



Setting a High Bar

Fresno State graduates excel as judges, attorneys

by Shirley Melikian Armbruster

Marvin R. Baxter's journey from a small farm in Fowler to the state's highest judicial office ran directly through Fresno State.

It was at then-Fresno State College that Baxter gained the knowledge and skills that helped him through law school, a successful career in public and private practice law and finally, in 1991, an appointment as associate justice on the California Supreme Court.

In January 2015, Baxter will retire, ending a distinguished law career that spanned nearly 50 years.

Baxter is not alone in his legal accomplishments. When checking credentials of the "who's who" in Valley legal circles, Fresno State emerges as the alma mater of many judges. And looking beyond, graduates are scattered around the state and country.



Above: Marvin R. Baxter served as student body president before graduating in 1962.

Left: Baxter serves as associate justice on the California Supreme Court.

Below: Louise Allder Bretz, first alumni president and student body president in 1912, and Baxter inspect the seal commemorating the establishment of Fresno State College.



The University's database lists alumni with job titles throughout the legal field: judge, justice, lawyer/attorney, prosecutor, defender.

To name a few judges:

- Four Fresno State alumni sit on the Fifth District Court of Appeal — Presiding Justice Brad Hill ('77, '79), Gene Gomes ('69), Rosendo Peña Jr. ('77) and Charles "Chuck" Poochigian ('72).
- Retired from that court are James Ardaiz ('70), James Thaxter ('56), Steven Vartabedian ('72) and Rebecca Wiseman ('75).
- Earlier Fifth District Court justices, now deceased, were Hollis Best, presiding, ('48) and George Zenovich ('48).
- Sandra Brown Armstrong ('69) is senior district judge of the U. S. District Court, Northern District of California.
- Gary Austin ('72) and Sandra Snyder ('68) serve as federal magistrate judges for the United States District Court for the Eastern District of California.
- Fresno State alumni are Superior Court judges in at least 10 California counties: Fresno, Madera, Tulare, Kings, Kern, Stanislaus, Alameda, Riverside, San Bernardino and Tehama.
- Mark Anthony Scott ('80) is Superior Court Judge in the Stone Mountain Judicial Circuit in DeKalb County, Georgia.

Like Baxter, a 1962 graduate of Fresno State, all of these achievers have Bulldog roots that started them down the path to success.

Baxter says Fresno State is the only college he considered. He particularly appreciated the close interaction and mentoring he received from faculty and staff. He was active in student government and served as student body president, which led to a fellowship in public affairs with the prestigious Coro Foundation followed by law school at the University of California's Hastings College of the Law.

"I owe my entire career to having attended Fresno State," Baxter says.

"Fresno State provided me with opportunities I would not have had at another university."

Building pride

Peña says as a Fresno State student in the 1970s, he had the opportunity to build pride in his Latino heritage and engage in meaningful extracurricular activities, including as a founding member of the Chicanos in Law Club. He says his experiences helped him learn "that challenges are a part of life and that it is better to meet them head on and with gusto."

Following his graduation, Peña headed to UCLA Law School and began his legal career in the California Public Defender's Office in Los Angeles. He worked in public and private practice law before he was appointed judge of the Fresno County Superior Court by Gov. Gray Davis in October 2002.

In 2012, Gov. Jerry Brown appointed him a justice on the California Fifth District Court of Appeal.

Both Peña and Baxter have maintained ties to the University through the Fresno State Alumni Association. Baxter served on the board and as president, and Peña is now in his seventh year as a board member.



Judge Rosendo Peña Jr.

Peña enjoys the alumni connection and believes it's an important one for all Fresno State graduates. "It ensures the Bulldog legacy lives on, and the value of our degrees will continue to be enhanced by the University's successes," Peña says.



Judge Sandra Brown Armstrong

Campus life in the '60s

Armstrong left her hometown of Oakland in 1967 to study sociology at Fresno State because she wanted to avoid the student protests and turmoil at campuses nearer to home.

"It was exactly what I needed at the time," she recalls. "It was a quiet place and a challenging academic setting."

At that point in history, Fresno State also allowed Armstrong to experience a much-less diverse atmosphere than she was used to in Oakland. She often was the only female African-American in her classes, in the dorms and on the cheerleading squad that she joined. [Today, African-Americans make up 4.1 percent of the student body.]

"It rounded me out in a way I could not have accomplished if I had stayed in the Bay Area," she says. "The experience I had in Fresno went a long way to prepare me for my future career moves. I was the first African-American female in many of the jobs and appointments I've had."

Armstrong joined the Oakland Police Department after graduating from Fresno State and then earned her law degree from the University of San Francisco School of Law, graduating No. 4 in a class of 225.

"Fresno State prepared me well to compete against students from a range of schools from all over the country. I felt extremely well prepared," she says.

Armstrong's law career included work as a deputy district attorney, senior consultant to the California Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice, commissioner on the Consumer Product Safety Commission and a member of the United States Parole Commission. She was a judge on the Alameda Superior Court when President George H. W. Bush nominated her to a seat on the United States District Court for the Northern District of California.

— *Shirley Melikian Armbruster is the associate vice president for university communications and integrated marketing.*

Downtown Fresno tribute will honor alumni Marvin and Jane Baxter

Justice Marvin R. Baxter will retire from the California Supreme Court on Jan. 4 — marking the end of a distinguished 24-year career on the Supreme Court and 32 years of public service.

Marvin and wife Jane (Pippert) Baxter both graduated from Fresno State in 1962. They have maintained a close connection to the University, where Baxter once served as student body president. He later served as president of the Fresno State Alumni Association and was the recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Top Dog Award in 1996. They remain avid fans of Fresno State athletics.

A special tribute will take place in honor of the Baxters at 6 p.m. on Nov. 14 at Fresno Hotel and Conference Center (2233 Ventura St.). For more information, email:

baxtertribute@gmail.com.

