

PROFILE



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Partner: Lee Kanon Alpert, in his office at the law firm Alpert Barr & Grant in Encino, says 'I have the type of personality where I can be aggressive when I need to be.'

Street-Savvy Advisor

Skills learned as a kid in Detroit have served Lee Kanon Alpert as a negotiating attorney.

By HELEN FLOERSH Staff Reporter

Before Lee Kanon Alpert was a civic leader and business attorney with his own Encino law firm, Alpert Barr & Grant, he was taking punches (and throwing even more of his own) as a kid growing up on the mean streets of Detroit. Back then, he promised himself that if he were ever to make it out of poverty, he'd do what he could to help people and would never forget about those in need, no matter how much money he made. He credits his experience as a member of the only white family in a low-income black neighborhood with enabling him to make good on this promise. He believes his success as an attorney is linked to his ability to see past color and class to embrace people of all backgrounds and ethnicities, a trait that has afforded him rich relationships, both personally and in business. In addition to working on construction transactions, government lobbying and other business matters at Alpert, Barr & Grant, Alpert also runs Alpert Dispute Resolution and Consulting Inc. He currently sits on the board of governors for the Valley Industry and Commerce Association; the Community Ministry Board of Providence Tarzana Medical Center; and the Woodland Hills Country Club. Alpert has the Tree of Life award from the National Jewish Fund; a Fernando Award for volunteerism in the San Fernando Valley; a Justice Armand Arabian Award for leadership in public service; and a Stanley M. Lintz Community Service Award from the San Fernando Valley Bar Association. He was one of the founding members of Genesis L.A., a community development financial institution and entity started

out of the office of former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan. He sat down with the Business Journal to discuss embracing diversity, the value of civic leadership and the future of the legal industry.

Question: How did you end up in California?

Answer: I had two scholarship offers: one to Ohio State and the other to USC. I visited Ohio State and it was very nice, but it was just too close to home. It was the same type of weather environment, which I was really hoping to get away from, and I decided that despite not knowing a soul in California – I had never even been west of the Mississippi, really – I was going to give it a shot.

What was your childhood like?

The community where I grew up was right where the (1967 race riot) started in Detroit. When I grew up, it was all African American. And yet the people in our community didn't really see color – I grew up with the kids on my block and on my street. We played and we fought; we had little street gangs. We were all the same on my street, and what I mean by that is that we were all poor. Everyone in the community had the same sense of need. None of us had more access to things like supermarkets and doctors' offices. All of our neighbors looked out for us – you didn't have to lock your screen doors because people were watching out for you. I struggled more when I moved out into the Caucasian community.

Why did you move away?

The junior high school I went to had kids

Lee Kanon Alpert

TITLE: Founder

COMPANIES: Alpert Barr & Grant and Alpert Dispute Resolution and Consulting Inc.

BORN: Detroit, Mich.

EDUCATION: Wayne State University; University of Southern California; Loyola Law School at Loyola Marymount University; Harvard University

CAREER TURNING POINTS: Deciding throughout my career as a lawyer to resist, at numerous times, accepting very enticing personal employment or firm mergers into large law firms or private businesses with great financial and/or ego benefits being offered but to the detriment of time with my family and honest personal desires

PERSONAL: Lives in Sherwood Forest with his wife of 47 years, Arlene; has two sons and one grandson, with a second due in March

HOBBIES: Sports, especially football; amateur photography; politics; reading novels; traveling; and volunteering with causes that support health care access and uplift impoverished communities.

he pulled a knife. My friend Xavier stepped in and told him that if he was going to stick me, he'd have to stick him first. So the kid dropped the knife and we fought. But Xavier told his mom, and, within a couple days, my mom found out. She told my dad that no matter what we'd have to move into another community because she was worried about my safety – not because of people on our block, but the ones at school who didn't understand. So we moved way out to a rural suburb.

What was that experience like?

Everyone knew each other. The other kids made fun of me because I wore different colored clothes and I spoke differently. I reacted differently in terms of fighting and stuff because that's what I'd learned. It was my culture, and my culture wasn't there.

How did you react to the bullying?

(In one case,) a guy sitting in front of me kept turning around and making fun of me. I warned him not to turn around again, so after he did it twice, I just walloped him. We knocked down the desk and the chairs ... Our teacher had to get a male teacher to break up the fight because I wasn't going to stop. I'd learned that you just finish it. I ended up getting suspended for a week.

Have you ever considered going back to Detroit?

I thought at one time about going back to set up a nonprofit similar to Genesis L.A., but it was just too difficult to move out there, so I decided not to do it and instead stay here and work on the projects I had a passion for

from all different elementary schools. Some of them didn't know me, and they weren't used to having white kids around – it's just a fact. One kid picked on me in the locker room not realizing that I was just like him. We took the fight outside and when I got out there,

What was your earliest encounter with the legal profession?

There was only one legal office in our neighborhood. Former U.S. Sen. Carl Levin from Michigan and his brother put an office in the community to help the poor and the underserved. I had an opportunity meet him when I was in D.C., and I told him about how I used to walk by his office when I was going to school.

Did you always want to be an attorney?

I actually started out as a teacher. I graduated from SC with a degree in education; my emphasis was exceptional children, or those with emotional or physical challenges. I taught a year at Miller High School (in Reseda).

