

PABA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT — INTERVIEW NO. 2

The First:

A Conversation with Judge Mel Red Recaña

Conducted by Arnold Pamplona • March 24, 2026 • Los Angeles Superior Court

I'll be honest about something: I don't know Judge Mel Red Recaña the way I know some of my longtime PABA colleagues. I know him the way most people in PABA know him, by reputation, by legend, and through his son, Judge Julian Recaña, who has been a friend and colleague of mine for years. But sitting across from him in Julian's chambers on a Tuesday afternoon in March 2026, I understood pretty quickly why the legend exists.

Judge Recaña was born in Guinobatan, Albay, in the Philippines, and came to the United States in 1968. He worked a rate clerk's job at the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, watched jury trials at the courthouse for months just to absorb the craft, and then, after a chance meeting at the home of G. Monty Manibog Sr. following a car accident, learned that a Philippine-trained lawyer could petition the California State Bar to sit for the bar exam. He did that, citing a 1920 Philippine Supreme Court case called *In re Shoop*, which established that Philippine jurisprudence is grounded in English common law. The argument was elegant in its simplicity: if an American judge could practice law in the Philippines because of that common law foundation, then a Filipino lawyer ought to be able to do the same thing in reverse. The State Bar agreed. He passed the bar in 1974.

What followed was a career of firsts. He became the first Filipino American deputy district attorney in Los Angeles County under DA John Van de Kamp. On June 13, 1981, Philippine Independence Day weekend, Governor Jerry Brown swore him in before more than a thousand people gathered at MacArthur Park, making him the first Filipino American judge in the United States. He went on to become Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles Municipal Court, chairman of the Municipal Court Judges Association, a director of the California Judges Association, and president of the California Asian Judges Association. Unable to attend Harvard's Kennedy School of Government because the rules would have allowed the governor to declare his seat vacant, he helped engineer the passage of California's Judges Sabbatical Leave Law and then went to Harvard. He received his master's in public administration in 1993. He presided over high-profile cases, including the 2022 ruling ordering Kevin Spacey to pay nearly \$31 million to the makers of House of Cards. And in 2015, he swore in his own son, Julian, as a Los Angeles Superior Court judge, appointed, like his father, by Governor Jerry Brown.

Judge Recaña officially retired on January 6, 2025, after more than 43 years on the bench. He now serves as an assigned judge. We sat down to talk about what it meant to be the first, what he built along the way, and what he hopes comes next for the Filipino American legal community PABA has spent fifty years serving.

— Arnold Pamplona



Arnold Pamplona interviews retired Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Mel Red Recaña in the courtroom of Judge Julian C. Recaña, Los Angeles Superior Court, March 24, 2026.

Arnold Pamplona: *You came to the United States in 1968 and ended up working for the Southern Pacific Railroad. That's a long way from a judgeship. What were those early years like, and when did you start to believe that a legal career in America was possible?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: Two reasons inspired me to come here. First, my older brother Jaime was a Fulbright-Hays scholar. He went to Kansas State for his master's and then came back to finish his doctorate at the University of Michigan. He kept telling me there were tremendous opportunities here. The second motivation was a movie. I saw *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Gregory Peck won an Oscar for Best Actor. For the first time, I really understood what a jury trial was, and I thought, "I can do that. I want to do that." So, I came. When I arrived, gas cost only ten cents a gallon. You could buy a Volkswagen for \$2,000 and a house for \$35,000. In any event, I ended up at the Southern Pacific Railroad Company as a Rate Clerk. Before that, while I was looking for work, I would get up every morning, get dressed, went to the courthouse, and just

watched trials all day. I did that for months. Then I had a temporary job at the Bank of California for about six months at \$50 a week, and then Southern Pacific. I dreamed of taking the bar exam. But how could I? I was Philippine-trained. Then, by accident, I was rear-ended. A friend suggested I go see Monty Manibog, Darren's father, because he was a Filipino lawyer. So, I went to his home one evening, we discussed the case, and Monty said, Mel, I heard you were a lawyer. I said, yes, in the Philippines. He said, you know, you can take the bar exam here. I said, really? And that started everything.

