

Retiring Chief Justice Honored With Blowout Bash at Judges' Conference

By Sara Randazzo
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MONTEREY — When Tom Girardi took the stage Saturday night to introduce a man he called “one of the finest human beings in the world,” he wasn’t referring to either of the two honorees of the evening, retiring Chief Justice Ronald M. George and outgoing State Bar president Howard Miller.

No, he was referring to Paul Anka (yes, that Paul Anka), who serenaded the crowd at a no-expense-spared party orchestrated by Girardi, the Los Angeles plaintiffs’ lawyer, on the final night of the annual State Bar meeting here.

With George by his side, Anka sang a personalized rendition of the classic tune he wrote for Frank Sinatra, “My Way,” subbing in lyrics that in one line paid tribute to the justice’s renowned career and in the next poked fun at the all-lawyer band playing behind him.

“Talented lawyers, swing the scene./ Led by conductor Gary Greene,” Anka swooned. “They’ll send their bill, why sugar coat/I bet they’re charging, by the note.”

Greene, a sole practitioner in Los Angeles, founded the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic in 2009. The group’s 75 members count lawyers, judges and law clerks, many of them graduates from top music schools who were eager to have a creative outlet outside of work. Fifty of the musicians were flown in for Saturday’s event.

“Isn’t this cool?” Girardi, who practices law with Miller at Girardi & Keese, said early in the night as the orchestra took the stage. The group, which rehearses every Monday night, had only a week to practice a list of requests known to be George’s favorites, including George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” and classics like “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” and “It Had to Be You.”

The soirée picked up steam as the guests of honor arrived, and the room soon filled with a few hundred members from the bench and bar. Girardi lavished the guests with an open bar and full buffet, lit by twinkling candles beneath a picturesque white tent erected for the two-hour event.

George mingled with the crowd alongside his wife of nearly 45 years, Barbara George. When asked how it felt to be at his final State Bar conference as chief justice, he concluded: “It’s bittersweet,” pointing to the shower of admiration he’s received but also the reminders of everything he’ll miss.

George couldn’t get through a conversation with a reporter without having more praise lavished upon him.

“He single-handedly created a third branch of government in Cali-



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Sole practitioner Gary Greene with the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic.

fornia, in this state,” James Penrod, senior counsel at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius in San Francisco, said as he approached the chief.

George conceded the oft-stated compliment. “We always had it in name and theory,” he said, “but not in function or reality.” The two swapped reasons on how he accomplished this, including by consolidating the 58-county court system, launching a statewide court case management system, and transferring ownership of all 532 courthouses to the state.

Attention then quickly turned to Anka, the 69-year-old crooner who gained fame in the 1950s and 1960s with songs like “Diana” and “Put Your Head on My Shoulder.”

Anka graced the stage for only a few short minutes but packed a

punch. He warmed up the crowd with jokes, mostly poking fun at his Catholic roots: “I went to confession recently, and I said to the priest, ‘You first,’” he quipped.

Lines of his personalized song, which he read off notes, drew laughter and applause from the crowd for their spot-on accuracy of the judge’s tenure. In one refrain he sang: “Yes we see, humanity, in each decree you rightly rendered/ You faced, you then embraced, marriages based on love not gender.”

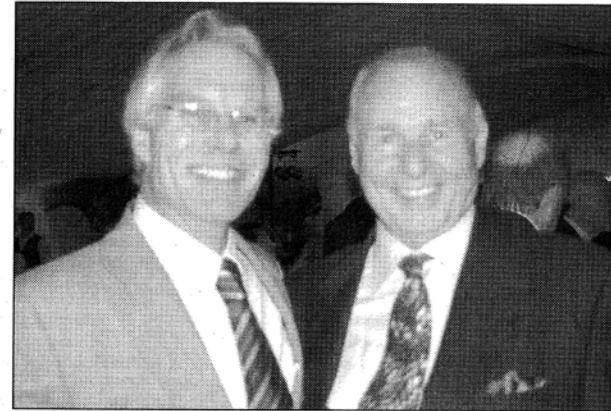
After the song, George thanked the tanned former teen idol for giving him a new set of lyrics to remind him of the end of his career, commenting that he came into the party with the Kenny Rogers refrain in his head:

“You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em/ Know when to walk away.”

He also made an observation that seemed to be on most guests’ minds: “To conceive of this, there’s only one guy, Tom Girardi, who could even conceive of this.”

Before stepping off the stage, George showed gratitude to the band for flying up for the occasion, calling their appearance “mind-boggling,” and pointed out his wife Barbara’s long connection to conductor Greene, who has worked with Barbara to improve music education in the state’s public schools.

Greene, a violinist, said he grew up in a musical family that fostered his love for music at a young age. In addition to his law practice, he con-



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Joe Hilberman, of ADR Services, and Tom Girardi of Girardi & Keese.

ducts the Los Angeles-based Junior Philharmonic Orchestra, founded in 1937 by Greene’s uncle.

Members of the lawyers-only band may have day jobs, but they sound like any professional orchestra. As Greene explained, “They had the passion [for music], had the desire, but bottom line they all wanted to quote-unquote make a living, so after trying music they all went into law school.”

Since forming, they’ve played 15 concerts, including at the esteemed Walt Disney Concert Hall in down-

town L.A. This was their first show on the road. Up next is a performance in honor of Los Angeles County Superior Court Presiding Judge Charles “Tim” McCoy, who was in attendance Saturday night.

Once Anka left the stage, the band settled in for a few last numbers, but with a noticeable sense of urgency. As one concerned musician pointed out, “We only have five minutes to get to the bar!”

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James Penrod, of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius; outgoing State Bar president Howard Miller of Girardi & Keese; Barbara George and Chief Justice Ronald M. George.