

## Trial attorney group turns 40

*The Association of Business Trial Lawyers, founded in LA, filled a legal niche.*

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**F**orty years ago, business trial lawyers in Los Angeles lacked the same opportunities as other specialists to interact and exchange ideas about the bar. Unlike personal injury or defense attorneys, at the time they were without a professional group that catered to their specific interests.

So in 1973, a cadre of business litigators led by Allan Browne, founding partner of Browne George Ross LLP, formed the Association of Business Trial Lawyers.

"It started from the premise that there were some gaps that needed to be filled, and it has continued to serve that role," said Karen Kaplowitz, who was president of the Los Angeles chapter in 1996.

The founders were young - most were in their 30s, said Bingham McCutchen LLP partner Marshall B. Grossman, one of the association's founders. Lacking a central office, the members organized using the "stationery and the postage and the elbow grease" provided by Browne's and Grossman's offices.

"We started with nothing - we had no funds, we had no experience," Grossman said. "We had no right to succeed, but we did."

In four decades, what started in Los Angeles has expanded to include five chapters across the state - Los Angeles, Northern California, Orange County, San Diego and San Joaquin Valley - and now boasts nearly 5,000 members.

"We were able to meld a true open bar association dedicated to litigation and cooperation between the bench and the bar in advancing the professional needs of each group," Grossman said. "That's the reason for its founding and its initial and continued success."

The group includes both plaintiff- and defense-side business litigators, as well as judges. Many of the association's members and leaders agreed that its greatest impact over the years has been connecting the bench with both sides of the state's business bar.

"We think that's really valuable ... to have a way to readily exchange ideas between the bench and both sides of the bar about



Alexander Drecun / Special to the Daily Journal

Marshall Grossman and J. Warren Rissier of the Association of Business Trial Lawyers, which just celebrated its 40th anniversary.

issues of import to a significant group that the California courts serve, which is the business litigators," said Bingham partner J. Warren Rissier, this year's Los Angeles chapter president.

At a 40th anniversary event held during the association's annual seminar earlier this month, association founders discussed the original goals of the association. Among them were providing continuing legal education and fostering "social fellowship" among its members, Rissier said, adding "I think we've stayed pretty true to those goals that were set forth since 1973."

Balance is also a top priority. From its membership to the leaders at its helm, the group has worked to avoid becoming dominated by defense attorneys, said Alan Schulman, the association's first plaintiffs'-attorney president. Schulman, now a University of San Diego School of Law professor, headed the San Diego chapter in 2001.

"I felt there was a genuine effort being made to make sure the organization was balanced with plaintiffs, defendants and judges, so it was truly representative of the litigation bar," he said.

A balance between both sides of the bar is attractive to judges, because they can talk to attorneys without concern that they might appear to be taking sides, said Richard Seabolt, the Northern California chapter president and a Duane Morris LLP partner. Informal events such as dinners and debates give members a chance

to foster relationships with both attorneys and judges, groups that don't often have contact outside of the courtroom.

ABTL's expansion throughout the state began in the early 1990s, allowing members to connect with an even larger group of their peers, said Kaplowitz, who was part of a team that drove the expansion.

"You can see that the outreach by ABTL Los Angeles to the rest of the state reflected the growing importance of the legal communities in other parts of the state," she said. "We were part of a growing trend towards the nationalization and the internationalization of law firms."

The Northern California chapter has since surpassed Los Angeles in head count, eventually reaching an all-time high of about 2,000 members, Seabolt said.

Going forward, Rissier said, the association is making investments to prepare it for another 40 years. It has, for example, ramped up its Internet and social media presence and is focusing on increasing diversity. The group, which has had fewer female presidents or minority attorneys in its membership, is working to address these shortfalls, Kaplowitz said.

It's also devoting more resources on younger lawyers, encouraging them to take on leadership roles and offering free first-time memberships to attorneys who have practiced for three years or fewer.

"We think when young lawyers are introduced to the ABTL," Rissier said, "we'll have members for life."