Arnold Pamplona: *You were the first Philippine-trained lawyer to successfully petition the California State Bar to sit for the bar exam without attending an American law school. What was the argument, and did you know at the time that you were setting a precedent?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: The case I cited was *In re Shoop*, and the citation is 41 Philippines 213, a 1920 Philippine Supreme Court case. The Court concluded that Philippine jurisprudence is based on the principles of English common law, as modified by local customs, and the opinion was written by an American associate justice, Thomas H. Street, who was serving on the Philippine Supreme Court at the time. My argument was essentially this: if an American can go to the Philippines and practice law there because it is a common law jurisdiction, then why can't a Filipino lawyer do the same way in the United States? I filed the application, cited the case, and they accepted it. At the time, my focus was entirely on passing the bar. But as soon as I passed, I realized the community was excited. Every weekend, I had to attend some events as an inspirational speaker. The Filipino American community had its first Philippine-trained lawyer who had passed the California Bar Exam without attending an American law school. So, I was almost everywhere. And looking back, yes, it opened the door for others.

Arnold Pamplona: *Before the judgeship, you were the first Filipino American deputy district attorney in Los Angeles County. What was it like being the only Filipino American face in that office?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: After I passed the bar, I worked with Monty Manibog on immigration, divorce, and personal injury cases. But I said, Monty, I want to try cases. He referred me to two judges who could appoint me to represent defendants ineligible for representation by the public defender. I started handling criminal cases and went to trial constantly. Then there was an opening for a deputy district attorney. I said, I want to be a prosecutor. There was an examination, and then an interview with District Attorney Van de Kamp. He asked me about my experience in public speaking. I said, as a matter of fact, during the last election, I campaigned. He asked for whom? I said, unfortunately, I campaigned for your opponent. I campaigned for Vince Bugliosi, the man who prosecuted Charles Manson. Van de Kamp and his Assistant DA Johnny Cochran laughed. Van de Kamp said, "No wonder Vince lost." And then he hired me! My first six months were in Torrance. I had a supervising DA who was basically my babysitter, making sure I was okay. I kept plugging along. Was it intimidating being the only Filipino American in the office? No. I was just excited. The one thing I struggled with was my accent. I would stand up and say, Your Honor, People is ready. And my supervisor would remind me that "People" is plural. It was a lot of fun.

Arnold Pamplona: *When you were at the DA's office, were you thinking about the bench?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: No. My plan was to go into private practice. I didn't think about going to the bench. I thought, how could I ever get there? But then these things happened. My son, Julian, who is with us during this interview, put it well: his father kind of "Forrest Gumped" his way through life. I got rear-ended and met Monty. I campaigned for the wrong candidate and got hired by the right one. Luck is preparation meeting opportunity, and somehow, at each turn, the opportunity found me.

Arnold Pamplona: *On June 13, 1981, Philippine Independence Day weekend, Governor Jerry Brown swore you in at MacArthur Park as the first Filipino American judge in the United States. What do you remember about that day?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: More than a thousand people attended. The community organized everything: Consul General Manding Fernandez, Joe Lauchengco, Dr. Landero, Alberto Mendoza, Dolphs Aguayon, Dr. Malapaz, Dr. Quivedo, and many others whose names unfortunately I cannot remember at this moment. I am so grateful for all of them. And then Gov. Jerry Brown came. Knowing the historical implication of his official act, he was ecstatic in swearing me in as the first Filipino American Judge in the United States.

Arnold Pamplona: *Joe Lauchengco is a legend in PABA. How did you know him, and what do you remember about him?*

JUDGE MEL RED RECANA: When I passed the Bar, Joe and Monty were the only two practicing lawyers in the United States. Both were Loyola Law School graduates. Joe also has an MPA from USC. Monty would later become the first Filipino American mayor in the United States. Joe was a fearless advocate for the underdog and "lost" causes. He was the charismatic leader of Browns for Brown. Along with Monty, Alex Esclamado, Philippine News Publisher and Editor, they were the Filipino American community's powerful voice for the licensure and employment of Filipino American professionals, for equal opportunity for the Filipino American community, and equal participation in the great task of nation-building. We reap the fruits of their labor.

