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No Red Tape

Latino-owned boutique Andrade Gonzalez LLP tries to circumvent big law bureaucracy.

By Matthew Sanderson
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Slowly but surely over the last five years, litigation boutique firm Andrade Gonzalez LLP, which has been involved in recent high-profile legal work for the Los Angeles Unified School District, continues to add more space and staff to its penthouse floor office in the historic Banks-Huntley Building at 634 Spring Street in downtown.

Profile

On Oct. 4, Andrade Gonzalez celebrated its five-year anniversary with a party at its office. It takes pride in being primarily Latino-owned, which is also part of its vision.

“I think that clients are looking for talented, diverse law firms to represent them in significant litigations in Los Angeles County and California, and we do that, with the technology and talent,” said Sean A. Andrade, the firm’s founding and managing partner. “Technology allows our talented attorneys to do what only the big firms could do in the old days.”

The firm handles white-collar litigation, government investigations, catastrophic injuries and wrongful death, employment class actions and wrongful terminations, commercial litigation, complex tort litigation, insurance coverage, intellectual property, and real estate law.

The firm’s lawyers also donate annual pro bono time to assisting those in need.

Andrade and Henry H. Gonzalez, co-founder and named partner, met while working as partners at boutique firm Baute & Tidus



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From left, Stephen Masterson, Sean Andrade, Arturo Padilla, Henry Gonzalez, Andre Bates and Damian Martinez of Andrade Gonzalez LLP.

LLP in downtown, now known as Baute Crochetiere & Hartley LLP. Gonzalez worked there for eight years and Andrade for five.

The firm hired a partner who represented a large multinational finance and insurance corporation, and Andrade, at the time, was representing a client who was adverse to the corporation. Due to the conflict of interest, Andrade and Gonzalez left and planned to start their new law firm over a weekend, launching it immediately thereafter.

“We learned a lot there,” Andrade said. “They helped kind of sculpt our litigation practice and the way we approached cases, being client-driven and always finding efficient ways to win for our clients.”

Prior to Baute & Tidus, Andrade worked at Baker & Hostetler LLP

for eight years as an associate. While there, Andrade said there were a lot of matters he could not bring in due to philosophical conflicts, power shifts and people stealing his credit.

When he met Mark Baute, Andrade saw the opportunity that a boutique firm presented: to still do great work with great clients and lawyers.

“He is super charismatic and a great lawyer,” Andrade said. “He seemed like a really good business manager, and I felt I could learn so much from him and not have all that red tape.”

In addition, Andrade was regional president of the Hispanic National Bar Association for four to five years. He is also on the host committee for the California Rural Legal Assistance. First living in El Centro then moving to

Santa Maria with his family, Andrade grew up in the small town environment of the Central Coast.

His father, Adrian, is a lawyer there and works pro bono for farmworkers and low-income rural communities. His father worked for California Rural Legal Assistance for “a long time” and had been chairman of its board, Andrade added.

“I see that in our role as a Latino-owned law firm, we should be contributing,” he said.

Gonzalez, who began his career at the Los Angeles office of Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP, said he could immediately see Andrade was smart and driven.

“But what set him apart from other young lawyers I met was that he took the time, from the beginning of a case, to think about both the short-and long-

term strategy,” he said. “He was very much client-focused, and the partners at our firm encouraged that type of creative approach.”

Gonzalez brought Andrade’s leadership as the approach for their new firm. In its first year, it was the duo and one staff member, and by the second year they were at four attorneys and three staffers. Currently they are at eight attorneys and six staff.

Andrade earned his law degree at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and handles litigation and appeals. Gonzalez graduated from Harvard Law School and handles commercial litigation and complex tort matters.

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund bought the Banks-Huntley Building in the 1990s from the city of Los Angeles, Andrade said. Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP used to occupy a space on one of the building’s floors before moving to Bunker Hill with the big firms and banks. The top floor was all storage.

