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Special Section

PERSONALITY PROFILE

JOSEPH R. CERRELL

After 40 Years in the Field, He's 'King' of Political Consultants

By KENNETH OFGANG, Staff Writer

Joe Cerrell is slowing down....sort of.

At age 71, and as he reaches the end of a year in which he had three open heart surgeries, he has relinquished control of the company he built into what he says is the largest privately held public relations firm in the United States. But he still goes into the office every day, including Saturday and Sunday, when he's not traveling to various parts of Europe and North America, which is often.

"I don't play golf, I don't play tennis," Cerrell notes. His days, he says, are filled by "work and grandchildren."

He adds recognition as MetNews Person of the Year to his long list of awards and achievements.

While Cerrell Associates, Inc.—which recently celebrated its 40th anniversary—has broad interests in public relations, communications, and lobbying, the firm's founder and still chairman/chief executive officer still takes great pride in his pioneering role in bringing professional campaign tactics to judicial elections.

Cerrell credits retired Court of Appeal Presiding Justice Harry Low, now a private judge in San Francisco, with having first described him as "king of the judges."

It was 1978, and about 30 judges, mostly appointees of then-Gov. Jerry Brown, were facing election challenges around the state. Cerrell took on representation of nine candidates in Los Angeles County in that 1978 cycle, including six incumbents, two candidates for open seats, and one challenger—Ronald Schoenberg, who ran against Los Angeles Municipal Court Judge Richard Moore—and won every race.

Low, president of the California Judges Association at the time, recalls an era when judges were under challenge for their actual or perceived positions on cutting-edge issues like school desegregation and criminal justice.

Low had headed the California Democratic Council, a liberal activist group, before being appointed to the San Francisco Municipal Court by then-Gov. Pat Brown in 1967, just before Brown left office.

He knew Cerrell from his days as a top adviser and strategist for Brown, and thought he had the "talents and skills" to advise judges on politics, along with the "finesse" to avoid crossing the line separating judges from politicians, Low remembers.

Meeting with CJA members, Cerrell says he realized just how little many of these judges knew about politics.

He explains that Pat Brown, whom he says he reveres to this day, appointed a number

of politically sophisticated judges, many of whom played active roles in Brown's campaigns. He cites Joseph Wapner—later presiding judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court before starring in "The People's Court" on television—and the late Vincent Dalsimer, who became a Court of Appeal justice.

Jerry Brown, on the other hand, appointed a number of judges who had been active in bar groups but had little experience with the political process and were totally unprepared to run in an election, Cerrell says.

Hundreds of Candidates

In the ensuing years, Cerrell has represented hundreds of judicial candidates, many of whom retained him in expectations of challenges, some of which never came. Before the trial courts in the county were consolidated, Cerrell's reputation among, and rapport with, the bench officers was such that several municipal court judges who hired him to help them move up to the Superior Court found themselves unopposed.

His success led to the firm being hired by judicial candidates in Riverside, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and San Bernardino counties as well. It was also retained in three different election cycles to run campaigns on behalf of all incumbent justices of this district's Court of Appeal running in retention elections.

While Cerrell Associates unsuccessfully represented an incumbent Superior Court judge in San Francisco in 1996, it had never lost an incumbent judge in a countywide race in Los Angeles until last year when Dzintra Janavs—who was subsequently appointed to a vacant seat on the court by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger—lost to Lynn D. Olson.

"We were absolutely blindsided," Cerrell says, when Olson—who had been an inactive lawyer, working in private business, for most of the past 10 years—snared most of the all-important slate mailers in a campaign whose total cost ran to about \$120,000.

Once locked out of the slate mailers, Janavs, who raised about one-third of what her opponent spent, had to spend most of her money on newspaper advertising, generally viewed as far less cost-effective than slate mail, or "blackmail" as Cerrell calls it, which costs only pennies for each voter reached.

"[Janavs] didn't want to work at it," Cerrell comments. "She'd never been in politics."

In some respects, the race was similar to his San Francisco defeat 10 years ago. Cerrell's candidate, Judge Douglas Moore Jr., was a recent appointee of a Republican governor, trying to hold on to office in the state's most Democratic county.