Arnold Pamplona: *Who else was at that table?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: Joe, Monty, Congressman Raul Daza, Alberto Mendoza, Lorenzo Miranda, Noni Advincula, Leo Legaspi, Eric Aguiluz, Jerry Reyes, and a few others.

Arnold Pamplona: *PABA officially became PABA in 1986, when Cas Tolentino reorganized and renamed the group. There has been some documentation about tension in the Filipino American legal community at that time between the Philippine-trained attorneys and the American-trained attorneys. Do you remember any of that?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: By 1986, I was already a judge. I had been appointed in May of 1981. But I could see where the tension would come from. On one side, you had the Philippine-trained attorneys. On the other hand, you had the locally born and educated

lawyers. There was some hesitation in bringing themselves together. It was not anything to disparage either side, no hatred, nothing like that. It was more of a cultural issue. But I will say, by that point, I was genuinely excited about what I was seeing. This new generation did not have the cultural barriers we had. The door for their success was wide open.

Arnold Pamplona: *How did you see your own role in relation to the Filipino American legal community at that time?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: More of an elder statesman. I saw a very bright future for this generation. They are full-blooded Americans. They got their education here. They are courageous. They know what to do and claim what belongs to them. I told my son, Julian, that the only thing missing is a congressman. We have mayors and city council members. But what we need is a congressman. I don't see any cultural barrier anymore. And I remember saying this at a PABA event recently. I used to have difficulty filling up a dining table in Chinatown. Look at us now.

Arnold Pamplona: *Let's talk about Harvard. The rules would not let you attend the Kennedy School without risking your seat. How did a judge end up engineering an act of the California legislature to solve that problem?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: Harvard had a mid-career program that would bring in representatives from around the world who qualified and passed its tough examinations for a master's in public administration. I got the invitation, and I always wanted to go to Harvard. So, I asked my presiding judge, and he told me the rule: if you are gone for more than 90 days, the governor can declare your seat vacant and appoint someone else. So I asked him, given that he had been the mayor of Montebello, what should I do? He said, Mel, if you don't have the law, then make one. He said, get someone in Sacramento and push for a judges' sabbatical law. I went to a Filipino community activist in the supervisor's office, smart and politically savvy. I told him to relay the following to Speaker Willie Brown: if I go for a year, the court can appoint a commissioner to take my post at 75 percent of a judge's salary. When I return, I will bring additional knowledge that would benefit the court. Willie Brown liked the idea. The law passed. I went to Harvard. I got my master's in public administration in 1993. But there was more to it than just Harvard. I had a plan. I said to myself, I cannot become presiding judge if I am just one of the average judges. What would I tell my fellow judges? Why should we elect you? And then I heard about the Institute for Court Management at the National Center for State Courts in Williamsburg, Virginia, which is considered the "Harvard" for Court Administrators. I attended. There were about thirty or forty people, mostly court administrators. Only two of us were judges. At the end, my classmates selected me as class valedictorian. I was sworn in as a Fellow of the Institute for Court Management at the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. So, when I ran for presiding judge, I could say: I have my MPA from Harvard; I am a fellow of the Institute for Court Management. I think I am qualified to lead this court.

Arnold Pamplona: *You served as Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles Municipal Court in 1996 and 1997, and as chairman of the Municipal Court Judges Association as the courts were consolidating. Did you feel a responsibility to use those leadership positions to bring more Filipino and Asian American judges to the bench?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: Absolutely, yes. And now we have Assistant Presiding Judge Ricardo Ocampo as the incoming Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court, the largest superior court in the world. Can you imagine that? I am ecstatic. He followed in my footsteps as presiding judge, and when people say, Mel, you were the first to do that at the Municipal Court, I think of it as another step forward by the Filipino American Community. We have California Supreme Court Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye, Judge Patrick Bumatay of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. There are 29 Superior Court Judges in California (13 in LA, 9 in San Francisco Bay Area, 2 in San Diego, 2 in Orange, 1 in San Bernardino, 1 in Riverside, 1 in Ventura excluding 3 retirees Tom Ong, Rafael Ongkiko and me), and California Attorney General Rob Bonta. There is almost nothing left for us to accomplish as far as judges are concerned, except the U.S. Supreme Court, which probably will not happen in my lifetime. But a congressman, that we can and still need to work on.

