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PERSPECTIVE

Community Service

Olivarez Madruga Lemieux O'Neill specializes in representing school districts and cities.

By Kamila Knaut

Daily Journal Staff Writer

When founding partners Ricardo A. Olivarez and Thomas M. Madruga met as young attorneys in the late 1990s, they often joked they should run their own practice together.

The pair stayed in touch over the years, and eventually they did just that. In 2010, Olivarez asked Madruga, who at the time was working for a police union firm, to join the municipal practice he had just launched.

"It turned out to be a great decision. I get to work with one of my best friends," Madruga said.

In 2017, the firm grew again.

After Madruga and Olivarez met W. Keith Lemieux and Steven P. O'Neill — who specialize in water and environmental law — while competing to represent a water district in the San Gabriel Valley, the four developed a relationship.

In 2017, Olivarez and Madruga joined forces with the water firm Lemieux O'Neill, changing the firm's name to Olivarez Madruga Lemieux O'Neill LLP, and bringing together the attorneys' expertise in water, education and municipal law.

Five years later, Olivarez Madruga Lemieux O'Neill LLP is now a one-stop shop for public entities.

"We've forged out a pretty good situation. We've gone from four, five lawyers to almost 40 now," Madruga said.

"We've grown purposefully. We didn't grow just for the sake of growing. We were taking a lot of clients, but we also worked with clients that we wanted to work with," Olivarez added.

As the firm has grown, Madruga and Olivarez have maintained



Daily Journal photo

From left, partners Thomas M. Madruga, Inés Kuperschmit, Rick R. Olivarez, Christine K. Hsu and Terence J. Gallagher of Olivarez Madruga Lemieux O'Neill LLP

their focus on the community, which was what originally drew the two partners to specialize in municipal and education law.

"We're helping cities with some of the issues that will improve the lives of residents. And then with the school districts, we're working on behalf of the kids," Olivarez explained.

Madruga agreed, adding he is proud to enter the courtroom and say he is defending a city or a school district compared to a corporation.

The same community focus was what drew Olivarez to city attorney work 11 years ago, he said.

Olivarez is the city attorney for El Monte and Bell Gardens, but in the past has served as city attorney for La Puente, San Fernando and Cudahy, which are all still clients of the firm.

"It was up my alley because it

was a nice blend between being a lawyer and community service, which I was raised around," Olivarez said.

Olivarez comes from a family of elected officials. His grandfather served in Congress for 30 years. (One of the federal buildings in downtown Los Angeles is named after him.) His mother is Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard, D-Commerce.

"We started focusing mostly on municipal work and then over time started doing work for school districts and now most of the growth area has been education law," Olivarez said of the firm's practice. "We have more education law clients now than we do municipalities."

The firm represented school districts and cities in civil lawsuits ranging from civil rights claims against law enforcement agencies, to employment discrimination and wrongful termination.

"And then there's all kinds of tort cases in the schools, like a kid who fell off the monkey bars — I have had a bunch of those cases — or a traffic collision involving a bus or someone who was injured at school, slip and fall premises liability cases. It's a pretty wide range," Madruga said.

Stephen G. Larson, founding partner of Larson LLP in Los Angeles, has known Olivarez and Madruga for the better part of the last decade and has worked closely with Olivarez in his capacity as a city attorney on matters ranging from internal investigations to litigation.

"What impresses me is the ability to anticipate issues affecting clients instead of being reactive," Larson said of the firm. "They are proactive and get out in front of issues before they become a bigger problem, and I think that is a rare

and critically important attribute of all attorneys, but particularly those that represent and play that trusted adviser role as a city attorney.”

“Rick and his firm, they’re extremely talented, but they recognize when it’s in the best interest of their client to bring in a specialized attorney, whether it’s us or somebody else,” Larson explained. “And the most important thing for him, in my view, is a good result for his client and not just doing all the work himself. There’s no pride of authorship. It’s ‘What can we do to best serve the client?’ and that seems to be his philosophy that comes across basically in every professional relationship I’ve had with him.”

Larson has referred clients to the firm and said he highly recommends it to any city looking for a city attorney.

Woodland Hills civil rights attorney Dale K. Galipo echoed similar sentiments about the firm calling the attorneys “professional and ethical.”

“It was a very positive experience,” Galipo said of an excessive force case involving a police officer he handled in 2019, which Madruga defended.

“Tom is a very good lawyer and we got along very well, so I would say it was as pleasurable as it can be when you’re on opposing sides of a wrongful death case,” Galipo said.

Describing Madruga as a straight shooter and very competent, Galipo added, “He’s personable and has a good sense of humor. He’s also willing to compromise when he can as long as it doesn’t hurt his clients’ interest.”

Though Madruga is a strong advocate for his clients, he doesn’t lose sight of professionalism when interacting with opposing counsel, Galipo said.

“Some lawyers in their zeal to represent their clients lose sight of being a good lawyer and a good person with ethics and integrity, and that’s unfortunate,” Galipo commented.

Galipo said he looks forward to the opportunity to face Madruga in the courtroom again, explaining he enjoys going up against good trial lawyers.

Some of the firm’s most notable cases include a landmark plaintiff win in 2020. The firm represented the Compton Unified School District in challenging the use of SAT and ACT tests by the University of California. Along with Public Counsel, the firm argued the use of standardized test scores discriminated against applicants on the basis of race, income and disability. The case settled in 2021 and the UC system agreed to no longer consider test scores through at least 2025. *Smith v. Regents of the University of California*, RG19046222 (Alameda Super. Ct., filed Dec. 10, 2019).

Recent cases include a successful trial that ended this month. Madruga and associate Jaime Hernández defended Centinela Valley Union High School District against negligence claims arising from one student assaulting another on campus. The plaintiff sought \$3.8 million, alleging the district’s security was inadequate and it failed to discipline the attacker for prior misconduct.

Madruga argued the district had not breached any of its duties and brought a cross complaint against the attacker. Following a 10-day trial, the jury ruled 11-1 that the district was not liable and awarded \$1.2 million in damages to the plaintiff against the attacker as a result of the cross complaint. *Ivan Gonzalez v. Centinela Valley Union High School District*, BC699762 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed March 27, 2018).

“What kind of differentiates us from other firms is that we’re always available, and I think our clients know that if they need us, we’re going to be there,” Olivarez said. “They know that we care above and beyond them just being clients.”

Madruga said, “We get asked to do a lot of things and while we would like to take on more business, if we feel we’re not going to do the best job, they deserve the best lawyer for that job. We on numerous occasions have said, ‘You

know what? We can recommend you a lawyer for this particular issue because it’s not our bailiwick,’ rather than taking it on and doing a bad job. I think clients appreciate it and some people are afraid to do that.”

As of now the partners said they do not plan to expand out of Los Angeles, Ventura, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, but are open to it if the opportunity arises.

“Tom and I knew that we were going to be successful,” Olivarez said, looking back at the firm’s founding. “There definitely were difficult times along the way, but I think the firm has definitely exceeded my expectations. I never thought we would have 60 employees. That was never anything I think he and I planned to do, it just happened because we were doing good work and were aggressive as business people.”

“Where we are now, for me, is a good spot,” he said. “We’re busier than ever, we have great clients, we work with great people and if we grew in some ways, I think that would make it more difficult to keep the collegial environment that we have. But I wouldn’t be adverse to it because, I think, unless you keep growing there’s always the risk that you could not do as well going forward.”

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