

Judicial Vignettes: San Bernardino County's Newest Superior Court Judge

by Ed Butler

When new judges are appointed, our field reporter, Ed Butler, Esq. interviews them and submits for your information, a "Judicial Vignette." These vignettes are added to our online collection of Benchmarks, a feature in the Bar Bulletin.

Gilbert G. Ochoa

An advocate for more than a score years, Judge **Gilbert G. Ochoa** brings varied litigation experience to his new role as Superior Court judge of San Bernardino County.

While his attorney practice experience was dominated by insurance defense, he also worked several years in criminal advocacy.

Filling one of the newly legislated judicial positions, he assumed the bench at Central District Dec. 3. His assignment there includes a general criminal calendar and a quasi-civil one hosting sexually violent predators, defendants "not guilty by reason of insanity," and mentally disordered defenders.

He finds it challenging to revisit crime after a long spell in the civil litigation arena.

Judge Ochoa was born and raised in Norwalk, his father an electrician for Hughes Aircraft and his mother in customer service at a credit union. Growing up, the future judge enjoyed absorption in water sports, competing interscholastically in water polo and swimming all four years of high school. He also went out for water polo all four years at Whittier College, where he earned a bachelor's degree in education. He earned his law degree at the University of Santa Clara School of Law.

Reflecting his enthusiasm for water sports, he worked as a lifeguard for the city of Norwalk during high school and college. That was followed by work as lifeguard and water polo and swimming coach for the city of Santa Fe Springs. He says these jobs were helpful for

defraying college expenses.

Law school brought clerking experience, in Newport Beach at the law firm where now-State Appellate Justice Bill Rylaarsdam was managing partner. The firm did insurance defense.

Admitted to the State Bar in 1985, Judge Ochoa launched his practice career with three years as deputy district attorney of Orange County. He started with juvenile delinquency and moved into misdemeanors. Then came two years of varied insurance defense work at Haight, Brown and Bonesteel in Santa Ana.

He cut loose for a brief solo practitioner career in 1990-91, engaging in criminal defense and personal injury plaintiff work in Santa Ana. In 1991 he joined Bollington and Roberts, an insurance defense firm, and two years later was promoted to open and manage its new Ontario office. He remained there until his recent judicial appointment.

Along the way, he found time to serve as judge pro tem in both Orange and San Bernardino counties, and to serve as court-appointed arbitrator for Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

He estimates that as attorney he participated in 60-70 bench trials and 45 jury trials.

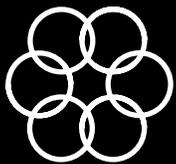
Judge Ochoa says the role of judge has attracted him ever since he was a prosecutor. Nearing age 50, he reflected on his body of work and was tempted to take a new direction, and felt his experience and temperament would support him on the bench. Also, he felt judging would allow him to "have a little more of an impact on the community."

He finds it's been stimulating and educational returning to criminal law after an 18-year hiatus. "I really feel like I'm back in school and really hitting the books," he says. He praises his fellow judges as supportive, approachable and welcoming of overflow from other departments.

Judge Ochoa and his wife of 13 years have four children ranging in age from four to 17. His wife had been working as a Southwest Airlines customer service representative, but they agreed his reduced time flexibility as a bench officer would necessitate her being a fulltime, home-based mom.

One of the family's favorite pastimes is their frequent retreats at their San Felipe beach house, where they enjoy a sand rail, quads, fishing and swimming.

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