Arnold Pamplona: *In 2015, Governor Brown, the same Governor Brown who swore you in, appointed your son Julian to the bench, and you swore him in. What was that moment like?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: Oh my God. What really amazes me, what I still cannot fully believe, is that he was appointed 34 years after my appointment, by the same governor. The same governor! That will never happen again in anyone's lifetime. A governor only serves two terms. The only reason it was possible was a constitutional amendment that allowed Brown to serve again. That moment, as far as I am concerned, is the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. And the advice I gave Julian was simple: stay out of trouble.

Arnold Pamplona: *You presided over some significant cases, including the 2022 ruling ordering Kevin Spacey to pay nearly \$31 million to the makers of House of Cards. How do you think about the relationship between high-profile cases and the everyday work of a trial court judge?*

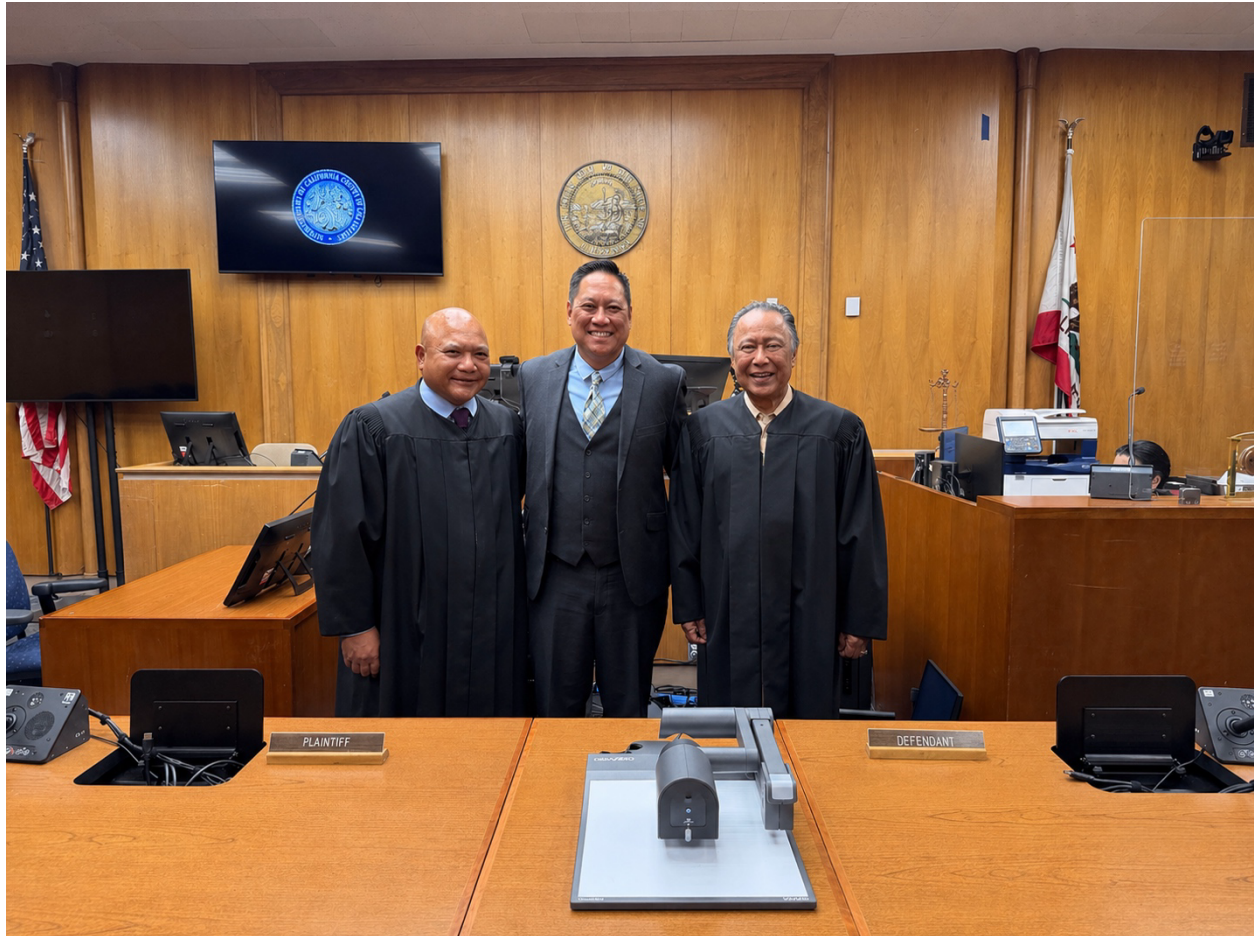
Judge Mel Red Recaña: You might pay a little more attention to high-profile cases to make sure you get the rulings right. But really, that is what you should be doing for every case. It comes back to preparation and dedication. When I was still sitting, I would work every evening until eleven or midnight. You try to avoid being reversed on appeal, not just because it is a high-profile case, but because it is your job to be fair to everyone who comes to your court. And I always had in the back of my mind that if I blow this, it is not just going to affect me. It may affect my community. So, I had to be absolutely sure. Big case, small case, every time.

