

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE



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experienced lawyers and their families

[Home](#) > [Publications](#) > [Voice of Experience](#) > [February 2016](#)

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT : SELMA MOIDEL SMITH

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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Selma Moidel Smith

At 97 years old, Selma Moidel Smith has had an impressive and inspiring career as an attorney, advocate, speaker, and editor - and she's still going. Did we mention she's written more than 100 compositions of classical music?

Selma Moidel Smith was sworn in to the California bar by the California Supreme Court on January 5, 1943, beginning a long and impressive career as a litigating attorney, advocate, speaker, historian, writer and editor. She has served on the boards of a wide range of organizations, programs and committees. "Indeed, every organization Selma joins ultimately places her at its helm or in a position of leadership," observed Associate Justice Kathryn Mickle Werdegar of the California Supreme Court.

On April 3, 2016, Selma will turn 97 years old.

She is a Life Fellow of the American Bar Foundation, and on February 7 in San Diego, the Fellows presented Selma with its inaugural Life Fellows Achievement Award.

Selma is a prolific composer of classical music and has written more than 100 compositions for piano and orchestra. The many performances of her music include the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., in 1989 and the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic at Walt Disney Concert Hall in

2010 and 2014. (At the Fellows Achievement Award event honoring Selma, all of the music consisted of selections from her musical compositions.) She is listed in the *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* (1987).

In 1953, Selma was invited by the president of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania to become a charter member of its National Board, ultimately serving as president of the board from 1980 to 1982. (Today the school is part of the Drexel University College of Medicine.) She was a member of the National Board for its entire 50-year history, until the board voted to dissolve in 2003, declaring that it had fulfilled its mission of creating opportunities for women to become physicians.

At many points throughout her career, Selma worked to promote cooperation between physicians and attorneys. "These two fields are more interlocked than people think," she says. As president of the women lawyers in Los Angeles, she convened a number of lawyer-doctor dinners to "break down walls" between the two fields.

She has been an active member of the National Association of Women Lawyers since 1943, and since 1996 served as the liaison from NAWL to the ABA's Senior Lawyers Division. She is the author of NAWL's Centennial History, and she received NAWL's Lifetime of Service Award in 1999. In 2005, NAWL created its annual Selma Moidel Smith Law Student Writing Competition on women in the law in her honor.

At the ABA's Senior Lawyers Division, she served as vice chair of the Diversity Committee, vice chair of the Non-dues Revenue Committee, vice chair of the Membership Committee, and chair of the Arts Committee. She has been recognized for her significant contributions to *Experience* magazine as a writer and editor, and was vice chair of the Editorial Board from 1998 to 1999, and chair of the board from 1999 to 2001. Under her guidance, the Editorial Board became active in soliciting, writing and reviewing articles. Selma helped the magazine develop its editorial policies and increased the number of articles written by SLD members. In 2001, Selma arranged for the first posting of *Experience* articles on the SLD website. She created several indexes of the magazine, the latest one spanning 21 years.

She also was chair of this newsletter, *Voice of Experience*, from 2003 to 2005.

In 1996, she was named the first and only honorary life member of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles (WLALA), in recognition of her continuous dedication since serving as president in 1947 and again in 1948 of the predecessor organization, Southern California Women Lawyers Association (which she joined on the day she was admitted to the bar in 1943). Selma was also president of the Los Angeles Business Women's Council, and was active in California and local bar associations, as well as the International Federation of Women Lawyers. Internationally, her paper on legal education (advocating clinical training in law schools), presented by invitation at the 1948 Conference

of the International Bar Association at The Hague, was adopted by resolution. She was admitted to practice at the U.S. Supreme Court in 1958.

Selma also is fluent in Spanish, and in 1965 she represented several women's bar associations at the Washington World Conference on World Peace through Law; she also served as a host for Latin American judges and lawyers. Previously, in 1956, she was decorated with La Orden del Mérito Juan Pablo Duarte by the Dominican Republic. (She was the first bilingual docent for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, giving in-school music presentations at public and private schools throughout the Los Angeles area.)

Currently, she serves as editor-in-chief of *California Legal History*, the annual scholarly journal of the California Supreme Court Historical Society, and has served in that capacity since 2009. She has been active as a board member of the Society since 2001 and served as editor of the CSCHS Newsletter from 2008 to 2011 and again in 2015. In 2007, she initiated a law student writing competition in California legal history which she continues to conduct each year. At her 95th birthday celebration in April 2014, the Society renamed the competition in her honor.

Selma's story was chosen to be among those in the ABA Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History project. Her story was audio recorded in 2013 and 2014, and transcripts can be found on the [Senior Lawyers Division's website](#). Selma is listed in *Who's Who in America* and in the first and later editions of *Who's Who of American Women* (1958) and *Who's Who in American Law* (1977).

Senior Lawyers Division: You were a star student and started writing and speaking publicly at a young age. Tell us about that part of your childhood.

Selma Moidel Smith: I was in kindergarten and a young teacher named Miss Kitty Howard died. The school commissioned a painted portrait to be made of her and the community wanted to dedicate it to her. They selected an evening date at Warren G. Harding High School (in Ohio). The school selected me to speak at the dedication and I gave a talk about Miss Kitty and her dedication to teaching. I remember going up on stage and speaking, and I remember at the end making a little bow.

The story was in the city newspaper. The next day the editor of the paper came to our home to find out if I had actually made the speech. When I told him that I did, he said to me: "well, Selma, that's really nothing. Anybody can get up and make a speech," I said "No, first you have to have something to say!"

Senior Lawyers Division: What has been the highlight of your career?

Selma Moidel Smith: The career was very good, and it gets better and better. It was a good idea to stick around. In April I'll be 97.

Senior Lawyers Division: What advice would you give to someone considering law school today?

Selma Moidel Smith: Go! Law is an opportunity for service. You may find in it ways to be of service to varying communities, depending on where you feel your aptitudes or skills or wishes lead you. Law school is an opportunity for an education, for knowing more about life and living than a small scope in other fields.

Attorneys are a great group of people to be among, and you'll have a feeling that your life had purpose.

Senior Lawyers Division: When did you first become a member of the ABA and why did you decide to join?

Selma Moidel Smith: I became a member in 1946. At that time I was the only woman member of the activities committee of the entire ABA. I joined because I liked the company of my colleagues – and I like to see what people can accomplish together.

Senior Lawyers Division: What were the biggest changes you saw in the legal practice during the course of your career?

Selma Moidel Smith: The principal changes in the profession are the expanding opportunities for minorities and women.

Senior Lawyers Division: What has been the highlight of your work with the ABA?

Selma Moidel Smith: There were very many, and it is hard to measure them against each other. Certainly I would rank my work as a member and chair of the editorial board of *Experience* magazine.