

STATE OF THE DISTRICT

FBA-San Diego Chapter Recognition—Retiring Federal Attorneys

Disclaimer: Please note that the San Diego Chapter of the Federal Bar Association compiled information from the community-at-large as to the identity of the federal practitioners retiring during the 2020 calendar year. The following information has been compiled exclusively by the FBA and is not Court-sponsored in any way.

Robert “Bob” Ciaffa

Bob graduated from Georgetown University in 1985 with both a JD and a master’s degree in foreign service. He started his long career as a prosecutor as an Assistant District Attorney in Philadelphia. Five years later, Bob joined the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Miami just as the drug war was heating up. He spent eight years in Miami as the drug trafficking focus shifted from the Caribbean to Mexico. In 1995, U.S. Attorney Alan Bersin hired Bob to work in the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of California.

Bob started in the Southern District’s drug unit and later became the office’s International Coordinator. Then, from 1999 to 2002, Bob served as the Department of Justice’s Attaché in Rome, where he focused on traditional organized crime. Bob returned to the U.S. Attorney’s Office to serve as the Deputy Chief of the Major Crimes Section and later as Senior Litigation Counsel. Bob represented the United States in the high-profile public corruption case involving the owner of Cheetahs strip club, which led to a jury convicting San Diego City Councilman Ralph Inzunza of accepting bribes to repeal the City’s “no-touching” ordinance at nude clubs. Bob later served as the DOJ’s Attaché in Mexico City from 2013 to 2015. He then again returned to the Southern District and served as the office’s International Coordinator until retiring this year after a long, accomplished career that spanned three countries.

James Fife

James started his professional life as a linguist who specialized in Celtic languages. He later went to paralegal school and started freelancing for criminal defense attorneys in San Diego who focused on capital cases. James’s flourishing love for the law led him to attend Thomas Jefferson School of Law, where he graduated in 2004 at 44 years old.

After taking the bar in 2005, James immediately started with the Federal Defenders of San Diego. James spent the next fifteen years in the office’s appellate unit, where he litigated countless appeals. His accomplishments include a successful appeal from the Southern District that led to the Supreme Court’s 2011 decision in *Tapia v. United States*. That decision held the Sentencing Reform Act precludes federal courts from lengthening a prison term to promote a defendant’s rehabilitation. James also played a pivotal role in several major projects, including by leading the Federal Defenders’ unit on Amendment 782 to the Sentencing Guidelines. This amendment not only applied a two-point reduction in guideline sentences for drug trafficking offenses, but also did so retroactively. Therefore, James and other Federal Defenders staff screened several thousand cases in this district and worked with the United States Attorney’s Office to obtain as many uncontested sentence reductions as possible. This project was a resounding success and significantly reduced the burden on the Court to carry-out Amendment 782. At 58 years old, James discovered he has been a Canadian citizen all his life due to derived citizenship. He has now happily retired to Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, after a successful, multi-faceted professional career.

Phillip “Phil” L.B. Halpern

Phil was born in New York and received his law degree from Rutgers School of Law in 1978. But his 36-year, storied career as a prosecutor did not begin right after law school. After law school, Phil received a criminology degree from Cambridge University. Phil then returned to the United States to clerk for a judge and serve as an Assistant Prosecutor in Hudson County, New Jersey. Phil was sworn in as an AUSA in the Southern District of California on October 1, 1984.

As an AUSA, Phil’s accomplishments include orchestrating some of the nation’s first steroid smuggling prosecutions, which included 34 indictments, among them an Olympic athlete and a coach for the University of Miami’s football team; indicting and international arms smuggling ring supplying Iran with critical F-14 parts; and bringing the first federal case involving a violation of the Presidential embargo of Libya. And he did all of that in his first few years as an AUSA. Over his career, Phil’s prosecution also included two U.S. Congressmen, the Executive Director of the CIA, sitting state judges, an IRS Agent for bribery, a former San Diego mayor, and former Tour de France winner Floyd Landis. The list goes on. At the United States Attorney’s Office, Phil’s positions included Chief of the Major Frauds and Special Prosecutions Section and in a variety of other positions, including Senior Litigation Counsel, Senior Legal Counsel, and Special Assistant to the U.S. Attorney.

Sherri Walker Hobson

Sherri graduated from Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts in 1989. As a law student, Sherri completed internships at the U.S. Attorney’s Office in both the Northern and Southern Districts of California. She then completed a one-year fellowship in Texas with the U.S. Attorney General’s Honors Program. On October 1, 1990, Sherri was sworn in as an AUSA in the Southern District of California at only twenty-five years old.

Over the course of her illustrious thirty-year career as an AUSA, Sherri worked within various sections, including Intake, Trial Team, General Crimes, the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (“OCDETF”), and the Narcotics Section. She tried more than 100 cases. She served as an original member of the San Diego Tunnel Task Force with a twelve-year tenure on that force. The “Tunnel Queen” took down eight tunnels in a six-year span, which included the seizure of 135 tons of drugs, followed by another 81 tons. For nearly ten years, she served on the board of the California Methamphetamine Initiative. At the earliest rumbling of fentanyl, Sherri immediately led the charge to fight this challenge head-on. She led a grassroots effort to educate the community of this new threat and she assembled a Fentanyl Forum to further educate and collaborate with law enforcement. Her fervent efforts on fighting fentanyl ultimately culminated into receiving the prestigious Director’s Award from the Department of Justice.

Michael David Stein

Michael Stein graduated from the University of Arizona College of Law in 1969. Upon graduation, Michael served as a law clerk in the Los Angeles County Public Defender’s Office. Immediately after taking and passing both the California and Arizona bar exams on his first attempt, he joined the LA Public Defender’s Office and served as a public defender for nearly four years. In that role, he had the unique opportunity to represent a co-conspirator involved in the Charles Manson murders during a bail review.

Michael has exclusively practiced criminal defense in state and federal courts for over fifty years. In 1973, Michael started private practice at his firm, The Law Officers of Michael D. Stein, P.C. Michael served on the CJA panel early in his private practice, and he also served on the panel throughout the past ten years. As a passionate advocate, Michael has received a “Very High” rating from Martindale-Hubbell. The bulk of Michael’s caseload involved defending drug and drug trafficking charges, including representation of a notorious cartel defendant. Although Michael’s practice demanded much of his time, he is a devoted father of three boys, a grandfather, and a loyal volunteer for the San Diego Humane Society. Michael has extensively traveled abroad and domestically and has seen a large majority of our nation’s National Parks.