His opponent, Kevin McCarthy, was an openly gay deputy public defender endorsed by the Democratic Party; while the city's gay community had come into its own politically, it included few judges, and the race became a cause for many. McCarthy, with backing from most of the local political establishment, got 70 percent of the vote.

That Cerrell, who describes himself as a political moderate, managed campaigns for Janavs and Moore illustrates another side of his persona—the ability to form relationships across ideological lines.

"I'll work for Republicans for city council, board of supervisors, or judicial [offices]," he explains. But when it comes to the top of the ticket, he says, "I still consider myself a partisan Democrat."

Close to Gore

He remains in close contact with former Vice President Al Gore, who has not ruled out a presidential bid in 2008, but whom Cerrell says he does not expect to run this time.

Cerrell worked for Gore in both his 1988 and 2000 campaigns.

His Democratic partisanship, he says, led him recently to turn down a request to serve on former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's presidential campaign exploratory committee, he explains. His refusal was despite the fact that Cerrell is vice chairman of the National Italian American Foundation and admits to some fondness for fellow Italian American Giuliani.

Cerrell's fellow Persons of the Year, both Republicans, are effusive in their praise of him.

Paul Turner has told the story to fellow judges more times than he can recall.

It begins in 1984, when he learned from a MetNews reporter, soliciting his comment, that a San Fernando Valley lawyer, Paula Gentile, had filed to run against him for the Los Angeles Municipal Court seat to which then-Gov. George Deukmejian had recently appointed him.

When he reported this distressing development to his Republican patrons, they unhesitatingly pointed him towards Cerrell.

Turner, who was active in GOP politics before his appointment to the bench, says he had no qualms about hiring a partisan Democrat as his consultant—but did so only after talking to the late Bill Roberts, a GOP advisor who played a major role in Ronald Reagan's campaigns for governor and president.

"Roberts told me that 'Joe Cerrell understands judicial campaigns better than anyone,' and he was right," Turner comments.

Lobbied For Schiavelli

George Schiavelli is a beneficiary of the bipartisan selection process for federal district judges in California, and was among the easiest of President Bush's nominees to confirm. Cerrell proudly acknowledges that he lobbied Democratic members of the nominating committee.

"He's a good guy," Cerrell says of Schiavelli, noting his service on the Los Angeles Superior Court and his reputation as a trial and appellate lawyer before he became a judge. His Italian heritage also earns points in the Cerrell book, the consultant says with a smile.

The judge returns the praise.

"I just cannot thank Joe Cerrell enough for his help...in getting me to know Sen. [Dianne] Feinstein and Sen. [Barbara] Boxer," both of whom recommended him for the appointment, Schiavelli says. "He is just a fabulous guy. I think he deserves an honor separate from everybody else."

Besides his skills as a lobbyist and consultant, the judge says, Cerrell is "a fascinating man, a giving person, committed to the Italian community, just one of the finest people I've ever known."

Cerrell will not talk about his efforts on behalf of a nominee who may be more controversial, Orange Superior Court Judge James Rogan, whose nomination is still pending. But Rogan is not so reticent.

"I would never have been nominated for the federal bench if it were not for Joe Cerrell," the Republican ex-congressman, who was one of the prosecutors at the impeachment trial of President Clinton, says bluntly.

"Joe was one of the first guys to go to bat for me when my name first surfaced," Rogan says. "Many people thought I had the chance of a tired dime, but Joe on his own called people on [the Democratic] side of the aisle who respect his judgment."

Rogan explains that he and Cerrell have been friends for 20 years, going back to the days when the judge—who served in the Department of Commerce for a time, then came back to California to practice law, after losing his House seat to Democrat Adam Schiff in 2000—was a deputy district attorney with a keen interest in politics, and a Democrat.

A self-described “political history junkie,” Rogan says he and Cerrell had hours of discussions about California political figures while Cerrell was lobbying him during Rogan’s years in the state Assembly and then in Congress.

Both men acknowledge that it was Cerrell who arranged for Rogan to meet Pope John Paul II prior to the 2000 election. “I think Schiff is still mad at me,” Cerrell quips.

