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## Good lawyers make for good neighbors

*Turner Law Firm focuses on high-stakes, emotion-filled real estate conflicts.*

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Longtime litigator Keith J. Turner frequently represents clients embroiled in real estate disputes with their neighbors, a practice area that's often fraught with difficult emotions.

"I like to think we bring both the appropriate level of professionalism while also being aggressive advocates," said Turner, the founder of Turner Law Firm APC in Los Angeles. "But the other thing we understand is we need to help clients resolve disputes, and hopefully, we can help the other side see the light, too."

A 1990 Chicago-Kent College of Law graduate, Turner spent the first 16 years of his career handling real estate, business and insurance cases at larger firms, but he decided to strike out on his own in 2007, hoping "to make more money and have more fun practicing law."

Turner Law Firm APC is home to three attorneys and handles business, real estate and insurance matters along with some attorney fees and legal malpractice cases. Although neighbor-related real estate disputes are by no means all the firm does, Turner described the practice area as "a major subspecialty."

"It's very interesting and challenging because - particularly in Los Angeles with the value of real estate - you can be dealing with high emotions," Turner said. "For people living next to each other in our society, I like to think the law tries to impose a sense of reasonableness, but how that's applied is often difficult, and people certainly have different ideas about it."



From left, Keith Turner and Justin Escano | Justin L. Stewart/Special to the Daily Journal

Attorney Justin Y. Escano started as an administrative assistant at Turner Law Firm in 2010, largely because he was trying to decide if he wanted to be a lawyer.

"I was thinking, 'What if everything I believe about law school I just saw on TV or in the movies? And what if it's not really like that?'" Escano recalled with a chuckle. "But Keith just sort of threw me into the deep end and had me doing a lot of paralegal type work in the first few weeks. ... And seeing how the sausage is made - it seemed doable bit by bit, and I really enjoyed it."

Escano later clerked at the firm while attending Loyola Law School, where he graduated in 2016. Escano said he's found that helping clients involved in disputes with their neighbors is particularly satisfying.

"A lot of the times in these cases, it does become very personal ... and can involve neighbors who might have to live with each other for decades afterward," he said. "So, it can be a very challenging situation to try to resolve a dispute between two people, who maybe don't necessarily like each other and have a lot of reason to fight."

According to Escano, the overwhelming majority of these cases settle out of court, a result he said the firm usually encourages clients to consider as early as possible.

"Depending on the jury pool you get, some jurors aren't as favorable to what they view as rich homeowners up in the hills, and a lot of judges say, 'Both sides look bad in this,'" Escano explained. "At least in a settlement, the parties can craft something they have a say in as opposed to getting a decision by a judge or a jury, which may be a complete loss."

Even so, not all the firm's neighbor-related real estate disputes end up settling. The boutique is representing clients in a case now under review by the California Supreme Court, a dispute that started as a hedge-height violation matter in Los Angeles. *Cohen v. S.C.* (Schwartz) S285484.

"The neighbors' hedges were obstructing my client's ocean view," Turner said. "And rather than just trimming the hedges a bit, which wouldn't have affected the neighbors' privacy, the neighbors fought it. And they got the court of appeal to decide that private citizens cannot sue to enforce violations of municipal code ordinances. ... So, I'm

in the middle of that fight, and I think it's an important fight because it involves the right of access to our court system."

Turner said the City of Los Angeles is "selectively enforcing" hedge-height violations these days.

"The irony of the case is the city of L.A. hasn't even investigated the violation, but they're opposed to this case. They filed an amicus brief and are fighting us," Turner said. "They're spending more resources on attorneys to fight the case than it would have cost to just investigate the violation."

Los Angeles litigator Robert S. Ross has opposed Turner on half a

dozen neighbor-related real estate disputes involving view rights in the past, and he described Turner as one of the few attorneys who knows the practice area really well.

"If I were going to pick somebody to represent me in that kind of case, I'd definitely choose Keith," Ross said. "And I really enjoy dealing with everybody at his firm."

Ross noted that clients in neighbor view rights disputes can often be challenging.

"They are incredibly accomplished. They're very wealthy. They are very self-confident, and it can be very difficult discussing with them how they're probably not going to win,"

Ross said. "And I think Keith is very good in terms of being able to deal with clients, talking with them about the different issues involved and being able to exercise very good judgment in terms of what he thinks is possible and what's not."

Ross also added that Turner isn't afraid to be honest.

"He's got great confidence, but not to the point of believing his own bullshit," Ross said. "What I mean by that is sometimes lawyers will convince themselves that they're right even when they're not. ... But I just think he's got a very good perspective."

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