

# New Leader for Consumer Attorneys Group

*New Bar Leader Pledges Passion for Civil Justice, Compassion for People*

**By Don J. DeBenedictis**

SANTA ANA - John A. Montevideo became an active member of the bar association for California tort plaintiffs' lawyers because he "fell in love with the selflessness."

Montevideo loved the fact that even though the sole and small-firm lawyers who make up the group's membership essentially were all competitors, they went out of their way to help one another with difficult cases.



As this year's president of the Consumer Attorneys of California, Montevideo will honor that selflessness when the association celebrates its 50th anniversary in April.

The association, formerly called the California Trial Lawyers Association, began when lawyers who represented injured plaintiffs were considered "ambulance chasers."

"The judges did not give us a lot of respect," Montevideo said.

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**- Joseph L. Dunn**

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Worse still, the insurance and defense lawyers, working in midsize and larger firms, "were better than we were," he said.

"That had to change."

As the trial lawyers association grew, members were better able to share advice, briefs and expert depositions and put on educational programs.

"It's like being part of a very large law firm," he said.

The association "gives consumers a chance to have a good lawyer."

For this April's milestone, Montevideo is planning party for the group, but not a big party.

Instead, even before assuming the president's post last month, he had wallet-sized cards printed for the group's 3,000-plus members. The cards display a "consumer attorneys pledge" that Montevideo wrote with help from CAOC staff.

It calls on the lawyers to have "compassion for people and passion for civil justice" and declares that clients' "most important right is the right to a jury trial."

But, it warns, "A right to file doesn't mean it's right to file."

Over its 50 years, the trial lawyers group has expanded beyond continuing legal education into politics. Based in Sacramento, it has four, full-time attorney lobbyists among its staff of 20, Montevideo said.

He said the association has not settled on a legislative agenda for the current session. One interest area will be laws protecting medical patients, such as last year's Senate Bill 1237, which took effect this month and requires hospitals and clinics to track patients' exposure to X-rays from CT machines.

And the group will continue to push to keep the state courts open and well funded.

"No one should tell the courts, 'You need to close,'" he said.

State Bar Executive Director Joseph L. Dunn, who represented Orange County in the state Senate from 1999 to 2007, said Montevideo learned over the years how Sacramento operates.

Dunn, who was a top mass tort lawyer in Orange County, has known Montevideo for more than 25 years, and last year even shared office space with him briefly.

"John is one of the most polished lawyers you can find, yet he does not have the ego that often goes with polished lawyers," Dunn said.

Although his tie is always straight and his jacket never unbuttoned, Dunn said, Montevideo retains his "friendly Midwestern personality."

The son of an Italian immigrant, the 59-year-old Montevideo grew up in Niles, Ohio, near Youngstown, and graduated from Ohio State University, intending to become a doctor.

He was accepted into a medical school in Guadalajara, Mexico, but he balked at the border on seeing too many officials, or alleged officials, with their hands out for bribes.

After three days of attempting to cross, he turned north and drove with his family to Irvine, where an uncle lived. Eighteen months later, he started law school.

Montevideo put himself through Western State University School of Law by working as a respiratory therapist. When he graduated in 1979, Santa Ana injury lawyer Andrew Di Marco, son of one of his respiratory patients, asked Montevideo to join his practice. He's been there ever since.

The firm focuses on representing workers injured on the job, and Montevideo focuses on representing them in suits against third parties, not the workers' compensation cases against employers. In one case in Pomona a few years ago, he won \$6 million for a paralyzed construction worker.

Montevideo became active in the organized trial bar in the mid-1980s, beginning with the Orange County Trial Lawyers Association, where he moved up through the ranks quickly.

Perhaps a little too quickly, Dunn said.

As in many bar associations, OCTLA leaders start out as secretary and advance "through the chairs" to treasurer, vice president, president-elect and finally president.

In the mid-1990s, Dunn was in line to become president in 1998, and Montevideo was next behind him. But when ballots were printed for the 1997 election, Montevideo was incorrectly listed as president-elect.

"He engineered a coup before I even took the reins," Dunn said, laughing.

Both blame a clerical error for the mix-up, but Montevideo won the presidency nonetheless.

Dunn couldn't have served anyway because he was elected to the state Senate in 1998.

But Montevideo said Dunn got his revenge. When then-Lt. Gov. Gray Davis arrived to swear in the 1998 OCTLA president, he came with a proclamation honoring Dunn.

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