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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

## Mixing Business with Passion

Alpert, Barr & Grant looks to volunteer work for a lift in spirits — and their bottom line.

By **Susan McRae**

Daily Journal Staff Writer

ENCINO — Lee K. Alpert traces the spirit of volunteerism that pervades Alpert, Barr & Grant APLC to his childhood in a riot-torn Detroit ghetto, where social services were scarce and injustices abundant.

Though he said he never intended the firm's dedication to community service as a means of attracting clients, he and partners Gary Barr and Adam D.H. Grant said it has paid them back many times over in new business.

"If you do a job for the right reasons, people know that," Alpert said of how the lawyers' outside activities have led to more work for the firm. "It became an unintended consequence of what we were doing."

The firm and its attorneys say they donate more than 3,000 of volunteer hours to community causes each year. Three partners are past presidents of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association, and a fourth is due to take the reins in two years.

A founding partner of the eight-lawyer transactional and litigation boutique, Alpert grew up with his parents, grandparents and younger brother in a 900-square-foot house with one bathroom. His father drove a laundry truck; his grandfather was a baker.

The neighborhood had few services, no supermarket and only a corner bar. He remembers his mother taking him with a cold and fever on a series of three buses to visit a doctor. But there was a law office that served the poor, staffed by Carl Levin, now a U.S. senator.

"I was a minority in a minority community," Alpert said of being white and Jewish in a mostly black neighborhood where disputes were often settled with fists and knives. While he suffered some racial discrimination, he said he felt more prejudice from being poor.

Still, he said he couldn't change the experience if he could. It infused him with a



Gary L. Barr, Lee K. Alpert, and Adam D.H. Grant

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passion for helping the underdog and for the kind of community involvement that is the mainstay of his firm today. Other lawyers at the firm share his philosophy.

Alpert opened what is now Alpert, Barr & Grant APLC in 1976 with colleague Michael S. Mink, who left in 1994 to become a Los Angeles County judge. At the time they launched the firm, Alpert was just four years out of Loyola Law School. He had come to California on a scholarship to USC, where he majored in education and taught children with handicaps.

He said he decided to go to law school because he was getting married and needed to make more money. But once there, he saw that through the profession, he could help others obtain access to justice.

Since then, he said, his goal has been to enjoy his work "but not to forget where I came from, where my roots were."

Barr joined the firm in 1979 but left shortly thereafter for the Los Angeles city

attorney's office to take a job as a tax litigator. He returned to the firm in 1982, making partner in 1985.

"One of the reasons I came back to the firm is the fact that Lee and Mike Mink were dedicated to the idea of community involvement and community activity," Barr said. "I had done it back in high school, and

### Alpert, Barr & Grant APLC

Encino

**Number of Lawyers:** 8

**Founded:** 1976

**Specialty:** business transactions and litigation

#### Tips:

- Grow slowly
- Encourage community involvement for every member of your firm
- Figure out what you have a passion for and find an organization in that area that needs help

# Alpert, Barr & Grant looks to volunteer work for a lift in spirits

it was ingrained in me as a way of looking at life and society.”

Barr, who specializes in business and real estate litigation, has spent more than 20 years volunteering for the California Manufactured Housing Institute, a trade association that among other things helps replace homes for fire victims and severely wounded war veterans. He’s in his second stint as board chairman.

Grant, who leased space from the firm for several years, merged his practice with it in 2007, and the partners added him to the firm’s name. He specializes in business litigation with an emphasis on construction disputes. That’s the front side of his card, as he puts it.

The card’s back side, figuratively speaking, is his work for the Shalom Institute, a Jewish educational center and retreat, which he first became involved with as a child, attending its sleepover summer camp. He later met his future wife there when the two worked as camp counselors and continued to volunteer for the organization through college and beyond as a member of its alumni committee. He served five years as board president, taking the board from

a small group to a private nonprofit with tax-exempt status. In addition to sitting on the board, he also now helps out with legal issues, such as reviewing contracts.

The back side of his card also includes his participation in triathlons, which he’s been doing for 10 years. He finished seventh in the June Ironman triathlon in Idaho. And as a member of the Fox Network triathlon team, he helped raise funds last month for Children’s Hospital Los Angeles.

“Oftentimes, the front side of the card is business,” Grant said. “But as people get to know me, they get to know me not just as an attorney but what my passions are.”

The back side of the lawyers’ cards has generated new business over the years, keeping the firm afloat through good and bad economies.

But they hasten to add that if volunteering is done just as a marketing ploy to get clients, it’s likely to backfire. But if it’s done out of a passion for the work, then every contact can be a potential client or will know someone who can become a potential client, and business starts to flow naturally.

Alpert, whose lifelong commitment to volunteerism — from Little League coach-

ing to chairing the board that oversees Encino and Tarzana hospitals — has earned him numerous awards, said he landed one of his biggest clients through donating his time. It was in the early days of cable television, he said, and the future client was having trouble meeting franchise obligations. Alpert headed a task force that produced a 10-page plan on how to proceed.

The next thing he knew, he said he was he was asked to sit on the company’s board. When his term was up, he said the company hired his firm to represent it, which it does so to this day, reviewing contracts, negotiating deals and strategizing various opportunities.

Volunteerism, Grant said, is the tie that binds the firm’s lawyers.

“We give back to the community each for our own reasons,” he said. “We all came to the realization on our own that giving back was important. It bound us together, to trusting each other. We’re coming together with people not for financial gain but because we’re committed.

“And when times are down, people turn to people they can trust. They feel that extra connection.”