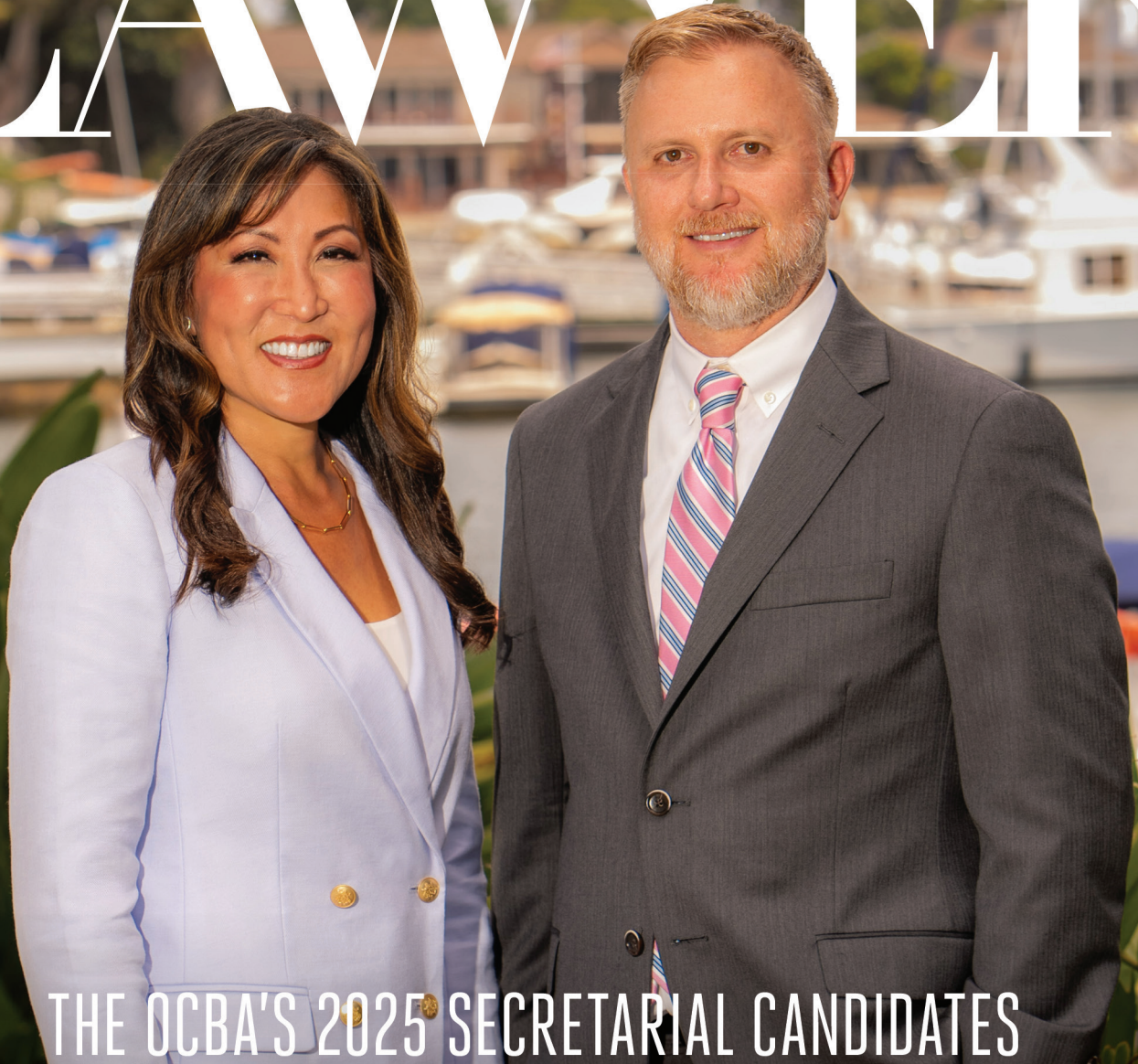


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# JUDGE SCOTT B. COOPER: LEADING A COLLABORATION TO PROMOTE JUSTICE

*by JOSEPH L. CHAIREZ and JENNIFER CORONA*

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Judge Cooper is a highly respected jurist charged with supervising the Orange County Superior Court's Collaborative Courts Programs (CCP). In Department C46 at the Central Justice Center in Santa Ana, he presides over the Veterans Treatment Court, Military Diversion Court, and the Drug and DUI Courts in Santa Ana. Judge Cooper was asked to take over this important and busy assignment when Thomas Delaney was elevated to Associate Justice of Division Three of the Fourth Appellate District. "Orange County is fortunate to have someone with Judge Cooper's work ethic, intellect, and experience to lead the CCP," comments Justice Delaney. He adds, "Judge Cooper is a seasoned judge who understands the goal of the CCP, having previously presided over OCSC's five mental health courts. He is a leader who has a passion for making our justice system better through these problem-solving courts. We truly are lucky to have him."