Arnold Pamplona: *You retired on January 6, 2025, after more than 43 years on the bench. What were you thinking about when you walked out of the courthouse for the last time?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: I thought, “I am going to miss this job.” And I sure do. Which is why I am now serving as an assigned judge. When a judge is unable to serve, I can step in and handle cases for a week or more. Not every retired judge gets to do that. The unwritten first qualification is that you have never been disciplined by the Commission on Judicial Performance. I fulfilled all the requirements for an Assigned Judge. I am glad still to be of service.

Arnold Pamplona: *What does it take today to make it to the bench? What advice do you have for younger attorneys who are thinking about it?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: Preparation. Try cases. When I say preparation, I mean really knowing the rules of evidence, reading all the relevant decisions in your cases. And you have got to love it. Because if you are not going to do all these preparations, you should get another profession. You are serving people who have put their future, their money, their entire resources in your hands. It is a very demanding profession. But if you love the challenge, it is a very exciting profession. I find it exciting every single day. And yes, community involvement matters enormously. One of the things the governor looks for is whether you are out there in the community. The governor is going to appoint you, and every appointment he makes has to resonate. He wants someone who helps others, who is respectful, who is doing their best, and who always acts with good sense and sound judgment. PABA is a place where people see who you are, not just as a lawyer, but as a person. It is also our training ground for good advocacy and professional advancement.



From left: Judge Julian C. Recaña, Arnold Pamplona, and retired Judge Mel Red Recaña in Judge Julian Recaña's courtroom, Los Angeles Superior Court, following the interview, March 24, 2026.

Arnold Pamplona: *PABA is turning fifty. When you think about what this organization has meant to the Filipino American legal community, what stands out to you?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: I see PABA as the repository of the best of the Filipinos when it comes to law and its practice. And what excites me now is that I do not have to worry about the generational gap or the cultural gap anymore. They are full-blooded Americans. They know what they have to do and claim what belongs to them. I attended a PABA event recently, and I saw all these people, tables filled, and I thought about that dining table in Chinatown. I cannot believe how far we have come.

Arnold Pamplona: *What do you want your legacy to be, not just as a judge, but as a Filipino American who helped make this path visible for everyone who came after you?*

Judge Mel Red Recaña: I just want to be simply remembered as someone who tried his best. I am proud to be a Filipino. I gave whatever energy and effort I had. There were failures and there were successes, but I did what I had to do, and God was with me all this time. My objective was never to open doors just for myself. It was to take the whole

community with me. I know I have my shortcomings, my defects. But I did my best. And I hope the next generation will be a lot better than my generation. I can see it now. I think it will be.

AP: *Because of the doors you opened.*

MRR: I hope so. I hope they were really open.

AP: *They were. Thank you, Judge. It was an honor.*

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity. It is the second in PABA's oral history series commemorating the organization's 50th anniversary. The interview was conducted in the courtroom of Judge Julian C. Recaña, Los Angeles Superior Court.