westwood, so I slept in my car. On most days, I was too exhausted to drive. I did not have housing because being the first to go to college, I did not even know you had to apply for housing separately. And even if I had applied, I couldn’t have afforded it.

### My mentor

I took on a second and third job while in college. This is when I met Jeffrey Pop, a trial lawyer and CAALA member, who profoundly influenced me and taught me the meaning of a mensch. For the next 18 years (eight as legal staff and 10 as a lawyer), Jeff taught me how to honor and respect clients’ confidence and trust, to always put their interests first, to show deference to the court even when the court is wrong, to dig deep into the facts of a case, and to question my assumptions and the basis of my supposed knowledge. He taught me the importance of balancing family and work. He gave me opportunities to grow, learn, and thrive. He even paid for law school so I could focus on my studies.

I wanted to be a lawyer because of an ugly event when I was about five- or six-years old. I was with my mother walking to our car. We had parked in a residential neighborhood that bordered a thrift shop. As we were approaching the car, a man with white hair to his shoulders and wearing a white tank top and shorts, with beet-red skin, started yelling racial epithets toward us. He said for us to go back to our country and that we did not belong here. In response, my mother in her broken English said, “So sorry.

So sorry.” We got into the car and left. We never spoke about it.

### A voice for the poor, the unrepresented...

I grew up angry. I was not angry at what the man had said or done to us. I should have been, but I wasn’t. I was angry at my mother. Why did she apologize? Why did we not stand up for ourselves? Growing up, I saw my mother as weak. As a child, I failed to see the strength that she had to withhold her anger to protect her son or to avoid conflict. I wanted to be her voice. I wanted to be a voice for the poor, the unrepresented, the oppressed, the forgotten, and the damned.

We must stamp out hatred in whatever form, whenever and wherever we see it. If we are to be true Justice Warriors, our beliefs and values must live within our bones and travel wherever we may go. We must deliver justice in the courtroom and provide service in our community.

I grew up in CAALA. I attended CAALA Vegas before I was a lawyer. I saw many lawyers speak who became my role models and friends. I remember when the listserv was first created and how I spent an hour or two each day answering questions. I was a legal nerd and enjoyed helping others. I shared information freely and often; admittedly, I have slowed down in the last couple of years. But I promise to be more active as soon as my CAALA duties subside next year.

### The first Asian-American to lead CAALA

I am humbled to be the first Asian-American to lead CAALA and to be the first of many firsts to come in the near future with Ibiere Seck being the first African-American Woman president (2024), and Elizabeth Hernandez (2026) being the first Latina-American president, man or woman. However, we are not the firsts. The firsts are CAALA’s founding members (1949) and our first female

president, Deborah A. David (1997). CAALA is at the forefront of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The current board underwent its first DEI training at the last retreat. We will schedule more sessions for the board and then for the members. DEI is a must, even for a progressive organization like ours. I look forward to the day that we no longer need to talk about it. Until that day arrives, we will strive to be diverse, equitable, inclusive and welcoming. We still have a ways to go. But we are leading the way.

### The work to be done

By every metric, CAALA is very successful. CAALA is the one and only plaintiffs' Bar in Los Angeles. No other association can make such a claim. We are the oldest, most influential, and largest local bar association. We have a voice within the Los Angeles Superior Court and our legislatures in Sacramento and Washington, DC. This year, we are going to build on the wildly successful Plaintiff Trial Academy by having an advanced course. We will continue to train the next generation of trial lawyers. We are going to assist our sisters and brethren with case evaluation by starting a CAALA-only sourced database of settlements and verdicts using metrics that can be filtered and searched. Too often, the insurance industry has been successful at taking

advantage of our less-seasoned members about the true value of a human being's injury. We will level the playing field. This will be a Herculean project that we will call upon our accomplished members to share their successes in confidence to create this database.

We will continue to work with the bench to ensure equal access to the court. Some of our officers and board members sit on the court's Bench and Bar Committees. We will push for firm trial dates and uniformity with discovery rulings. With the phasing of the PI Hub and the return to district courts, it should expedite IDCs, if renewed, eliminate discovery delays, and motivate the carriers to settle earlier given the certainty of the judge and trial date. Most of our clients cannot afford trial continuances and the associated.

We will push for good laws to be passed and to eliminate bad laws. The changes in MICRA and increases in financial responsibility law are a good start. We will push to eliminate junk opinions and science in the courtroom. We will fight fee caps. We will also tackle the ever-rising litigation costs and work with our affiliate partners to bring more benefits to our members. We will protect our clients' rights to a jury trial.

We will continue to extend a hand to ASCDC, ABOTA-LA, LACBA, and other

affinity bars to collaborate on joint programming. We will also increase members-only programming.

### My personal team

I want to end by thanking my law partner, Belinda Theam, associates, Lakshmi Odedra, Jason Doucette, Diamo Dokhanian, and Arnold Reed II, and our office staff, for allowing me to lead our organization this year. I am going to lean on them to hold down the firm while I spend my time at the CAALA office. I want to thank my wife Nicole, son Aidyn, and daughter Kailyn for sharing me with CAALA. I am going to miss some important events in their lives this year.

Finally, I want to introduce everyone to our wonderful staff led by Executive Director Kwedi Moore, Director of Finance and Operations Manager Bill Smith, Education and Events Manager Fatima Jones, Affiliate and Sponsorship Manager Nyleen Viegas, Membership Manager Araceli Murillo, Communications and Marketing Manager Jenna Pass, Office Administrator Martha Ruiz, Events and Members Services Coordinator Margie Ruiz.

I look forward to reporting the many accomplishments we are going to achieve together this year.

