
COVER STORY

DECEMBER 15, 2003

DAILY JOURNAL EXTRA

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The fruit groves and sleepy suburbs have made room for skyscrapers and corporate boardrooms, but Orange County is still a small business community, giving young lawyers like O'Melveny & Meyers's Amy Longo, the opportunity to build a practice more easily.

By Liz Valsamis

Fed up with trying to advance his career in a big city, Scott Ferrell decided to pack up and leave his budding litigation practice for a fresh start in Orange County.

Ferrell, 31, began practicing in Washington, D.C. at Baker Botts after graduating from Georgetown University Law Center in 1996. But the young litigator soon started to look elsewhere, hoping to get away from the bureaucratic nature of his litigation work in Washington and distinguish himself in a place a little less crowded.

"I was frustrated by the lack of individual opportunity that was available to young lawyers," he says. "There typically weren't opportunities to go out and develop business and set one's imprint on the legal community."

He relocated to Houston-based Baker Botts' Dallas office but encountered the same big-city problems. Ferrell's third stop, in 2000, was Orange County. The Montana native got to know Orange County while attending San Diego State University.

There, he finally found a climate friendly to his career.

"I came with no clients and no prospects of clients to representing some of Orange County's fastest-growing public companies and having a book of business of \$5 million or more a year," Ferrell says.

His strategy is no different from that of many young lawyers: make a name in a place with few lawyers but lots of business opportunities.

The competition isn't as cutthroat as in major metropolitan centers, and Orange County is slowly ditching its stodgy image, thanks in part to the number of small technology and life sciences companies opening in the region. The county is home to 12,690 active lawyers, according to the State Bar, compared with 44,507 in Los Angeles County and 22,190 in the San Francisco area (San Francisco, Marin and Alameda counties).

Four years after moving to Orange County, Ferrell is a name partner of Call, Jensen & Ferrell, a 20-lawyer litigation boutique in Newport Beach. Working at a smaller firm was part of the reason for his quick climb up the ladder, but Ferrell says that Orange County has played an undeniable role in his success.

Ferrell joined Call & Jensen as an associate in 2000. Proving himself to be a strong business-getter, he says, he made partner the following year and became name partner in 2003. He represents Dell Inc., Memorex Products Inc., Public Storage Inc., Sony Corp. and Amgen Inc., as well as several local technology companies, like Composite Technology and Newport Corp., both based in Irvine. He

specializes in representing companies in class and representative actions.

While Ferrell did well for himself at a small law firm, some lawyers achieve the same success in the satellite office of a larger law firm in Orange County or in one of Orange County's large, local firms like Knobbe Martens Olson & Bear and Stradling, Yocca, Carlson & Rauth.

"Based on my experience, Orange County is unique because there are young companies who don't have entrenched relationships with large, established firms and are interested in and receptive to overtures from young lawyers," Ferrell says.

Amy Longo, counsel with O'Melveny & Myers, began practicing in New York with Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson after graduating from Columbia Law School in 1996. Longo decided that she wanted the best of both worlds: a large law firm in a small community setting.

After working in Newport Beach on a securities case related to the Orange County bankruptcy, she decided to apply to large law firms in Orange County. In 1998, she joined the 60-lawyer Newport Beach office of O'Melveny & Myers.

In New York, Longo says, she couldn't distinguish herself from the masses of young lawyers.

“In some cases, there are more opportunities for younger lawyers to distinguish themselves [in Orange County],” she says, “and because it’s a smaller community, it’s easier to get to know people in the business community.”

Longo says she’s been able to build a practice that includes national

work has slowed down as a result of the economy.

Carlo Van den Bosch, an associate with Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton in Los Angeles, joined his firm’s Costa Mesa office because he was ready to settle down.

Van den Bosch started his career in Costa Mesa in 1998 but

firm is in Irvine, began practicing in the area in 1975.

“It was very much frontier justice here in Orange County,” Connor says. “It’s changed so dramatically over the last 20 years. It’s become far more cosmopolitan.”

He has been instrumental in closing the gap between the older

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companies like Bethesda, Md.’s Lockheed Martin Corp., as well as local businesses like Irvine’s Quality Systems Inc. and Santa Ana’s Powerwave Technologies Inc.

Richard Leuhrs is president and chief executive for the Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce, a position he held for 21 years. He says the health care, auto and high-tech industries began to take off in Orange County in the mid-1980s and that the region’s quality of life is what attracted them to the area.

Leuhrs adds that Orange County’s diverse economy has allowed it to endure the downturn better than other small markets.

“There’s no one [industry] like Silicon Valley that just collapsed when the high-tech industry collapsed,” he says. “That’s not the case here. What you’re seeing are these specialty companies finding a niche and making a worldwide name for themselves.

“Biomedical industry has a significant imprint, [as does the] auto and auto design industry. There are a whole host of industries, health care included, that show significant signs of growth and opportunity.”

Claudia Trevisan, a recruiter with **Swan Legal Search**, has seen many attorneys, like Ferrell and Longo, move to Orange County as young lawyers to benefit from the business climate there. Many are able to build books of business by developing relationships with the upstart technology companies located in the region, **Trevisan** says. But she cautions that the amount of

moved to Los Angeles to be closer to partners in his practice group and because he was interested in living in a large city.

