



## The Beverly Reid O'Connell Power Lunch program

RELAUNCHED IN A VIRTUAL FORMAT, PROGRAM HELPS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EXPLORE LEGAL CAREERS

Since 2007, the Beverly Reid O'Connell Power Lunch program (named after the program's visionary founder and a beloved former colleague of the Los Angeles Superior Court) has been bringing high school students from the far reaches of our county to our courthouses to learn about constitutional amendments and to explore career options in the law with judges, court staff, and attorneys.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck in March last year at the outset of what would have been a typical Power Lunch season. As it has done every year since the inception of the program, the Power Lunch committee had planned numerous Power Lunches to take place at different courthouses, and attorney and judge volunteers eagerly anticipated welcoming the students at these Power Lunches. Of course, what followed – the closure of courts and schools across the country – was anything but typical. It was heartbreaking to have to cancel all of these in-person Power Lunches due to concerns of rising infection rates and the need to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

When schools resumed in the fall, nearly all students in our county were receiving instruction remotely. As high school teachers and students scrambled to adjust to this new mode of teaching and learning, our Court felt an impetus to do what we could to adapt our community outreach programs accordingly. More than ever before, we saw a need to reach out to students who were at risk of becoming disengaged and disconnected.

Our court's Power Lunch committee soon began its work to find a way to pivot toward virtual Power Lunches. During planning meetings, Judges Beverly Bourne (my co-chair for the L.A. Superior Court Power Lunch committee), Lee Arian, Julie Blackshaw, Marguerite Downing, Maame Frimpong, Alexander Giza, Lynne Hobbs, Wesley Hsu, Andrew Kim, Ann Park, and Maria Puente-Porras brainstormed ideas on how we could transition to remote Power Lunches while preserving the precious and meaningful exchanges between student and attorney/judge participants that are the hallmark of in-person Power Lunches. Judge Downing even created a fact pattern involving a stolen vehicle and stolen library books for an interactive exercise with students designed to spark discussion on the types of evidence necessary to prove intent and knowledge in criminal cases.

Several segments of our traditional, in-person Power Lunches translated well to a virtual setting. For example, at the outset of each in-person Power Lunch, judges and attorneys traditionally introduced themselves, one by one, recounting what sparked their initial interest in the law, their pathway to their current position, what they currently do on a daily basis, and what drives their passion for what they do in the law. It was not difficult to envision how we could just as easily introduce ourselves in a large Zoom room. At the centerpiece of every in-person Power Lunch are the small group discussions, each led by a judge and/or attorney. Again, we could readily foresee how breakout rooms in Zoom could help us achieve the functional



equivalent of small discussion groups. Indeed, at some of our larger in-person Power Lunches, it is sometimes difficult to find physical space to break out into 20 or more groups of 5 to 6 students and attorneys/judges each. Arguably, our ability to send participants into breakout rooms instantaneously on Zoom would make that segment of virtual Power Lunches actually easier than for our traditional, in-person Power Lunches. Once we envisioned what a virtual Power Lunch would look like, the judges of the Power Lunch planning committee set about inviting high schools throughout the community to participate in our inaugural virtual Power Lunch season.

The one missing piece we needed most was technical assistance for virtual Power Lunches – sending out a Zoom link in advance to participants, verifying the identity of and admitting participants into the Zoom room at the outset of each virtual Power Lunch, sending participants into breakout rooms at the appropriate moment each with one judge/attorney leader and an evenly distributed number of students, and bringing us all back together again for a wrap-up at the end. For this, our court turned to our longtime partner for the Beverly Reid O'Connell Power Lunch program, the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles (WLALA).

My cochair for the WLALA Foundation Power Lunch committee, Kelly Hanker, was instrumental in putting us in touch with Erica Chavez, who in turn generously offered up Gabriel Hinojosa of TBI Med Legal to help us with all the technical aspects of setting up and running virtual Power Lunches. Ms. Hanker and Mr. Hinojosa dedicated many hours to Zoom meetings with our Court's community outreach staff, Marlow Gory and Sandra Gray, as we walked through an infinite array of details to ensure that each virtual Power Lunch would run smoothly. Another WLALA board member, Laura Jane Kessner,

also lent us her helping hand by connecting us with several high schools whose teachers and administrators saw our virtual Power Lunch program as a wonderful opportunity for their students to learn about careers in the law. WLALA Executive Administrator Kay Burt and Mr. Hinojosa helped us meticulously track registration for attorney participants for each virtual Power Lunch while Ms. Gory and Ms. Gray tracked registration for students and judicial officers.

