

Daily Journal

OCTOBER 30, 2024

TOP BOUTIQUES IN CALIFORNIA 2024

CELEBRATING CALIFORNIA'S SMALL BUT MIGHTY SPECIALIZED LAW FIRMS

**Wolf
Wallenstein**
LOS ANGELES

REAL ESTATE &
ESTATE PLANNING



From left: Justin Brossier, Michael Wallenstein, Ellen Kaufman Wolf, Scott Antoine and David Gabor. Not pictured: Christopher Cummiskey.

In 2002, Ellen Kaufman Wolf founded the firm that would become Wolf Wallenstein, PC with the addition of Michael H. Wallenstein in 2017. The six-attorney boutique focuses on litigation, creditor's rights, real estate, business and estate planning.

Wolf Wallenstein's status as a certified woman-owned business enterprise reflects Wolf's long history as one of the few women lawyers to establish and keep her own firm, under various names, for nearly 35 years. She's the daughter of the late Marcus M. Kaufman, the state Supreme Court justice.

His advice: "Find something you love to do that is helpful to the community and get somebody to pay you to do it," she said.

Wolf graduated from Stanford Law School after getting a fine arts degree as a piano performance major at UCLA. "I couldn't make a living playing piano, but I got a pretty great LSAT score," she said. Once she had her bar card, she found an entry-level job at a large firm for a few years. "It was a man's world, but I seemed to find a way to fit in."

Wallenstein, too, has an artistic background. He obtained a master's degree in theater arts and worked as an actor before graduating summa cum laude from South-

western Law School. He too worked at a large firm until, frustrated by its limitations, he met Wolf via a legal recruiter. "It was kismet," he said. "She immediately instilled in me the realization that this is where I want to practice. I'm never leaving."

Having worked in the arts turned out to be a plus for practicing law. "Michael's performance background shows in his ease and facility in presenting cases in court," Wolf said. "And I was memorizing piano scores from a very young age. Now, when clients tell me their stories, I absorb and retain details with ease."

Wallenstein is an authority in railroad real estate law, in which easement and boundary disputes often figure. This year he landed a \$193 million arbitration award for a client that licenses fiber-optic encroachments on railroad property. "It was 735 miles, and renewal of the license was in dispute," he said, declining to name the client while confirmation of the award is pending.

"I have 25 years of corridor evaluation experience, and we gained a lot of credibility with the judge. Plus, our cross-exam left their expert bloody and broken," Wallenstein continued. "I got him to admit he was wrong, and we came away with a complete victory."

Wolf, who focuses on transactional law, used advanced estate planning techniques to save more than \$20 million in a single client's estate taxes on a \$200 million estate — in a maneuver that passed an IRS audit. She has six or seven other clients for whom she is establishing so-called dynasty trusts.

"This is an important practice area for the next 14 months as clients rush to complete their estate planning before the estate tax exemption reduces at the end of 2025," Wolf said. "My approach seeks an end to inter-family and partnership disputes by getting everyone more money than they were expecting."

After Wolf's Malibu property was threatened — but spared — by the 2018 Woolsey Fire, she partnered with a large firm to recover more than \$50 million for fire loss clients. Woolsey Fire Cases, JCCP 5000 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Dec. 19, 2018).

Her clients "had so little warning that they literally ran through flames to their cars and hoped they would not incinerate on the way out of their neighborhoods," Wolf said. "This case is a labor from the heart."

— John Roemer