

BY MICHAEL J. VAN ZANDT

Handling Life's Transitions

This issue of *Experience* is focused on transitions. Whether it's your adult children and their older parents, working through disputes in your estate plans, practicing law at cocktail parties with your friends, or surviving a retirement that lasts several decades, this issue has something for everyone.

→ We have some extremely talented people in the Senior Lawyers Division and some who've been devoted to providing active service to the division for many decades. One person stands out in this group, and that person is Selma Moidel Smith. Selma is still active in the SLD and is a member of the *Experience* board. She previously was the chair of the *Experience* board, where she made tremendous improvements to the magazine.


I had the pleasure of interviewing the 100-year-old Selma for this issue, and I can tell you

unequivocally that Selma is an amazing person, full of life and energy, and a true hero to our profession. The article details just some of the awards and accolades Selma has achieved over her storied career.

Having passed the California Bar in 1943 at the age of 23, she established herself as a leader and someone to be admired. When I asked Selma about transitioning, she gave a very telling answer. However, I'll let you read about it in the article in her own words.

Selma is part of our Women Trailblazer Project, and you'd benefit from reading or listening to her interviews. Even better, search for her on YouTube and listen to one of her musical compositions. She never fails to dazzle and amaze with her intellect, talent, charm, wit, and vivacity.

We're getting ready for the Annual Meeting of the SLD in San Francisco from August 8–10. Our annual Pickering Dinner is August 8 at the Marines' Memorial Club at 609 Sutter Street, just a few blocks from our hotel.

The recipient of the Pickering Award this year is a San Francisco native and internationally renowned attorney James Brosnahan of Morrison Foerster LLP. James was chosen from a significant number of nominees, all with distinguished careers and superior contributions to their communities. Of these, James stood out as evidencing the ideals that John Pickering adhered to in his lifetime. Congratulations to James Brosnahan! See you in San Francisco. 

MICHAEL J. VAN ZANDT is a partner and co-chair of the Environmental & Natural Resources group at Hanson Bridgett in San Francisco. In addition to chairing the *Experience* editorial board, Van Zandt is vice chair of the Senior Lawyers Division; a member of the SLD Council; a representative for the ABA SLD to the ABA Section of Environment, Energy and Resources Special Committee; a Litigation Counsel of America senior fellow; and an American Bar Foundation life fellow.



Selma Moidel Smith Celebrates Her 100th Birthday

The still-very-active member of the SLD shares her thoughts on her life in the law and volunteering.



BY MICHAEL VAN ZANDT

Our long-time member Selma Moidel Smith celebrated her 100th birthday earlier this year—at the meeting of the National Association of Women Lawyers, where she is the Senior Lawyers Division liaison—by inviting and introducing the speakers for a special panel discussion. The speakers were California Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye, Associate Justice Carol Corrigan, and recently retired Associate Justice Kathryn Mickle Werdegar, together with NAWL President Sarretta McDonough.

The program began with McDonough introducing Selma as, “The ultimate role model for me and countless others.” It continued with selections from Selma’s own musical compositions, to which she danced onstage, and ended with the audience singing “Happy Birthday” as she received a cake and candles. (See “Selma and the Supremes” at YouTube.com.)

A LIFE FULL OF LEARNING

Selma was a child prodigy. She gave her first public speech at the age of six in her town’s high school auditorium (to eulogize a deceased, beloved teacher). At

eight, she published her first article in the city newspaper (on current events).

By the age of five, she was heard humming the notes on a sheet of music, without ever have been taught to read music, and she went on to become proficient in violin, classical Spanish guitar, and piano.

As with all of her pursuits, Selma’s gift for composition comes from within; she says music comes to her “like turning on the radio.” It simply begins to play from the first note and continues to the end, and then it shifts into memory. The many performances of her compositions continued on June 29, 2019, with the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic at Walt Disney Concert Hall. It’s no surprise that Selma is listed in the International Encyclopedia of Women Composers.

Admitted to practice law in California in 1943 at the age of 23, Selma has never stopped contributing to the law, to her profession, and to her community. On the day she was sworn in, she went to the Southern California Women Lawyers in Los Angeles and joined. She quickly became one of the organization’s leaders and was elected president in 1947 and again in 1948.

The successor group, the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, named her its first and only honorary life member. She has received the Lifetime of Service Award from the National Association of Women Lawyers and the Inaugural Life Fellow Achievement Award from the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation.

Selma also learned Spanish at an early age and quickly became fluent. Many who hear her speak wonder in what Spanish-speaking country she was born. She has used her gift of language to reach out to the Latin-American community to engage in projects in law as well as music. For service to international understanding, she was decorated by the government of the Dominican Republic.

For the past decade, Selma has served—and continues to serve—as editor-in-chief of *California Legal History*, the annual scholarly journal of the California Supreme Court Historical Society. Before that, she was chair of our own *Experience* magazine, to which she made tremendous contributions that improved the magazine's quality.

IN SELMA'S OWN WORDS

On the occasion of Selma's 100th birthday, I had the opportunity to interview her. I provided her with a list of questions, and she graciously provided these answers.

Q. You came from a very loving and supportive family environment. Can you describe the influences that have shaped your life?

A. My mother wanted to be a lawyer, but that was hardly possible for a woman married in the year 1902. Her alternative—heartily endorsed by my father—was to send all five of their children to law school, which included my three older brothers and an older sister.

One of my early teachers told my parents I should be a writer, and another said I should be a linguist, but my course was set on law early on. All of my other interests have been ones that existed naturally in myself.

Q. You've told me that most of what you do comes from instinct. You see something that needs to be done and you volunteer to do it, or you see a problem that needs to be fixed and you fix it.

Can you explain how you developed your indomitable spirit and why people were drawn to give you the tremendous responsibility you have had even at a young age?

A. I can't say what others see. It's true that I've been given many positions of responsibility, but I've never sought them myself. Early on—at 26—I was chosen to be president of the women lawyers in Los Angeles. More recently, my predecessors selected me for the positions I've held at *Experience* and at the journal I now edit on legal history in California.

My only "volunteer" work has been charitable or educational. For example, for many years, I was the only bilingual member of the Docents of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which meant that I was giving music instruction to children in schools in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods.

Q. What advice do you have for lawyers just starting out in the legal profession?

A. Most advice needs to be tailored to the individual's own talents and wishes. One of the few suggestions that's widely applicable is to seek out the right mentors—who can help to guide you further in the directions you're naturally drawn to and know you're best suited for.

Q. When I explained this issue of *Experience* was about transitions, you laughed and said you've never transitioned. Can you explain what you mean by that?

A. I've never moved from being active to passive or from being a creator to an observer. I've always found myself enthusiastically engaged in my choices—and they've been remarkably constant through the years.

Q. Since you've contributed so much to the bar associations and in particular to the Senior Lawyers Division, what advice might you have for our members about getting involved in our activities?

A. It will give you new opportunities for personal growth, and I cherish the many friendships I've made in the division.

MICHAEL J. VAN ZANDT is a partner and co-chair of the Environmental & Natural Resources group at Hanson Bridgett in San Francisco. In addition to chairing the *Experience* editorial board, Van Zandt is vice chair of the Senior Lawyers Division; a member of the SLD Council; a representative for the ABA SLD to the ABA Section of Environment, Energy and Resources Special Committee; a Litigation Counsel of America senior fellow; and an American Bar Foundation life fellow.