All of these coordinated efforts culminated in six virtual Power Lunches taking place between March and May. Judges and attorneys were once again able to share our passion for the law with students from Immaculate Heart High School, Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies (L.A.C.E.S.), Marlborough School, Notre Dame Academy, Roosevelt High School, and Whitney High School. Initially, we had organized and planned four additional virtual Power Lunches – for Cerritos High School, Culver City High School, the Webb School, and Compton Opportunities for Learning Magnet, but ironically, these virtual Power Lunches were canceled at the last minute because these schools reopened for physical, in-person learning, and the students could no longer attend these virtual Power Lunches remotely.

Judges Nicole Bershon, Julie Blackshaw, Kimberly Guillemet, Lynne Hobbs, Ann Park, Maria Puente-Porras, and Victor Wright hosted the six virtual Power Lunches that went forward. These talented judges found ways to liven the discussions despite all of us not being physically together in the same room, including by asking each attorney or judge volunteer to share a favorite legal movie or book. Scores of attorneys and other judges, including our very own Presiding Judge Eric Taylor, volunteered their time by serving as mentors and leading the discussions in breakout rooms.

With the tragic deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the sweeping Black Lives Matter protests, the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol, and the unprecedented rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders all occurring in the past year, there was no shortage of topics for our small group discussions. At each of these virtual Power Lunches, the students wowed us with their insightful observations and comments during small group discussions. Some of the students shared with us their reactions to the Derek Chauvin verdict and the role they hope to play in building a more equitable and inclusive community in the years ahead. Others shared with us their thoughts about gun violence. Still others asked what types of externships will help them further explore their interest in the law and what types of majors in college will help prepare them for law school. It was reassuring and inspiring to see so many students deeply engaged in thoughtful, candid, and heartfelt discussions.

Attendees from Power Lunches in the past have shared how very impactful it is for them to meet and speak with judges and attorneys who once sat in their classrooms and graduated from their school. For example, for one of our particularly successful Power Lunches in 2018, Judge Beverly Bourne hosted students from her alma matter, John Muir High School, in her courtroom at the Glendale Courthouse. In keeping with this theme and tradition, three of the schools who participated in virtual Power Lunches this spring – Immaculate Heart, Marlborough, and Notre Dame – have all female student bodies, and these virtual Power Lunches featured alumnae from the respective schools leading the mentorship circles.

Nothing can duplicate or capture the excitement of students clacking with their clackers during the animated game of Legal Jeopardy that usually caps off our

in-person Power Lunches. Nor is there anything more rewarding than seeing high school students display such enthusiasm while learning about our constitution. The day that we can once again welcome students to our courtrooms for in-person Power Lunches where we can gleefully throw candy at them for answering correctly during our Legal Jeopardy game cannot come soon enough. Until that day, the launch of our Power Lunch program in a virtual format demonstrates all the good that we can accomplish together, with or without a pandemic.

*Judge Elaine Lu is one of two Assistant Supervising Judges of Civil of the Los Angeles Superior Court. She also presides over an unlimited civil independent calendar court at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse. Judge Lu serves on the L.A. Superior Court's Education Committee and has taught seminars for fellow bench officers on a variety of topics in civil and criminal law, including privileges, punitive damages, and jury selection. Judge Lu also presides over Pasadena Teen Court through which juvenile offenders are questioned, judged, and sentenced by a jury of Pasadena High School students. Judge Lu is a member of the Executive Board of the California Judges Association. Prior to her appointment to the bench in 2007, Judge Lu served as an Assistant United States Attorney in the Central District of California for ten years. While at the United States Attorney's Office, she was assigned to the Major Frauds section, prosecuting white-collar, securities fraud, and bank fraud cases, and then served as Deputy Chief of the General Crimes Section. Earlier in her legal career, Judge Lu served as a judicial law clerk for the Honorable Rudi M. Brewster of the United States District Court in the Southern District of California, and subsequently, for the Honorable A. Wallace Tashima of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Judge Lu attended Stanford University, then earned her law degree at Harvard Law School.*