Then, it was renovated and the service organization Youth Policy Institute subleased the firm’s first three offices, and they shared space with other businesses. Next, it took over more space until it filled the entire floor. Once their lease expired, Andrade Gonzalez wrote their own lease.

“We were asking, ‘Can we have another office?’” Andrade said.

Next, the firm brought in partner Stephen Masterson who specializes in insurance recovery on the policyholder side. Partner Andre Bates, Andrade’s mentor at Baker Hostetler, came on to help run the firm’s liability practice, with an emphasis on employment. Partner Damian Martinez,

who Andrade has known since law school, joined this year and handles complex commercial litigation and white-collar investigations.

Partner Arturo Padilla joined two months ago. He’s worked as a defense lawyer on all kinds of litigation, either commercial or product liability. He has also been working on some of the firm’s plaintiff cases in catastrophic injury and wage and hour actions.

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— Henry Gonzalez

“It feels great,” Andrade said. “We’ve added about two lawyers per year.”

Senior attorney Sonia Salinas, past president of the Latina Lawyers Bar Association, also joined the staff along with attorney Jose R. Nuño.

“People aren’t headhunter-picked,” Andrade added. “It’s all personal relationships.”

The firm meets every week to go over all its cases and plan next steps. Andrade said he’s interested in developing strategy early for a case, and in first client meetings, he wants to be thinking about the items of the case and what is the actual story.

“It helps to plan from the beginning,” he said. “A lot of lawyers try to do the opposite.”

Gonzalez added that they constantly think about their cases and about ways to add value to clients through the firm’s work, and they place special emphasis on client communications.

“We answer the phone when our clients call and always respond to their emails, if not within the hour, within a day,” Gonzalez said.

“We give them constant updates because we have found that without that client-focused approach, clients are left guessing about what is going on with their cases and that only adds to their stress,” he added. “Talented lawyers and a hands-on,

client-focused, creative approach is what drives the day-to-day success of our firm and what has made us one of the premier minority-owned firms in Los Angeles.”

Masterson adds the firm’s success is tied to its collegial and cooperative atmosphere.

“The cases we do are usually in uncharted territory,” he said. “There’s a lot of creativity in the firm. I think we come up with angles and ways of looking at cases that you may not get some place else.”

In one of the largest public school litigation cases in the country, Andrade Gonzalez was lead counsel for LAUSD, helping reach a nearly \$140 million settlement with the students of Miramonte Elementary School, who filed a civil lawsuit against the district over its handling of the sexual abuse case of former teacher Mark Berndt. A.M., *a minor v. Los Angeles Unified School*

District, BC484111 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed May 4, 2012).

“We were responsible for all aspects of the case and coverage aspects,” Andrade said.

The firm represented LAUSD in its insurance coverage litigation related to the Miramonte case and won on motion for summary adjudication for a \$19.75 million payment. Andrade said it was the largest check they’ve given to a client on summary judgment on adjudication on defense. *LAUSD v. Ace*, BC593234 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Jan. 16, 2018).

“We’ve given Sean and his firm one of the biggest cases that have ever come to the Los Angeles Unified School District, so we’ve tried him with some very big cases,” said David Holmquist, general counsel for LAUSD. “We’ve always found him to be very understanding of our situation. He provides excellent legal work, and I continue to give high-profile cases to his firm.”

Earlier this year, after the firm was approached with a lawsuit threat on the theft of trade secrets, the attorneys were able to get it quickly dismissed by simply writing a letter, Andrade said. *Barg Shad Enterprises LLC v. Marquez*, BC702473 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed May 4, 2018).

“When I work with them, it’s really a personalized service, meaning it’s not like calling a call center,” said Rene Heredia, executive director of Guadalupe Radio, a nonprofit Catholic radio station in Los Angeles. “They are very unique in that, and I haven’t found that elsewhere.”

For three years, Andrade Gonzalez has worked as outside counsel for the radio station.

“They have attained great results for us,” Heredia added.