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PERSPECTIVE

## Consumer attorneys leader sees challenges ahead

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*Daily Journal Staff Writer*

Craig M. Peters began his career as a public defender. While he's technically on the other side of the courtroom these days as a civil plaintiffs' attorney, he said the two roles feel similar.

"I've been accused of having an overdeveloped sense of right and wrong, which I think was not meant as a compliment," Peters said. "I think I naturally gravitate to the side of the underdog."

This weekend, Peters will ascend to the presidency of the Consumer Attorneys of California at the organization's 60th annual convention in San Francisco. The group is meeting in person this year after holding last year's convention virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Peters has been active with the group for years, gradually moving up the ranks of officers in a process he said takes seven years or more. It's the sort of predictable path he pictured as a young law student, in the days before his professional career took a sudden turn.

When he was nearly finished at the University of San Francisco School of Law, Peters thought he had a sought-after summer job set up at a prominent plaintiffs' firm. The gig fell apart at the last minute due to scheduling issues. On short notice, he was able to set up a work-study arrangement with the Contra Costa County public defender's office.

This led to more than a decade as a deputy public defender in Contra Costa and San Francisco counties. His first paycheck was a bit of a shock. Peters said he made more working part-time jobs as a senior in high school than he did in his first year in the public defender's office.

But he also quickly realized the fast-paced job had a lot to offer him as an inexperienced attorney. In his first week, he made trips to jail and prison to see clients, and made three



Jana Ašenbrennerová / Special to the Daily Journal

Craig Peters, president-elect of Consumer Attorneys of California

motions in court. The work also taught him resilience.

"They learn how to lose, and how to bounce back from it," Peters said. "That's one of the things I'm most grateful for."

He spent three years instilling this "incredible fighting spirit" the

electrical lineman. At the beginning of 2018, he joined with four other veteran plaintiffs' attorneys to open the Altair Law Firm in San Francisco. Part of the goal, he said, was to create a small, nimble operation that could effectively collaborate with attorneys at other firms.

**'We will carefully review your other recommendations, although you might be interested to know that some of them — such as using memorandum opinions and issuing periodic case status reports — are already employed in many districts.'**

— California Judicial Council

job demands in younger attorneys as director of training for the Office of the Public Defender in San Francisco. Peters saw himself as a lifer with the public defender's office. It was only after a midlife crisis that he restarted his long delayed career as a plaintiffs' attorney. Another option was to buy an expensive sports car, he said, adding, "I'm not a big fan of cars."

Big verdicts followed, such as \$12.65 million for a severely injured

That same year, he won the Consumer Attorneys of California's attorney of the year award along with David L. Winnett of the Veen Firm PC. The pair won a \$14.9 million verdict against Mazda Motors of America Inc. for a seat back collapse. The case began in 2016 when Peters was also at the Veen Firm.

Peters said the year ahead will likely be challenging. The consumer attorneys often win legislative battles in Sacramento. But with Democrats

and their allies increasingly exerting control in Sacramento, the action appears to be shifting to voter initiatives. He cited several initiatives introduced by the Civil Justice Association of California. One of that group's proposed initiatives would limit the fees consumer attorneys can collect.

"If you really wanted an anti-attorneys initiative, why don't you just limit how much attorneys can make, period?" Peters said. "The reason they don't do that is because they want to be able to pay their attorneys unlimited sums because they think that means they'll get the best attorneys possible. But if they limit the fees attorneys can charge for the consumer, the everyday person, they are hoping the public won't recognize that it is actually limiting the public's options for holding the powerful accountable."

Peters declined to say how involved the consumer attorneys would get in the Fairness for Injured Patients Act. This 2022 initiative would raise the \$250,000 on non-economic medical malpractice damages, created when the Legislature passed the Medical Injury Compensation Reform Act in 1975. Leaders will also discuss the group's 2022 state legislative agenda at a private meeting at the conference.

He will be president during an important election year. Much of the current crop of Democratic lawyer-legislators will term out in 2022 and 2024. Peters cited Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, Sen. Bob Wieckowski and former Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson as important allies who must be replaced.

"It certainly always worries us when good lawyers in the Legislature are leaving, because they are a reliable voice to speak about the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law, and creating a level playing field so that everybody always has access to the courts," Peters said.

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