Why did you stop teaching?

The main reason was that as much as I had a passion for it, and I could deal with the emotionally handicapped kids very well, the physically handicapped kids really got to me. What ultimately caused me to leave was an incident when I returned after Christmas break to find out that one of the students had passed away.

What led you to pursue law?

I'd always been on debate teams and could speak fairly well. I have the type of personality where I can be aggressive when I need to be. I'd been told by family and friends that I should really think about becoming a lawyer, so I went to law school. It's been a great career, and I've been able to adjust and modify it.

How has your upbringing made you a better attorney?

If you don't have your defenses up, and you don't worry about being better than someone else, then you can just go along with life. That's what the upbringing I've had has taught me, and it's been my philosophy in dealing with people all along.

How did you start doing arbitration and mediation?

I was thrown into an arbitration that the firm



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Resolution: 'If the mediation is successful, the parties end up being able to do business together again,' Alpert maintains.

thought was a loser, and they threw me in as a young guy to try it and I came back with a victory. I realized I really liked that process better; I didn't like having to be strictly bound by the rules of evidence as to what you can admit. Arbitration gives you that kind of flexibility. It's also much quicker than going to trial.

What's the difference between the two?

Arbitration is like you're going to court: Someone presents the evidence before an arbitrator, and the arbitrator makes the ultimate decision – the clients don't. As long as (the arbitrator) hasn't shown bias, the court will confirm that as a judgment or an award. It has the same effect as if a judge or a jury has decided it. In a mediation, you as a mediator do not make the

decision. You get briefs from each side, meet together with the parties and their counsels – or individually, if they're too volatile – and then you hear altogether what the issues are. Then you put them in separate rooms and you, as the mediator, go back and forth and have conversations with them about their positions. Then, if they ask, you can make a recommendation. You work both sides, and it's hard work.

What do you enjoy about mediation?

In mediation, the parties have to agree. That to me is tough work, and I really enjoy it because I enjoy resolving disputes between parties. I don't think it's generally fruitful to take something to an ultimate legal conclusion. It's costly, it's emotional. And sometimes, if the mediation is successful, the parties end up being able to do business together again. Often it doesn't happen, but in a number of construction cases I've had, they've worked together again. You can include working together as part of an agreement. It's ultimately a much better process for the parties involved because they themselves control what they settle and what they don't.

Have you ever considered serving as a judge?

I had three opportunities to serve as a judge and I ultimately turned them down because I just didn't think it was right for me. I couldn't do the 9 to 5 – I'm not a 9 to 5-type person. I always feel that I have to put my all in it and I know I'd be working longer than a 9 to 5. I also had gotten involved politically in Los Angeles and the state and somewhat on the federal level, and I really enjoyed politics.

What about running for public office?

I've never wanted to be an elected official. I've been asked to run for city council, a Congressional seat and an assembly seat, but I chose not to do that. I don't want to put my family in kind of a goldfish bowl. It's not me – I can take care of myself – but it's my family. I also felt I could be more effective talking with people and working for various causes with the elected officials than I would be if I were stuck in an elected office.

What are some ways employers can diversify their workforces effectively?

My thought is that you make sure you give everyone the opportunity to be interviewed, then you hire the most qualified person, regardless of race. Maybe it's naive of me to say that, but I think where some of the anger comes in – whether it's white, black, etc. – is when you start showing preferences based on

ethnicity. You upset everyone if you're just looking at race, and justifiably so. Just give everybody a chance. If you're interviewing one ethnicity all the time, look for other resources. It's really important to have diversity, because otherwise you're limiting yourself and your success.

How has your background and philosophy benefitted your firm?

Here's one example: At our first office on Ventura Boulevard, we had a parking lot with an attendant named Jose. I'd always stop and talk to him, and around Christmas I'd bring him a bottle of good tequila. Some of the other lawyers in the building could be real jerks to the attendants; they'd treat them like they were slaves. A few years after we moved out, I got a call. Jose had found me. Since we'd left, he ended up taking over the parking lot, then another at a bigger building, then another and another. He wanted to sell them and build a home for his family in Mexico. I said, "That's great, but why are you calling me?" He said, "Because I want you to be my lawyer." The reason was because I was always nice and genuine to him.

What personality qualities make you particularly good at your job?

I think you have to ask others that question, because they probably have a more direct take on me than I sometimes do on myself. But to be honest, I think it's that I have a real passion for what I do. That's something my wife and I have taught our boys: You have to have a passion for what you do and see it as being fruitful and fulfilling, not only for yourself but for your clients and the community.

Who inspires you, and why?

At various stages of my life it has been various people, starting with my parents. My dad really taught me ethics and morality; he was a poor man financially but a very wealthy one in terms of those particular traits. Another one was the teacher in my neighborhood in Detroit – he always tried to guide me in the right direction. And another was the teacher who broke up that fight in high school. He was Puerto Rican, and he took me under his wing when I moved from one community to another, maybe because he understood himself. Then when I got to college, I think the person who had the greatest influence overall was Jack Bates, the senior vice president of student affairs at Wayne State in Detroit. He saw something in me that I certainly didn't understand myself, and really mentored me. He was really instrumental in my life.



Adventurers: Alpert and wife Arlene on a vacation to ice fields in British Columbia.