



WLALA Trailblazer and Living Gem: Selma Moidel Smith

By: Susan J. Dewitt

Over the years, I have bumped into Selma Moidel Smith a number of times at WLALA or other bar events. I knew she was a long time WLALA member and former president, but not much more. This past December, I had the privilege of sitting with Selma at a couple of different bar events and I decided I needed to learn more about her. Selma is such a wonderful treasure and a delightful person that I felt compelled to share a little of what I learned.

On April 3, 2017, Selma will turn 98 years old. I am confident that she could beat me in a foot race and I can only hope to be half as spry, witty, and engaging when - and if - I reach the same age.

Last year, Selma was selected as one of 20 individuals from the Los Angeles legal community to be honored with an exhibit, a public film premiere: **“Overcoming Adversity: Real Stories.”** All of the honorees appearing in the film were nominated and selected by a committee of legal professionals and officials from the LA Law Library as part of its OPENING THE DOOR: Personal Stories of Groundbreaking Los Angeles Lawyers, Judges and Legal Professionals Project. The 2016 honorees are lawyers, judges and other legal professionals in California who have achieved extraordinary success in the legal profession despite obstacles including race, gender, socioeconomic barriers and disability.

“Overcoming Adversity: Real Stories” is a film of personal interviews containing inspirational stories from widely recognized and distinguished Los Angeles legal professionals. The project goal is to tell groundbreaking stories of lawyers, judges and other legal professional in order to inspire others, especially students from local at-risk schools to set and achieve ambitious professional and personal goals.

This film is very inspiring. I encourage you to take the time to view it yourself online through the LA Law Library website at: <http://www.lalawlibrary.org/adversity>. The complete list of the honorees featured in this film includes: *Judge Craig Barnes; Yolanda M. Barrera; Betty Jing Boyd; Hon. Tani Cantil-Sakauye, Chief Justice, California Supreme Court; Martha A. Carillo; Cyndi M. Chang; Yamiko B. Herron; Jackie Lacey, Los Angeles*

District Attorney; Judge Luis Lavin; Richard Lewis; Selma Moidel Smith; Judge Dorothy W. Nelson; Rose M. Ochi; Lee Paige, CLA; Ireneo A. Reus III; Bobby Rimas; Luis Rodriguez; Judge Deborah L. Sanchez; Janeen Steele; and Sylvia Torres-Guillen.

To learn even more about Selma, an excellent article can be found at this ABA link, the highlights of which are summarized below:

http://www.americanbar.org/publications/voice_of_experience/20160/february-2016/voice-of-experience-vol-i-iss-2--the-finance-issue/member-spotlight--selma-moidel-smith.html.

Selma Moidel Smith was sworn in to the California bar 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. In fact, as Associate Justice Kathryn Mickle Werdegar of the California Supreme Court once remarked, "every organization Selma joins ultimately places her at its helm or in a position of leadership."

Selma is a prolific composer of classical music and has written more than 100 compositions for piano and orchestra. Her works have been performed by 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).

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.

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 also was 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.

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:

http://www.americanbar.org/directories/women_trailblazers_project_listing/selma_moidel_smith.html.

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).

Susan J. DeWitt is Assistant United States Attorney, Life Member of WLALA, and Co-Chair of the Criminal Justice Committee.