The secret to Cerrell’s success, Rogan says, is that “people trust him.” Cerrell, he notes, is “from the old school where his word is his bond.”

Expected to Teach

Through all of this, Cerrell frankly admits that there were some fortunate turns along the way, without which he might be the high school teacher he expected to be. (After dropping out of graduate school twice, he completed work on his credential in 1965. He jokingly calls it his “insurance policy,” while noting that his secretary is better paid than a starting high school teacher.)

Take a high school debate tournament in the early 1950s.

Cerrell, a senior at Los Angeles High School at the time—his family had moved to town two years earlier—was planning to attend Colorado College. But some of the judges at the debate tournament were attending USC, and convinced the budding politician that he would do well at the local institution.

Thus began an association with the university that has lasted more than 50 years. Cerrell is an active alumnus and donor and taught in the political science department for 15 years, and his firm represents the school.

(Pepperdine, where he holds the title of distinguished visiting professor, and Loyola Marymount universities are clients as well.)

It wasn’t particularly easy to be a Democrat at USC when Cerrell got there, he says, the school administration and faculty reflecting an outlook so conservative that some liberals, including U.S. Sen. Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota—to whom Cerrell later became close—had been banned from speaking on campus.

The energetic Cerrell founded the Trojan Democrats, which quickly became a vehicle for the ambitions of Jesse Unruh, who later became speaker of the Assembly and state treasurer, while losing races for governor and for mayor of Los Angeles in between.

Unruh, who died in 1987 and whose witticisms on politics are still frequently quoted, was elected in an Assembly district including the USC campus in 1958.

By the 1955-56 school year, Cerrell had hit upon an idea whose time had come—the political reception. The young activist would invite national Democratic figures to stop at USC and meet with students and local Democrats, often scheduling events on or near weekends when the guest’s favorite college football team was playing USC at the Coliseum.

Participants included Humphrey; Democratic National Committee Chairman Paul Butler (an Indianan whom Cerrell called after guessing he might be coming out for the USC-Notre Dame game); Sen. Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, the 1956 Democratic vice presidential nominee; New Jersey Gov. Robert Meyner; and Adlai Stevenson, the Illinois governor who was the party’s presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956 and later

ambassador to the UN.

One of the visitors was to play a significant role in Joe Cerrell's future, and it almost didn't happen, he recalls.

A senator from the East was coming to town in May 1959 and wanted to speak at the campus, Cerrell explains. The problem was, he was coming during USC's "Stop Week"—the week preceding final exams when campus groups were not permitted to sponsor events of any kind.

But the senator's staff was somewhat insistent, so Cerrell went ahead.

"I got in a little bit of trouble," he says with a serious expression. "But not too much."

Which was a good thing, because he had gone out on the limb for a man he knew very little about.

Kennedy Connection

When he was first contacted, he says, he had to ask, "What state is he from?" The answer was Massachusetts; the senator, who had just been elected to his second term the year before, was John F. Kennedy.

The two hit it off immediately. Kennedy came back to Los Angeles to accept the Democratic presidential nomination at the Sports Arena the following year, and Cerrell was with him as a personal aide on every one of his California trips after that.

"I like to play the 'what if' game with my kids," he says. What if, for example, the Democrats hadn't won the 1958 elections?

California Republicans had long dominated the state. Democrats had made gains during the Depression and the subsequent war, but by 1958 all but one of the officials elected statewide were Republicans, and the GOP dominated both houses of the Legislature.

But an economic recession, a ballot measure that would have made California a right-to-work state, and the unpopular decision by Republican Sen. William Knowland to run for governor, forcing Gov. Goodwin Knight to run for Knowland's Senate seat, combined to create a Democratic tide.

Democrats swept every race except secretary of state. The winners included two men to whom Cerrell would remain close—Edmund G. Brown Sr., who had been elected attorney general four years earlier and now became governor, and Stanley Mosk, a Superior Court judge from Los Angeles who succeeded Brown as attorney general.

Cerrell had dropped out of graduate school to work for the Brown campaign. He was assistant campaign manager for Southern California, under Unruh—who was also running his own campaign for the Assembly. (He beat a 17-year incumbent in a close race, after having lost twice previously.)

