

# President's Column

Catherine Shaffer

**M**y dear colleagues and *Court Review* readers, greetings. As I wrote this, I had just returned from an excellent AJA Executive Committee meeting in the Napa Valley, which focused on our three linked goals this year: (1) enhancing the value of AJA membership for those who are unable to attend conferences, (2) building on AJA's advances toward greater diversity in our organization and on the nation's benches, as well as achieving better understanding of and responses to diversity issues in our courts, and (3) strengthening AJA's ties to other national court-oriented organizations, including reaching out to national minority-lawyer organizations with judicial divisions and finding new ways to collaborate with our national court-oriented partners. Since then, I have attended the Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) midyear meeting in Henderson, Nevada, followed about two weeks later by a visit to the National Association for Court Management (NACM) midyear meeting in Orange County, California. My next update will talk in more detail about my latest trip, to our simply outstanding AJA midyear conference in Memphis, Tennessee. Justice Torres and Judge Betty Moore planned that excellent event, but I think Justice Torres and I both agree that it is Judge Moore, the conference chair, who really deserves a standing ovation for all she did to make that one of our best conferences ever.

I think our goals this year are important, and I have been reflecting on why, so that I could try to discuss that in this column. A recent jury-selection experience in my court helped to illuminate what I want to say. The lawyers asked the jurors to state their opinions about immigration and immigrants. The 50-odd jurors in the panel engaged very seriously with this question. They expressed some range of opinion: some indicated their desire that current immigration laws be enforced, some said they wanted to see both enforcement of existing law and reform to allow immigrants a path to citizenship, and some talked about how much they want to lower barriers to immigration. But what juror after juror discussed was how much stronger and richer the United States is as a nation because of our immigrant foundation. They pointed out that all of us who are not Native American or First Nations in heritage are immigrants or descended from immigrants to North America. They talked about the ways the United States has benefited from the work, patriotism, and enthusiasm of its immigrants. They discussed how fascinating and enriching it is to live in a place informed by many cultures, languages, and religious beliefs. The jurors, including the significant number who had been born outside North America, talked about their

passionate support for being part of a nation that is a haven for the persecuted, a beacon of liberty, and a respecter of every human being's right to pursue happiness and to receive equal treatment under the law.

Perhaps apropos of these reflections, I will highlight a book I read recently for the Law and Literature program at the CCJ conference. It is *Sweet Promised Land*, by Robert Laxalt. The book is about his immigrant father, Dominique, a Basque shepherd from the Pyrenees area who immigrated to the United States and married Laxalt's mother, also a Basque immigrant.



People with backgrounds like these became shepherders and cowboys in the mountains of western states like Nevada, Idaho, and Oregon. Dominique was wealthy and successful for a time, and when he was not, he returned to being a simple shepherd. America became his true home, as he realized when he finally returned to the Pyrenees for a visit late in life. His children were all successful, and one may be well known to you: Paul Laxalt, who was a Senator from Nevada, Governor of Nevada, and General Chairman of the Republican National Committee.

To me, this jury discussion and this book highlight some key common concepts on which our membership in the AJA rests. One of these is our appreciation of the immense value that our populations' diversity has brought to our national heritages as American and Canadian judges. Another is the respect we all feel for the rule of law and its bedrock assumption that all persons are equal before the law, equally endowed with rights and responsibilities, and equally deserving of opportunity, safety, and liberty. A third is the critical importance that we all thoughtfully share our experiences, discuss our common challenges, learn how to do our jobs to the very best of our ability, and work together professionally so that each of us can enhance the delivery of equal justice under the law to the people who appear in our courts.

I hope you agree with me that our association together can help to do these things, and—whether or not you come to conferences—that is a key value of being an AJA member. I hope, too, that you feel how worthwhile it is for all of us to rededicate ourselves to celebrating our diversity and enhancing it. And finally, I hope you agree that is fruitful and worthwhile for AJA us to reach out to and cooperate with other national court organizations, including both our existing partners and the national minority legal organizations with judicial divisions.

Please re-dedicate yourself to these goals in your AJA committees. I hope to see many of you at our fall conference in Kauai, Hawaii. I will be in touch with you again soon.