

Message from OCBA President Michael L. Baroni



Moving Forward Together.

I'm sorry. My first President's Page column, "United We Stand: Defending the American Dream," triggered angry responses, passionate objections and a public protest at our Judges' Night and Annual Meeting. It also prompted others to say they support me – and some acted on my behalf at that same event. I used this forum to express political and personal beliefs and that was wrong. As President of this Bar Association, I am the spokesperson for our wonderfully diverse legal community and what I penned was reckless.

In many ways, this all has reflected these sharply polarized times.

In every way, this is not the outcome I expected or wanted. And it is not how I want my year as your Bar Association president to continue.

I wanted my column to be inspirational. Instead, it inspired divisiveness. I wanted to send a positive, inclusive message. Instead, many heard an offensive message. I wanted to launch my year as president pointing to the Orange County Bar Association as a force for unity – as I believe it is the most richly diverse, collegial legal community in the country. Instead, we have OCBA members and affiliate organizations saying they may drop out, from frustration and anger or in protest.

I thought long and hard about what I wrote. I listened to my critics and my supporters. I have stepped back and reviewed my writing from a distance. And, I understand why my remarks fueled controversy.

After reading what I wrote objectively, I see how I was wrong. And for that, I am sincerely sorry.

Now, I want to put action behind my words.

I have a new mission. I am going to spend my year as your Bar Association president listening, learning and leading the way to making 2017 a year of full, open dialogue on these important issues. Rather than shutting people down as a result of this, I want people to open up. It will absolutely be my undertaking over the next 11 months to convince each and every one of you that the insensitive words I used in that first President's Page have been overwhelmed by words and actions built around respectful dialogue in an atmosphere of tolerance and a continued embrace of diversity of all kinds.

Most of all, I want you to know that my column being read as an anti-immigrant attack has caused me to do a great deal of soul-searching. As has the fact that I let my passion for law enforcement override common sense – I *know* that our law enforcement officers do the best they can, but they are not faultless in every violent encounter; yet, I chose to write differently.

I do think our great country faces great challenges – as I'm sure you do as well – and among the greatest of these are threats by extremists who preach intolerance, hatred and violence against anyone who does not share their beliefs.

The greatest defense against that extremism is to continue to be the example to the world of a successful nation of immigrants. Growing up in New York City, I was mesmerized by Ellis Island's history of taking in endless streams of people from around the world, people of all ethnicities, all colors, all

religions- all seeking a better life. My neighborhood was filled with an incredibly diverse array of first-generation immigrant shop owners. It is a world I love, and I am deeply disappointed that my written words portrayed otherwise.

Along with anger at me, some have expressed disappointment in how the OCBA reacted to my column. Let me assure you that the Executive Committee of the Board has already spent hours reaching out to various organizations and listening to feedback. They have been criticized for what I wrote, but it was not their fault. They have been working tirelessly to find a way to bring our members together and they have provided a model for us going forward.

How, now, do we go forward?

We will continue our many programs that support access to justice initiatives and providers, including the Public Law Center, Legal Aid, Veterans Legal Institute, UCI Saturday Academy of Law, Laura's House and more. This issue of OC Lawyer identifies charitable organizations receiving more than \$170,000 in grants from our Charitable Fund this year alone.

We are also discussing adding new programs and initiatives, particularly through the work of our diversity task force.

I join in vigorous support of all those efforts. Please also know that I have a long history in the OCBA of voting to support a wide array of charitable grants to help with immigration issues, and charities which assist minority communities. I have spoken on diversity matters and sought ways to help certain immigrant community populations deal with people pretending to be immigration lawyers. And, the people I've appointed to committees represent the full diversity of the Bar. I intend to continue my practice of promoting diversity and inclusion in all I do.

In the next couple of weeks, we are going to have a series of frank and open roundtable discussions with the leaders of many of our affiliate bars to discuss what's next and how, in that process, to make the OCBA better.

I can't emphasize this enough—I eagerly welcome the opportunity to speak with anyone, or any group, to help heal any rift I may have created. Positive results develop from civil, constructive dialogue, and the sharing of viewpoints. Let's learn from each other, and give me the opportunity to better understand your needs and concerns.

I have my new mission for 2017. I humbly and sincerely ask that you join me on it.

Michael L. Baroni
2017 OCBA President