



CONSUMER ATTORNEYS OF CALIFORNIA

Seeking Justice for All

Craig Peters, David Winnett selected as CAOC's Consumer Attorneys of the Year

Taylor Rayfield named Street Fighter of the Year at Awards Dinner

SAN FRANCISCO (Nov. 17, 2018) – **Craig M. Peters** of Altair Law in San Francisco and **David L. Winnett** of The Veen Firm in San Francisco are Consumer Attorneys of California's 2018 Consumer Attorneys of the Year for holding Mazda accountable for a defective seatback design that left a California woman a partial paraplegic.

The announcement was made Saturday night at the awards dinner held as part of CAOC's 57th Annual Convention at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco.

Taylor Rayfield of Greene Broillet & Wheeler in Santa Monica, who has been an attorney for only eight years, was also honored Saturday night as CAOC's Street Fighter of the Year for winning a settlement that compensated more than two dozen victims of a high school wrestling coach who was hired despite being a known sexual predator.

Consumer Attorney of the Year is awarded to a CAOC member or members who significantly advanced the rights or safety of California consumers by achieving a noteworthy result in a case. Eligibility for Street Fighter of the Year is limited to CAOC members who have practiced law for no more than 10 years or work in a firm with no more than five attorneys. To be considered for either award the case must have finally resolved between May 15, 2017 and May 15, 2018, with no further legal work to occur, including appeals. The winners are determined by a vote of CAOC's Board of Directors.

In *Doe v. Mazda Motor of America, Inc., et al.*, Peters and Winnett represented a woman who was seriously injured when the car she was driving was rear-ended by a one-ton pickup truck traveling at 65 miles an hour. The impact caused her seatback to collapse backward, and the headrest and the back of her head were struck by the intrusion of her trunk and back seat from the impact. She suffered a traumatic brain injury, a broken spine and broken ribs, and was left a partial paraplegic with a lifetime of excruciating pain.

The attorneys said the collapsing seatback was a design defect and said a reasonable consumer would not expect the seatback to collapse from a rear end collision at highway speeds. If the seatback held, the victim would have experienced few or no injuries. Mazda argued that a change in velocity of more than 60 mph is impossible to design a seatback for, and no government agency or industry group has required that seatbacks be built to withstand these type of impacts. But this seatback design fails at low speeds, even in an impact with a change in velocity of 20 mph. A jury agreed that the seatback was defectively designed, compensating the victim for her suffering and medical care. It is hoped that this verdict, along with other recent cases involving failing seatbacks, will have the effect of preventing the deaths or serious injuries of other drivers

and passengers. This was a difficult victory against a company, and an industry, that was willing to spend unlimited amounts of money to fight against a simple change that had the potential to save lives.

In the case honored with the Street Fighter award, *T.H. v. Torrance Unified School District, Thomas Snider*, Rayfield took on a school district that allowed a sexual predator to coach wrestling. Thomas Snider, a longtime Torrance High School computer teacher, was hired to coach the school's wrestling team in 2013, despite past allegations that he had sexually assaulted an 11-year-old boy on a camping trip. As coach, he molested dozens of boys on his team. Rayfield represented one of these boys, and during the course of her investigation, she uncovered evidence that showed years before her client was abused, school staff members, including the principal, were aware of allegations of sexual abuse by Snider. Rather than investigate or alert law enforcement, the school officials complained to Torrance police that the man who made the allegations was harassing them. Rayfield's tenacity and negotiating skills resulted in a settlement compensating her client for the abuse he suffered, and that helped more than two dozen other victims also reach settlements with the school district.

Also honored at Saturday's dinner were:

William L. Veen (founder and principal, The Veen Firm, San Francisco), winner of the Robert E. Cartwright, Sr., Award, given "in recognition of excellence in trial advocacy and dedication to teaching trial advocacy to fellow lawyers and to the public." Veen has been a longtime supporter of CAOC's education programs, as a speaker and sponsor, and has been generous in sharing his legal knowledge with fellow consumer attorneys.

Timothy G. Blood (managing partner, Blood Hurst & O'Reardon, San Diego), winner of the Marvin E. Lewis Award, given "in recognition of continued guidance, loyalty and dedication, all of which have been an inspiration to fellow attorneys." Blood has been indispensable in nearly every major political battle CAOC has fought over the past decade. This year, Blood was part of CAOC's effort to pass Assembly Bill 375, the California Consumer Privacy Act, that gives consumers the right to seek damages when businesses don't take adequate steps to protect their personal data.

Mary E. Alexander (Mary Alexander & Associates, San Francisco), winner of the Edward I. Pollock Award, given "in recognition of many years of dedication, outstanding efforts and effectiveness on behalf of the causes and ideals of consumer attorneys." A past president of both CAOC and the American Association for Justice, Alexander was among the attorneys who fought the lead paint industry for more than 20 years to hold them accountable for poisoning thousands of children. The result was a landmark verdict which held that lead is a public nuisance. And when the lead paint industry threatened to overturn the verdict through a ballot initiative, Alexander led the campaign to keep the initiative off the ballot.

The awards dinner also included the installation of CAOC's 2019 President **Mike Arias**, founding and managing partner of Arias Sanguinetti Wang & Torrijos LLP, with offices in Los Angeles, Emeryville, Las Vegas and Montreal. Arias is the immediate past president of

Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles and a member of the board of governors of the American Association for Justice.

Also during CAOC's 57th Annual Convention, the CAOC Women's Caucus honored **Micha Star Liberty** with its Woman Consumer Advocate of the Year Award. She was CAOC's legislative chair and has been a leader in advocating for women's issues and diversity.

Consumer Attorneys of California is a professional organization of plaintiffs' attorneys representing consumers seeking accountability against wrongdoers in cases involving personal injury, product liability, environmental degradation and other causes.

For more information:

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