

# Who we are

By Craig Peters



*“History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.”*

– Historian and Pulitzer Prize winner  
David McCullough

As the largest organization of California plaintiff attorneys, CAOC finds itself, once again, in perilous times. We find ourselves faced with impending ballot initiatives from corporate America that will try to prevent our clients from getting the justice they deserve. Simultaneously, the State Bar is working with powerful forces to undermine consumer protections by trying to institute a “sandbox” approach to our legal system. In any single year, either of these challenges would be a massive battle. In 2022, we will face them both.

As I contemplate the nature of these anti-consumer initiatives, I am reminded of the quote from Shakespeare’s play Henry VI: “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” Our powerful foes are trying to do one better – they are trying to kill off only the lawyers for those pesky consumers that demand they be held accountable for their actions.

Thankfully, we have history as our guide to navigating perilous times. And no one has a better history of success in navigating perilous waters than the staff and members of CAOC. Year after year, our small but mighty advocate team beats back efforts that would harm consumers, all while promoting good legislation that makes meaningful change for those who have been harmed. Our members step up to meet the challenges we face, whether it is on behalf of the clients we serve or our CAOC community. Our history reminds us, that is who we are.

Our foes in these battles, as in past battles, are expecting that we will sow our own dissension and lack unity. They rely on our idealism working *against* us, not for us. The powerful corporations that try to undermine our clients’ ability to pursue justice think we share some of their less-desirable traits – being petty or self-centered, lacking empathy. Ultimately, their fervent hope is that our organization of independent-minded trial lawyers will be unable to coalesce into a formidable army.

I have bad news for them: their hopes will not be realized. All of us, as independent-minded lawyers, recognize the value of collaboration, including when it means putting aside differences. Our idealism is one tempered by our pragmatism. No matter where we are in our career, we realize that whatever our past or future successes, they did not and will not happen by us alone. It is our connection to one another – our unity – that makes us strong.

So let’s show them the army that we can be. Let’s redouble our resolve to make the sacrifices and fight the big battles that are ahead of us. This is our 60th year, and our long history as an organization has seen us take on whatever challenge has been thrown at us. Let’s all remind them of our history, and why we are the way we are – defenders of the marginalized, champions of the underdog, protectors of those lacking power.

CAOC is blessed to have advocates that are unparalleled at the Capitol. They are strategic while also being bold, they are analytical while also passionate, they are careful listeners while also being skilled advocates. A track record means something, and theirs is one that is unparalleled in the state Capitol. Year after year they

have beat back harmful legislation while also trying to push forward legislative changes that help consumers. And they do this on a budget that is dwarfed by Big Pharma, Big Oil, Big Tobacco, big corporations and Big Insurance. Their track record of success is remarkable.

All our past CAOC leaders have helped to build the strong foundation on which we now stand. In just the past three years, we had Mike Arias focus on making us stronger through planning and strategy. Micha Liberty helped us grow closer to the more inclusive organization that we aspire to be. And Debbie Chang reassured us that, though we live in “interesting times,” we are able to face our fears and thrive. We will continue to build on the work that has been done by each of them, and this year we will show our strength in numbers.

This will be the year in which our adversaries see our willingness to come together, to coalesce, to renew our commitment to not just our own practice and our own clients, but to the greater good that is protected through our commitment to CAOC. We hope to be judged by our willingness to make sacrifices to protect those we don’t yet know and may never meet, but who need our help in the future, by having access to justice. I look forward to working with all of you to make this year another one in which we remind our foes who we are. I am honored and humbled to be your 60th CAOC President. ■

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