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Top 20 Under 40

Editor's Note

A lot of hand wringing is going on about the current state of the legal industry and the value of a law degree. It is true that a new law degree is not worth what it was a couple of years ago — if your matrix is the number of new graduates with six-figure salaries at marquee law firms. But every January, when the Daily Journal publishes this list of California's emerging legal leaders, we are reminded of how rewarding legal work

is, far beyond money. We receive hundreds of nominations [672 this year] from lawyers across California at big and small firms, corporations, public agencies and nonprofits. The work they are doing is far-reaching and inspiring. Yet most of these men and women do not start out making six-figure annual salaries. Some may never make that much money in a single year. They work long hours because they love what they are doing and because they are committed to

the law. At its core, law is about service — and that doesn't change all that much whether you are helping Lakers star Kobe Bryant with a legal problem or guiding a multinational corporation through a complex acquisition.

So there is much to be positive about in the legal industry. Read on, because we think we've found a little bit of it.

— The Editors



Amrit Kulkarni, 39

Meyers Nave
Oakland/Los Angeles
Specialties: Land use and
environmental law

Not long after Amrit Kulkarni graduated from the Northwestern School of Law of Lewis & Clark College in 1998, before he even passed the bar, he found his calling at a small firm in Ventura County. There, while working on some of Southern Califor-

nia's earliest growth-control ordinances, Kulkarni first became familiar with the area of law based on the California Environmental Quality Act, which sets the standards for many of the state's environmental and land-use guidelines.

"I just fell in love with it," he said with a laugh, acknowledging the complex statute can seem dry to outsiders. "Everybody says, 'That makes no sense.'"

Clearly it makes sense to him, as Kulkarni has risen steadily within the field ever since.

He joined Meyers Nave as an associate in 1999, and over seven years worked his way up to principal. Now the 39-year-old chairs the firm's land use litigation, land use transactional and environmental law practice groups, overseeing approximately 15 lawyers.

In recent years, Kulkarni obtained major victories for clients including the city of Los Angeles, Los Angeles International Airport and the Port of Los Angeles.

In 2010, he successfully defended the city of Los Angeles against a \$100 million claim from a developer whose project was denied before the completion of CEQA review. He also represented the city at the trial and appellate court levels in an inverse condemnation lawsuit seeking \$30 million in damages.

Kulkarni recently fended off a lawsuit filed by the city of Riverside against the Port of Los Angeles, effectively salvaging a major development effort at the port that was in the works for nearly 10 years, known

as the China Shipping Container Terminal Project. For LAX, Kulkarni successfully defended the airport's \$13 billion expansion plan against four consolidated lawsuits, and he recently obtained a dismissal of a \$200 million False Claims lawsuit alleging that LAX violated the Clean Air Act and other federal statutes.

In Northern California, Kulkarni successfully defended the city of South San Francisco in a case brought by a developer who sought to build as many as 185 housing units on a steeply sloped, 25-acre parcel. In the same region, he also recently represented the city of Benicia in a dispute over the construction of an emergency storm water drainage system and the city of San Leandro in an environmental challenge to the expansion of Oakland International Airport.

Kulkarni represents the Regents of the University of California in multiple campus expansion projects, including the University of California Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory Solar Energy Research Project, and he advises the city of Barstow on environmental issues related to the DesertXpress high-speed rail project.

Outside of his heavy workload, Kulkarni spends most of his free time chasing after his children, ages 7 and 3. When he has time, he also heads to the beach to indulge his longtime passion for surfing. Kulkarni's wife, Arezoo Montazeri, also is a land-use lawyer, and while the couple tries to avoid the subject at home, he said, it is often unavoidable.

— Anna Scott