

PABA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT — INTERVIEW NO. 1

## The Fixer

### Mel Avanzado on Fifty Years of PABA

*Conducted by Arnold Pamplona • March 15, 2026 • Arcadia, California*

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If you ask anyone who has been involved with the Philippine American Bar Association over the past few decades, Melvin N.A. Avanzado's name will come up quickly (and usually with a smile). A longtime member of PABA's Board of Governors, Mel has been one of the organization's most tireless advocates, dedicating years of his time and energy to strengthening the association and the broader Filipino American legal community. But perhaps his most lasting contribution to PABA has been the creation of the PABA Foundation, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit he co-founded and led as its inaugural President and CEO. Through the Foundation, PABA has been able to pursue its charitable mission in a more structured and impactful way, funding scholarships, supporting law students, and investing in the next generation of Filipino American lawyers.

Beyond his work with PABA, Mel is an accomplished trial attorney with over three decades of experience in entertainment, intellectual property, sports, and complex business litigation. He is the founder and principal of The Avanzado Law Firm, APLC, based in the Los Angeles area. He has also served as President of the Asian/Pacific Bar of California and has been a consistent voice for increasing the representation of Filipino and Asian Americans on the bench, including representing PABA before the

California Commission on Judicial Appointments at the 2010 confirmation hearing for Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye.

I'll be honest, Mel and I didn't always see eye to eye. He's a proud Reagan Republican; I lean pretty hard the other way. Over the years, we've had more than a few spirited arguments. But here's what I learned about Mel through all of that: when it comes to PABA and what it means for the Filipino American legal community, there is no daylight between us. That shared belief is what turned a sometimes contentious Board relationship into a genuine friendship, and it's what makes Mel the right person to open this oral history series.

I've known Mel for almost twenty years; he was already a seasoned Board member when I joined in 2007. For nearly two decades, he has been one of PABA's most committed leaders, and as PABA turns fifty, I sat down with him in Arcadia on a sunny Sunday afternoon in March 2026 to talk about where we've been, what it took to get here, and what he hopes comes next.

— Arnold Pamplona

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**Arnold Pamplona:** *Take me back to how you first got involved with PABA. What drew you in, and was there a particular person or moment that hooked you?*

**Mel Avanzado:** It was actually an odd situation, because I wasn't really looking to connect more formally with the Filipino community. I figured I was already part of it. It wasn't until I was at White O'Connor and starting to think about moving to a different firm that I realized it would be beneficial to have a more formal connection with the community. My cousin Arleen Aquino got me involved initially. Really, it was Arleen, her husband, Ron Aquino, and Ron's sister, Allison, all of whom were already heavily involved and had served as officers. It was a pretty easy entry. *[Ed. Note: Mr. Avanzado was a founding partner at the boutique litigation firm White O'Connor Curry & Avanzado. Rhonel Aquino and Allison Aquino are former PABA Presidents.]*

**AP:** *And back then, PABA was a very different organization.*

**MA:** We were a mom-and-pop operation, honestly. We weren't that formal. We were just kind of doing things our own way, without much guidance. Our governance documents weren't where they needed to be. We didn't have the kind of organizational structure that pretty much all the affinity bars have now. Every time I looked at how we were doing something, I'd think, why are we doing it this way? That tension was actually the genesis of my thinking that we needed our own 501(c)(3) foundation. But we'll get to that.

**AP:** *You were deep into building your career at some of the top firms in Los Angeles when you started putting serious time into PABA. What made community work feel worth that investment at that stage of your life?*

**MA:** Honestly, I'm not sure it was a fully conscious decision. I became a board member, and once I was there, I saw things that needed to be fixed or formalized, and I couldn't really sit still without doing something about them. I'm a fixer. My wife always says that about me. I'd rather fix a problem than prevent one. And Jeffer Mangels, the firm I was at during that time, did push me to get more involved in the community. They wouldn't pay for much, but they encouraged you to go out and develop relationships. Once I got involved and saw how much we were doing on the fly, that's when I became motivated to put things on a proper footing.

**AP:** *When you say things needed to be fixed, do you remember specific examples?*

**MA:** We were telling people we were a nonprofit, but we couldn't actually receive tax-deductible donations because we hadn't formalized the structure. So, one of the first things I pushed was getting the governance documents in order; creating proper templates and formalizing our practices, so that donors could give with confidence and we could receive money as a true nonprofit. It didn't take as much as you'd think. It was mostly just doing the paperwork. But it mattered enormously.

**AP:** *Who shaped you within PABA? Who are the people from those early years who were formative in your involvement?*

**MA:** You and Ben Hofileña, and Kiko Ochoa, among others. The OGs of that era laid the foundation and made the sacrifices. And the way we started formalizing things rubbed some people the wrong way, because we were becoming more corporate. One person who did a tremendous amount of the actual work in pushing all the governance documents and helping create the nonprofit entity was Marsha Dungog. In that period, she was the one driving the transactions, pushing all the paperwork through. I was overseeing and saying, okay, this can work.

**AP:** *Let's talk about the Foundation. You were one of the driving forces in creating it. Why did a separate 501(c)(3) feel like the right answer rather than just doing more within PABA itself?*

**MA:** Because we wanted to be able to tell donors they could make a tax-deductible contribution, and we needed a proper entity to receive that. But more importantly, I anticipated, correctly as it turned out, that PABA would still want to do political things. Advocate for candidates, comment on legislation, sign on to policy positions. Any of that would destroy a nonprofit's tax-exempt status. So, we needed a separate organization whose sole purpose was the charitable work: scholarships, educational programs, while the bar association remained free to lobby and advocate. That was the key distinction. In those early years, I was less focused on community building and more focused on literally building the foundation from which we could do everything else. It was only later, once we got the structure right, that I started going out more into the broader community. And honestly, I have you to thank for a lot of that.

