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Speaking the Language

Attorneys at Century Law Group are skilled practitioners in State Bar Court and on ethics.

By Erin Lee

Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — At State Bar defense and business litigation boutique Century Law Group LLP, the motto is “good people make mistakes.”

It’s about making sure qualified, smart people stay in the profession, founding partner Edward O. Lear said.

“When I was a [State Bar] prosecutor, it was really easy to prosecute the name on the piece of paper,” he said. “It’s really hard to prosecute a human being. So the first thing that we do as fast as possible is to humanize our clients. And it evens the playing field really fast because if you can show that your client in a professional licensing context is a good person who made a mistake, you’re winning.”

The foundation of the firm’s practice is State Bar defense and legal ethics, but it also handles licensing defense for other professionals, fee disputes and business and real estate litigation. The seven-attorney firm defends among the most professional licensees in the state, but it’s also one of few State Bar defense firms that represents plaintiffs in civil court as well.

Lear, who’s a former State Bar prosecutor, said the practice areas are interconnected; for example, many of their attorney clients are civil litigators themselves.

“We’re essentially the only State Bar defense firm that speaks their language,” he said. “And so they have a comfort level with us in that way because we know what it’s like to be in Superior Court.”

Century Law Group occupies a unique niche in the market, affordable enough for small- to mid-sized firms and their attorneys but also offering a broad web of services related to legal ethics. A significant portion of the practice is concierge service, headed by partners Rizza Gonzales and Marisol Ocampo. The firm is retained by other firms and consults on ethics or compliance issues that come up, similar to inhouse general counsel.

“A lot of our work is sort of preventative before it even gets to any kind of investigation



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From left, Century Law Group LLP partners Marisol Ocampo, Rizza D. Gonzales, and Edward O. Lear

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— Edward O. Lear, founding partner

or State Bar Court level, where law firms or several attorneys want to know what to do so that they don’t get to a client complaint to the State Bar,” Ocampo said.

Even if a proceeding has already begun, early action is crucial. State Bar investigations usually start with a confidential letter notifying an attorney of a case being opened.

“What we try to promote as much as possible ... is to say, ‘Call us as soon as you get that letter. Don’t be penny-wise, pound-foolish because we’re really good at shutting those down,’” Lear said. “That’s probably the greatest value that we give to attorneys is to come

in, hit those fast, shut them down.”

The majority of the work at this stage is confidential, so there’s a huge incentive to resolve the matter before charges are filed in State Bar Court, at which point it becomes public, according to Ocampo.

Even if the matter is not completely resolved before filing, the firm can help mitigate the damage and prepare the defendant, Gonzales said.

“If it’s going to get worse, we’re going to try to stop the bleeding as early as possible,” she said.

There are times when early preparation isn’t

possible, when the firm is hired after charges have already been filed. But even in those crisis situations, the firm very rarely turns down a State Bar defense case, Lear said.

“There’s already a bazooka pointed at our clients, so it’s our job to come up with the best solution,” he said. “Ninety percent of the time, our clients have done something wrong, so the process involves making sure that the discipline is commensurate with the bad act.”

Earlier this year, for example, Lear defended a prosecutorial misconduct case brought by the State Bar against former Los Angeles City Attorney Carmen A. Trutanich. Two years ago, the State Bar charged Trutanich with knowingly failing to disclose a witness’ identity and presenting false testimony as an assistant district attorney in a 1985 murder case.

Lear, along with co-counsel at Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP, argued the three-decade delay in pursuing misconduct charges limited Trutanich’s ability to present exculpatory evidence. State Bar Judge Yvette Roland agreed and dismissed the case.

“At the end of the day, the court said, wait a second, the witnesses are dead,” Lear said. “This was 35 years later. That’s prejudicial to the client.”

Aside from State Bar defense, the firm handles similar licensing defense with other

professionals, including real estate brokers, doctors, nurses and insurance agents. They also handle moral character cases for bar applicants having difficulty being admitted because of a conviction, for example.

With business, real estate and legal malpractice litigation, Ocampo handles the rigorous vetting process. Legal malpractice cases in particular require not only a showing of malpractice but also a showing that client would have otherwise won the case, she said.

Lear, Ocampo and Gonzales all attended UCLA School of Law, each about a decade apart. After graduating in 1987, Lear spent several years at a big law firm and then as a State Bar prosecutor before founding his firm in 1994. Ocampo and Gonzales both joined after graduating law school in 1998 and 2009, respectively.

It was at the State Bar where Lear gained trial experience as well as expertise in professional responsibility and legal ethics. Now as a State Bar defense attorney, he’s president of the Association of Discipline Defense Counsel.

Art Barsegyan of Pansky Markle, who is an ADDC vice president, said Lear is active in the discipline community and has brought new energy to the association. Though he hasn’t worked with Lear as co-counsel, they have referred cases to one another, and he said

Lear’s reputation as a top discipline defense attorney precedes him.

“He’s known to be aggressive in the positive sense, in that he will definitely fight for his clients and will take it all the way,” Barsegyan said.

Frances M. O’Meara of Thompson Coe Cousins & Irons LLP said Lear’s expertise in disciplinary actions and familiarity with State Bar Court are unique among litigators. She has co-tried several disciplinary cases with him and handled related civil actions.

“What I really appreciate as a professional and a colleague is that he keeps his clients informed,” she said. “He shares the pros and cons of issues, which we as lawyers are supposed to do, but he does that with a very intelligent and measured and professional analysis.”

For the Century Law Group attorneys, their work is deeply personal, to both them and their clients.

“It’s working one on one with an individual whose life has been directly affected because it’s their profession, it’s their livelihood,” Ocampo said.

“Going into that process, it’s scary and people don’t know about it,” Gonzales said. “And it’s nice when I’m able to give advice or help people, and they’re like, ‘I feel like I can sleep at night, I feel so much better.’”