When Judge Cooper was growing up in Orange County, he learned some important life lessons that went on to help him later in his practice of law and service on the bench. "When I was a teenager, following my parents' divorce, my mom and I went through some challenging financial times and one of my siblings was struggling with difficult issues," shares Judge Cooper. "As a result, I was forced to grow up quickly and learn to value what was truly important in life. I was fortunate to have the guidance of my mom as an important role model." Judge Cooper continues: "Looking back, that situation had a significant impact on who I am today. It taught me to have empathy for those going through difficult situations and to provide whatever support is possible and appropriate, while also understanding that people are ultimately responsible for the decisions they make. To me, these are qualities that can (and should) inform a judge's decision-making."

Judge Cooper was encouraged and supported by his family to pursue higher education. With this family mandate, Judge Cooper went on to the University of California, Berkeley (Go Bears!) where he received a B.A. with highest distinction (*summa cum laude*). He later attended the University of Chicago Law School, receiving his *juris doctor* with honors. In keeping with Judge Cooper's interests in helping the less fortunate, in law school, he participated in the Streetlaw Program where he taught legal concepts to inner-city high school students. "I have very good memories of this program. I often felt I learned as much from the students as they did from me and my fellow student-teachers."

Before his appointment to the bench, Judge Cooper had a remarkable career as a lawyer. He was a law clerk to Judge Alicemarie H. Stotler in the United States District Court, Central

District of California. "It was a great loss when Judge Stotler passed. She was a respected legal legend in Orange County, as both a lawyer and a judge. I was so fortunate to have worked for her and learned from her early in my career. Her remarkable work ethic and her measured, unbiased, and insightful approach as a judge continue to inspire me thirty years later," commented Judge Cooper. Following his clerkship, he was an associate at Latham & Watkins LLP in Costa Mesa, a partner at Cooper, Jones and Cooper, and founded his own firm, The Cooper Law Firm, PC in Irvine. At the latter, he was a civil litigator primarily representing plaintiffs in employment class actions.

Despite his busy practice, when Judge Cooper was a lawyer, he always was available to give back to the legal profession and community at large. He was an active member of the Orange County Trial Lawyers Association, serving on their board for many years and ultimately as their president in 2013. For the Orange County Bar Association, he served on the Board of Directors, was Co-Chair of the Community Outreach Committee, and a member of several other committees including Finance, Judiciary, Appointment, and Professional Ethics. He was also a valued participant and teacher for the OCBA Teenage Legal Survival Skills program.

On November 2, 2017, former governor Jerry Brown appointed Scott Cooper to the Bench, and he was sworn in on December 29, 2017. Judge Cooper filled the vacancy created by the retirement of Judge Carla M. Singer. Since his appointment, Judge Cooper has served on the family law panel, criminal open trial court, and DUI and Drug courts in Westminster. He later went on to preside over the five mental health courts in the Community Court Building. Regarding the latter assignment, Judge Cooper mentioned "presiding over the mental health courts was

great preparation for my current assignment. It gave me valuable insight into the various programs' participants, stakeholders, and issues facing all involved in these Collaborative Court programs." Judge Cooper currently serves on the Collaborative Courts Committee for both the California Judges Association and the Orange County Superior Court.

At a recent CLE program on the Collaborative Courts, Judge Cooper explained the purpose and objectives of the programs: "There are currently sixteen Collaborative Courts Programs in Orange County, including five Mental Health Courts, Veterans Treatment Court, Military Diversion, Homeless Outreach Court, four Drug Courts, and four DUI Courts." The objectives, he explained, are to "enhance community safety by reducing recidivism, save and change lives through evidence-based treatment practices, and promote judicial efficiency by reduced contact with repeat offenders."

In working towards accomplishing these objectives, Judge Cooper and the other Collaborative Court judicial officers and court staff work with various stakeholders who "seek to address the root problems causing the offending behavior." Judge Cooper expressed his gratitude to those stakeholders, saying "these programs would not work were it not for the commitment and resources provided by the Orange County Healthcare Agency, Probation Department, District Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, Sheriff's Department, and the VA." He also recognized the other "dedicated judicial officers and court staff who work so hard to make these programs the best they can be."

