

J. Clifford Wallace Chapter of the American Inns of Court

by The Honorable Karen S. Crawford¹

In 2004, a group of San Diego lawyers and judges assembled to discuss formation of an American Inn of Court Chapter in North County. Although several active Inn chapters existed in San Diego at the time, none were based in the Carmel Valley or Del Mar area. There was a perceived need for an additional Inn given the growing number of law firms in the area and the resulting need for legal education. Many questions were raised during our initial discussions, including whether the new Chapter should be a “specialty” Inn dedicated to intellectual property, what eligibility requirements were appropriate, and how to ensure a diverse membership.² With the assistance of the American Inn of Court Foundation and guidance from members of the legal community including Charles “Chuck” Dick, a Master in the Louis Welsh Inn Chapter, the decision was made to form the J. Clifford Wallace Chapter. On October 25, 2004, our Charter was issued; our first meeting was held on March 23, 2005.

The decision to name our Chapter in honor of J. Clifford Wallace came easily, as Judge Wallace played an invaluable role in the creation of the American Inns of Court. The concept of the “American” Inns of Court first arose in a conversation between the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger and Justice Wallace. As participants in the Anglo-American Legal Exchange in London in 1977, both were very impressed with the role the English Inns play in preparing advocates for practice, and by the models of integrity, civility, and collegiality afforded by the Inns. While on a bus outside their London hotel, they spoke about the possibility of adapting the British Inns teachings to American practice.³ Judge Wallace’s insight and active participation at the inception of the American Inns movement were significant factors in shaping the American Inns of Court today.

The mission of the American Inn of Court is to unite a cross-section of the bench and bar in an educational forum to encourage excellence, professionalism, and ethics in advocacy, as

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² Membership in an American Inn of Court is open to and encouraged of all qualified persons, regardless of race, color, sex, age religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or disability.

³ *The American Inns of Court: Reclaiming a Noble Profession*, by Paul B. Pixton, Matthew Bender & Co., Inc., 1977, at p. 18.

well as to promote fellowship of the bench and bar. The idea is simple: lawyers and judges with experience in litigation join together to impart their hard-earned lessons and varying viewpoints to their less-experienced litigators. In the process, of course, they also educate each other about questions concerning ethics and substantive law. By providing a forum whereby young lawyers can learn side-by-side with the most experienced judges and attorneys in their communities, the Inn aids lawyers to become more effective advocates and counselors, with keener ethical awareness.

The first American Inn of Court was organized in 1980 in Provo, Utah by District Court Judge A. Sherman Christensen. Today, the Inns of Court has evolved into a national movement, with over 31,000 active members participating in 379 Inn chapters in 46 states, Guam and Tokyo, 2,000 participating law students, and 120,000 alumni. The judiciary are involved in the Wallace Inn as well, and are among the 2,692 judges actively participating in Inns chapters. While most Inn chapters focus generally on substantive, procedural and ethical issues which arise in litigation, several Inn chapters specialize in areas such as criminal practice, tax law, administrative law, family law, white-collar crime, bankruptcy, intellectual property, and employment and labor law.

The Wallace Chapter has hallmark features which distinguishes it from typical continuing education programs. We are committed not only to improving advocacy skills, but also to heightening ethical standards in the legal profession. Our membership reflects the rich diversity of the San Diego bench and bar and includes plaintiff and defense counsel, public and private practitioners, state and federal lawyers, practitioners from large and small firms, corporate counsel, professors and judges. Our Chapter is comprised of approximately one hundred members from the legal community who are divided into four experience categories: Masters (defined as judges, or litigators with more than 15 years of litigation experience); Barristers (who have 15 years or less of litigation experience); Associates (who have 5 years or less of litigation experience); and, students drawn from each of the three San Diego law schools. The members of our Inn are grouped into “pupilage” teams. Each team consists of a mix of Masters, Barristers, Associates and student members. This arrangement fosters the development of mentoring relationships between judges and senior members of the bar with less experienced lawyers and students. Each pupilage team is responsible for presenting one program per year on a topic of interest. The purpose is to teach in a manner that shows rather than tells.

Under the leadership of our past Presidents, Justice Joan Irion, the Hon. Dana Sabraw, Robert Gerber, the Hon. Steve Denton, Ret., the Hon. Cathy Bencivengo, and our current president, the Hon. Randa Trapp, the Wallace Chapter has contributed to the legal education of many in the North County Coastal Region. As recognized by Judge Trapp, “The Wallace Inn of Court presents a unique mentoring opportunity where some of the finest attorneys and judges in San Diego serve to educate and socialize with younger lawyers in a supportive and collegial Carmel Valley area setting. The ‘Wallace Inn’ experience is truly different and special.”

We congregate one evening per month, usually at Morrison & Foerster, at which a presentation by a pupilage group is made, typically in a role-playing vignette format. The

issues raised in the presentations are intended to invoke discussion about ethical and substantive issues from the entire Inn. Indeed, the Inn is a participatory program, and our success relies on the rich exchanges between lawyers and judges raised at our meetings. The monthly program topics, which are selected by the pupillage groups at the beginning of our program year, reflect the creativity and diverse skills of our membership. Additionally, pupillage groups assemble informally between the monthly meetings, further fostering professional relationships and friendships. The active participation by members of the trial and appellate bench is invaluable and greatly enriches our monthly programs and informal pupillage group meetings.

Participation in an Inn is a wonderful way to obtain continuing education credits, but active participation provides so much more. We learn from one another, and develop mentoring relationships with members of the bench and bar in a forum that encourages and, in fact, relies on open and frank discourse. Learning in this way teaches us, by example, how to be better advocates and, in so doing, allows each of us to improve the level of civility and excellence in our legal community. Recognizing the important role that the Inns play in educating the bench and bar, on January 26, 2011, the Conference of Chief Justices commended the “American Inns of Court for [its] commitment and dedication to improving the professionalism, ethics, civility and legal skills of judge, lawyers, academicians, and students of the law . . .” and recommended that “members of the bench and bar become actively involved and promote the mission and goals of the American Inns of Court.”⁴

If you are interested in learning more about the Wallace Inn Chapter, or would like to receive an application, please contact our Membership Chair, Michael Conger at (858)759-0200 or e-mail him at congermike@aol.com.

⁴ Conference of Chief Justices, Professional and Competence of the Bar Committee, Midyear Meeting, January 26, 2011.