**AP:** *How so?*

**MA:** Because you went and got married and left me holding the bag. You were going to be PABA's point person for the 2010 NAPABA regional convention, all of that was going to be you, and then you went and got married. I didn't even get an invitation, by the way. So I ended up stepping in and handling a lot of that. And that's actually how I got close with the leaders of SCCLA, JABA, and KABA. I had to work alongside all of them on the regional programming, and those people became some of my closest friends in the community. So, you're welcome, Arnold.

**AP:** *By the time the 2023 Gala came around, when you were presented with the PABA Distinguished Leadership Award, the Foundation was awarding \$36,000 in scholarships to 24 students in a single night. When you were getting it off the ground, did you have any sense it would reach that scale?*

**MA:** Absolutely not. We were hoping to raise a few thousand dollars and help one or two kids get through a tough semester. I remember being in law school and what a few hundred dollars meant when you really needed it. That was the vision: \$500 here, \$1,000 there. The leadership teams that followed really elevated things, and I want to be honest: I can't take all the credit.

**AP:** *In 2010, you stood before the California Commission on Judicial Appointments and testified on behalf of PABA at the confirmation hearing for Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye. What was that day like, and what did it mean to you personally?*

**MA:** That's a great story. I was in Hawaii for the Ninth Circuit Judicial Conference, where I was serving as a lawyer representative, when someone called and told me I needed to be in San Francisco the following Wednesday. I asked why someone like Eddie Angeles wasn't representing PABA, and they explained that Eddie was representing the broader Filipino community at the hearing. [*Eduardo Angeles is another former president of PABA -Ed.*] So, I said, "Okay, I can do that." I flew up that morning, hadn't met her before, and testified in support of her confirmation. Afterward, she pulled me aside and told me there were so few Filipino American judges in California at the time, and that our Asian representation on the bench needed to be much better, and that PABA needed to do something about it. That conversation really defined my community service work over the next decade, helping Filipino and Asian American judicial candidates navigate the appointment process. When the transition came from Governor Schwarzenegger to Governor Brown, our numbers on the bench increased significantly, and I was very proud of that.

**AP:** *We've made real progress on Filipino American judicial representation, but we're still not where we should be given the size of our community. In your view, why is that, and what needs to change?*

**MA:** Part of it is that people need to want it. Not that many people go to law school with their sights set on the bench. Judge Christine Gonong is a perfect example of someone who did. From the time I met her as a law student, she was focused entirely on becoming a judge. I gave her some early guidance on what to build in terms of her record, so that when the time came, and she crossed the ten-year threshold, she'd be ready. But that kind of singular focus is rare. A lot of attorneys, including people like me,

simply never pursued it. I'll be candid: I was never particularly good at playing the political game that getting on the bench requires, so it was never a realistic path for me personally. Part of that was economic. And the grind of getting there is real: the bar association work, the community involvement, the vetting process. And the environment isn't always welcoming. So I think it's a combination of economics, temperament, and the fact that, frankly, our parents mostly wanted us to be doctors. The good news is, I think more young Filipino American lawyers are starting to see the bench as a viable and attractive path.

**AP:** *You still serve on the LACBA Judicial Appointments Committee. What do you wish more young Filipino American lawyers understood about what it actually takes to get on the bench?*

**MA:** You have to build your name in the community, and not just through your legal work. When your name comes up in a vetting committee, people need to know who you are. If they've served with you on a bar association committee, if they've seen you at events, if they've had any chance to observe how you operate with other people, that is what they're drawing on. If I've worked alongside you on some PABA committee and you were impossible to deal with, a huge ego who wouldn't let anyone else in the room, that tells me something about your judicial temperament. So get involved. Show up. Be someone people can genuinely vouch for, not just as a lawyer, but as a person.

**AP:** *What do you want PABA and the Foundation to look like in another fifty years?*

**MA:** Our model has always been SCCLA [*the Southern California Chinese Lawyers Association -Ed.*], because they've been at it longer and they have real institutional resources. I think the PABA and the Foundation should be doing more in the community beyond scholarships. Legal clinics. Small business support. Helping Filipino entrepreneurs who can't afford outside counsel get their basic legal house in order. The Chinese and Korean communities are much tighter internally than we are, and their business leaders come to their bar associations naturally. We haven't cracked that yet. I personally broke through some of it by becoming outside counsel to Seafood City and Island Pacific, but I didn't get nearly as deep into the Filipino business community as I should have. That's the frontier for the next generation. I'd also push the next generation of PABA members to branch out beyond our own organization. Join the judicial appointments committee of another bar. Serve on a leadership committee somewhere where you're the only Filipino in the room.

**AP:** *Last question: As PABA turns 50, what's the achievement you're proudest of, and what concerns you about where the organization goes from here?*

**MA:** I'm actually not too worried right now. I like the current leadership. Their heads and hearts are in the right place. What I do worry about is the current political environment trying to diminish what we do as "illegal DEI." As for what I'm proudest of, it's really two things: the improvement in Filipino American representation on the bench, and the elevation of the Filipino American lawyer in the eyes of the broader legal community. When I joined PABA, the perception was that we were a collection of plaintiff's attorneys and small retail practitioners. We've moved well beyond that. Seeing

Filipino American lawyers at the top studios, at major firms, in the judiciary: that is the real achievement, and it is continuing.

**AP:** *Mel, thank you. This was everything I hoped it would be.*

**MA:** Not sure I'm worthy of being the first, but I'll take it.

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*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity. It is the first in PABA's oral history series commemorating the organization's 50th anniversary.*