“It was the draw of a big-city life,” he says.

After getting engaged, he says, his priorities shifted, and he wanted to live in a more suburban and family-friendly environment that offered good schools and less crime. He moved back to Orange County in 2001.

Part of the county’s appeal, however, is that it is no longer a sleepy suburb. In the last 10 years, the area has added more attractions for young singles, such as the Block at Orange, an open-air shopping mall home to a movie theater and several restaurants.

“You’re seeing more desirable restaurants and concert venues and cultural events,” Van den Bosch says. “In part, that’s because Orange County is becoming more of a hotbed for high tech.”

The area’s geography provides another draw for young lawyers. Many Orange County attorneys can live minutes from both the beach and their offices. In nearby Los Angeles, most professionals must commute to the city’s two major business hubs, Century City and downtown Los Angeles, which are miles from the beach.

Older members of the bar, like Connor, Blake & Griffin’s Ed Connor, remark that the county has undergone drastic changes over the last several years. Connor, whose

and younger members of the bar.

Connor served as president of the Orange County Bar Association in 1998, and under his leadership, the organization launched its Young Lawyers Division to reach out to young attorneys. Connor and the members of the bar association’s executive committee thought that the organization needed new blood in its membership, but they didn’t have an effective way of reaching out to younger members.

“We had the same people turning up on the board,” Connor says. “We had very few young lawyers that were taking leadership roles in any of our activities, in any of our committees and in really anything relating to the bar.”

Since the bar formed the division, young lawyers by the hundreds have filled the ranks of the bar. The president of the division, William Wall, says the 550-member group often meets so members can benefit from one another’s experiences.

“It’s given me the professional network where I now can rely on a friend’s expertise,” Wall, an associate with Newport Beach’s Winthrop Couchot, says.

Like many Orange County lawyers, Wall went to law school far from the region and came to the county without a built-in professional network. Wall graduated from Philadelphia’s Temple University in 1996 and came to Orange County because of family ties in the area.

Unlike law firms in major metropolitan centers, Orange County

law firms have had to rely heavily on far-flung law schools to recruit first-year associates. Attorneys say recruitment suffered as a result.

According to Connor, the last few years, however, have seen a rise in prominence in three area law schools: Costa Mesa's Whittier Law School, Orange's Chapman Law School and Fullerton's Western State University College of Law. The schools, the only three in Orange County accredited by the American Bar Association, have helped to create a "bumper crop" of young lawyers in Orange County.

"If you have to leave the county to go get educated, chances are you wouldn't come back," Connor says.

"I think initially, 25 years ago, people thought Orange County was not well developed," Gary Singer of O'Melveny & Myers says. "If you were coming to Orange County versus Los Angeles or San Francisco, you'd be quickly out of the mainstream, and that could be detrimental to your practice and your career."

But lawyers who do end up in Orange County after law school elsewhere are usually there for the long haul, according to Fay Morisseau, managing partner of McDermott, Will & Emery.

Morisseau came to Orange County 11 years ago to raise his family. However, he soon found that his intellectual property practice benefited from the business environment. Because of the large number of high-tech companies, he says, Orange County had more intellectual property work than lawyers to handle it.

"I didn't see a whole lot of competition at that time for someone who had an IP background," he says.

Perry Viscounty, a \$10 million rainmaker with Latham & Watkins, fell in love with the location when he moved to Orange County in 1987.

"I thought it was a perfect combination of an incredible business climate with great companies with very complex legal

needs," Viscounty says. "And at the same time, there was a high quality of life where you could be involved in outdoor activities, live by the beach... with not much traffic or crime and with easy access to things I wanted to do, like go to the beach and mountains."

The intellectual property litigator was able to take his little slice of heaven and build an impressive legal career. He started by representing smaller, local clients like Mossimo Inc. and Ocean Pacific Apparel Corp. and built his client list to include international companies like Allergan Inc., the largest public company in the county.

Viscounty also points out the little things that make life easier in Orange County.

"When I go to other Latham offices, it takes a lot longer to park and get up to the office space, which often is at top of a fairly large building," Viscounty says. "In Orange County, it's still a lot easier to get to work and get things accomplished. In my view, the quality of life in Orange County is better than other places to practice law."

Other lawyers caution newcomers not to be fooled by the laid-back reputation of Orange County and wind up hurting their careers.

"I think there is always the concern that you won't get the same recognition from partners if it's a Los Angeles-based, New York-based or San Francisco-based firm, if a young lawyer is based in a smaller satellite office," **Trevisan** says.

Hard work and determination are as important there as anywhere else, probably more so in a place with lots of sun and nice beaches, according to Yuri Mikulka, an associate in Howrey Simon Arnold & White's 30-lawyer Irvine office.

To avoid becoming isolated in a satellite office, an associate must get involved with the business and legal communities as well as the firm.

But, if you can succeed at both, it's a great place to practice," he says.

"It's the best of both worlds," Mikulka says. "You have a large firm with national clients, and you get to do the sort of work that a bigger office would in D.C. or L.A., but work in a much more relaxing environment."