Gets a Break

Having played a major role in the campaign, Unruh wanted to be the state Democratic chairman. But Brown wanted Bill Munnell, the Assembly Democratic leader—and later a Los Angeles Superior Court judge—to be state chair because the garrulous Unruh "wasn't the right image," as Cerrell tells it.

Cerrell recalls being present at a meeting where Munnell delivered that news to Unruh.

Cerrell explains:

"Unruh reels in disgust. He really wants this...thing. He gets up and he says, 'OK, but I get to name the executive director.' Munnell, who was so happy...he's going to be both

the Assembly majority leader and the Democratic party chairman, says “Whatever you want, Jesse.’ And Jesse turns to me, I just happen to be up in Sacramento, and he said ‘Joe’s going to be the executive director of the Democratic Party.’ Had I not been there, maybe he wouldn’t have thought of me.”

So Cerrell served as executive director until after the 1960 national convention, when his career took another turn. An intraparty struggle led Brown to dump attorney Paul Ziffren as national committeeman and replace him with Mosk—who promptly named Cerrell as his executive assistant.

Mosk—whom Cerrell describes as “a man of absolute integrity”—accepted the party post, with the understanding that there would be a complete separation between the Attorney General’s Office and the party.

So Cerrell worked for Mosk, but out of a separate office, paid for by the party. “But I was always proud to tell people I worked for Attorney General Stanley Mosk,” he says.

Mosk gave up the DNC slot after the 1964 convention and was replaced by Eugene Wyman, a Beverly Hills attorney who later teamed up with famed show business lawyer Gregson Bautzer to form the now-dissolved law firm which carried their names.

Cerrell stayed on under Wyman until 1966, when he made the fateful decision to launch his own consulting firm.

He started the company with two partners, Charles Winner and Don Simonian. The firm was called Golden State Consultants because, in Cerrell’s words, “if the thing didn’t get off the ground, we didn’t want our names out front.”

The firm did work for the Democratic Party, with which it shared office space in exchange for services rendered, and for two billable clients—Pacific Bell Telephone Company and Simonian’s erstwhile employer, the now-defunct Pacific Southwest Airlines.

Times were lean, receipts totaling less than \$12,000 the first year. (Cerrell Associates probably exceeded \$6 million in revenues for the past year, its chairman notes.)

“I remind my wife that we never missed a payroll,” he says. “She reminds me that we didn’t always cash our own checks.”

Sole Owner

By 1968, the firm was sufficiently successful to have been renamed Cerrell, Winner & Associates. Cerrell and his wife Lee, whom he married in 1963, became sole owners after Winner—who founded Winner & Associates in 1975—left and became a Cerrell competitor.

Earlier this year, Cerrell Associates completed a reorganization that its chairman says he had been thinking about for several years. He and his wife sold six-sevenths of the company to six of its employees, including Hal Dash, a former newscaster who has been with Cerrell for nearly 30 years and is now the company president, and Steve Bullock, who is the chief financial officer and Lee Cerrell’s son from a previous marriage.

Cerrell, however, remains head of the company and he and his wife still own its spacious Larchmont Boulevard headquarters.

The company brochure continues to list judicial campaigns as one of CAI’s six practice areas, along with transportation, environment and energy, land use, education, and health care, although the two campaigns it ran last year—those of Janavs and Hayden Zacky—accounted for less than one percent of its revenues.

The firm doesn’t actually solicit judicial campaign business, Cerrell explains. If

candidates want him to represent them, he says, “they know where we are.”

That was the case with Zacky, who used a different consultant in the primary but was unhappy with falling short of a majority in a three-way race after spending over \$70,000.

He hired Cerrell for the runoff and collected 64 percent of the vote in November.

Zacky, who was subsequently appointed to the court by the governor and is now trying misdemeanors in Lancaster, calls Cerrell “the quintessential professional.”

In retrospect, he probably could have won the runoff without a consultant, Zacky says. But he has no regrets about his choice, he explains.

“Embarking on this whole election process is very scary,” he posits. “It’s like driving in a snow storm. If you don’t know where you’re going, you’d better have someone like Joe Cerrell with you.”

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