Sherin Larijani from the Orange County District Attorney's office says "the value in the Collaborative Courts is that they provide an opportunity to reroute a person's negative trajectory. The Collaborative Courts programs

stabilize at-risk populations by providing the needed treatment and other evidence-based resources to build the necessary skills, support system, and ability to get on a positive track.” Similarly, Michael Marino, a licensed clinical social worker who represents the Long Beach VA as a Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist in the Orange County Military Diversion Court, said “the Military Diversion Program allows veterans to address and treat the underlying causes of their legal issue, which is often trauma related. Whereas the other courts look at the crime, Military Diversion looks at the cause of the behavior that led to the legal encounter.” Marino continued, “Judge Cooper is a strong, effective leader who encourages open conversations. He is very invested in veteran care and makes me feel appreciated as a team member. It is a pleasure to serve our veterans with Judge Cooper, and coming from a military family, I am grateful for his compassion and understanding in the court room.”

After a participant’s successful conclusion of the program, the court and stakeholders hold a graduation/court appearance honoring the graduate and dismissing his or her charges. At a recent Veterans Treatment Court graduation, the courtroom was filled with mentors, stakeholders, family members and Collaborative Court team members to congratulate the participant for successfully completing the program. At the graduation, the participant read his written personal statement detailing his journey of climbing out of despair, self-destructive behavior, pain, and depression, toward a life of responsibility, hope, and peace. “It is truly remarkable to see how much participants change after undergoing these rigorous programs,” Judge Cooper observes. “They are often completely different people, and they are the first to say so.”

At this veteran’s graduation there were four law students watching the proceedings—Erica Sorenson (Western State), Jennifer Fazio (Western State), Ashlee Quick (Pepperdine), and Jonathan Banashihan (UCLA)—and all four commented how emotional the event was, particularly hearing the veteran participant’s statement. He spoke about his service to our nation, his fall into destructive behavior, and his redemption. When asked to give a joint comment, they said, “Veterans deserve access to justice from the country they fought for.” They went on, “and to fully participate in the society they defended with the community’s gratitude and support.” That day, Judge Cooper closed the court session by congratulating the participant on his completion of the program and granting the motion proffered by the

public defender, which the prosecutor did not oppose, to have the veteran participant’s charges dismissed. “The dismissal provides the veteran a fresh start that is not only authorized by the law, but is well-deserved due to the veteran’s transformation that resulted from his good choices and hard work throughout the program.” At a Collaborative Courts celebration on July 14, 2024, a former graduate of the program, Jeff Wetherbee, said that through the opportunities offered by the Collaborative Court’s program, “I became the person I always wanted to be, but I did not know how to.”

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Judge Cooper’s knowledge of these programs and compassion for its participants is real and considerable. Justice Eileen Moore commented at a Collaborative Courts CLE Program that Judge Cooper “runs [the CCP] with his whole heart and soul.” At that program, both Justice Moore and Judge Cooper were speaking about the CCP, but in particular about the Veterans Treatment Court and Military Diversion program. In their presentation, both Justice Moore and Judge Cooper echoed the importance of these programs to those who have served in our military. Justice Moore, a former combat nurse in Vietnam, noted, “Lawyers are the

first responders for returning veterans.”

Attorney Michael Fell provides a unique perspective on the Collaborative Courts. As a prosecutor, defense attorney, and victim right’s attorney, Mr. Fell says, “the Collaborative Courts provide a fantastic way for my clients to deal with their mental health issues, alcohol issues, and history of issues.” Mr. Fell has appeared in front of Judge Cooper and says, “Judge Cooper is a wonderful choice, following Justice Delaney, because he has shown a commitment and passion for assisting those in the Collaborative Courts.” This sentiment is echoed by Deputy District Attorney Larijani, who describes Judge Cooper as “patient, fair, and impartial, who renders legally sound decisions, who is courteous to all parties that stand before him. Judge Cooper really listens.”

Judge Cooper is a champion of the Collaborative Courts Programs. Under his new leadership, he is able to continue the success of the CCP, pioneered and implemented by some of Orange County’s most influential judges, including Judge Wendy Lindley, ret., Judge Joe Perez, Judge Mary Kreber Varipapa, Judge Matthew Anderson, and Justice Delaney (then Judge) among others. “The statistics show that participants in the programs are significantly less likely to commit offenses in the future and go on to live healthy responsible lives,” comments Judge Cooper. Judge Cooper believes “the success of the Collaborative Courts is due to the incredible efforts by the participants themselves and the many team members assisting them with that chance to change their lives.” Orange County is truly fortunate to have Judge Cooper at the helm of this important program. 

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*This article first appeared in Orange County Lawyer, August 2024 (Vol. 66 No. 9), p. 24. The views expressed herein are those of the author. They do not necessarily represent the views of Orange County Lawyer magazine, the Orange County Bar Association, the Orange County Bar Association Charitable Fund, or their staffs, contributors, or advertisers. All legal and other issues must be independently researched.*