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AWARDS DINNER

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# PROGRAM

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6:00PM

Registration & Cocktails

7:30PM

Dinner & Awards

OUTGOING PRESIDENT'S RECOGNITION  
**John D. Rogers**

JOURNALISM EXCELLENCE AWARD  
**Meghann Cuniff**

RICHARD HUTTON AWARD  
**Cameron J. Gomez**

INSTALLATION OF BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
**Hon. Lucy Armendariz**

HON. ROBERT TAKASUGI AWARD  
**Hon. H. Clay Jacke II**

PRESIDENT'S JUSTICE AWARD  
**Joseph H. Low IV**

JOHNNIE COCHRAN JR. AWARD  
**Joseph A. Markus & Joseph E. Markus**

JOSEPH ROSEN AWARD  
**Joseph A. Gutierrez**

JERRY GIESLER AWARD  
**Vanessa A. Rownagh & Yusun Kang**

SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT

CLOSING ENTERTAINMENT

# 2026

## INCOMING PRESIDENT

What an extraordinary honor to serve as President of this historically rich organization. What started off as meetings between the greatest lawyers in Hollywood in the 1950's has become a talented and diverse group of individuals committed to growing and supporting legal minds.

The leaders who came before me helped shape not only this organization, but the legal community itself, and I remain deeply inspired by their accomplishments and service.

I will always be grateful to Past-President Lisa Liu for welcoming me into the organization, and to Past-President Victor Salerno for his support during my first year on the Board. Past-President Chris Chaney has been a steady and selfless leader whose continued dedication and guidance helps move this organization forward.

I also want to thank Outgoing President John Rogers for setting an exceptional example of leadership, professionalism, and commitment to our profession. And my deepest gratitude to all board members and Past-Presidents who continue to contribute to our organization, especially Evan Freed, Richard Chacon, Andrew Stein, Alison Tressl, Bob Schwartz, Arash Hashemi, Lou Sepe, Sharon Marshall Carey Carouso, and others who continually step up. Together, we strive to strengthen and elevate this community.

This year, I am committed to bringing additional programming and meaningful opportunities for our community to learn, connect, and grow together. I would also like to thank our sponsors, who have not only invested in growing this organization, but provide valuable services to our members.

I am equally excited for the future leadership of Juanita Duran and Vanessa Rodriguez. They have both been instrumental in making this event a success. Their passion, talent, and vision give me every confidence that the best days of this organization are still ahead.

I also want to recognize our creative and hard-working gala team including Drea Castro, Shiggy Ichinomiya, Savannah Torsney, and our law student interns: Thank you for giving much more than you receive!

To all of our guests this evening, thank you for joining us to celebrate our remarkable honorees. Each has made meaningful contributions to the pursuit of justice and to the legal system we serve, and it is a privilege to recognize them tonight.

Finally, to my wonderful family and friends – thank you for your unwavering love and support throughout the years.

And most importantly, thank you to my mother and father, my first role models and the two people whose pride means the most to me.



# 2025

## OUTGOING PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It has been an honor to serve as President of the Criminal Courts Bar Association. I had the privilege of working alongside an extraordinary group of colleagues who are committed to our profession and the pursuit of justice. Your dedication has set the standard for what the CCBA represents.

I also want to acknowledge our current President, Nafise Nina Hodjat, the first Iranian American woman to lead the CCBA. She is a force of nature, focused, driven, and always moving the CCBA forward. There is no question that the CCBA will continue on its upward trajectory under her leadership.

To our award recipients this evening, your achievements reflect the very best of our profession. Stand tall and stand proud. You deserve it.

Thank you for the trust you placed in me. It has been a privilege to serve.

Over and out,  
John D. Rogers  
2025 CCBA President





# PAST PRESIDENTS

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James G. Cooney 1974  
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Morton Herbert 1978  
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Richard G. Hirsch 1980  
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Rickard Santwier 1995  
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Michael Shannon 1998  
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Barry Levin 2000  
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Bruce Richland 2013  
Michael A. Goldstein 2014  
Christa M. Hohmann 2015  
Louis Sepe 2016  
Evan P. Freed 2017  
Richard Chacon 2018  
Victor Salerno 2019  
Mark Khalaf 2020  
Carey Caruso 2021  
Jesse A. Arana 2022  
Lisa Z. Liu 2023  
Arash Hashemi 2024  
John D. Rogers 2025

*Past  
Presidents*



# 2026

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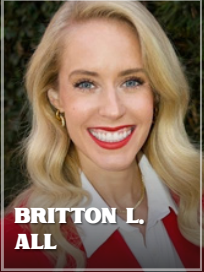
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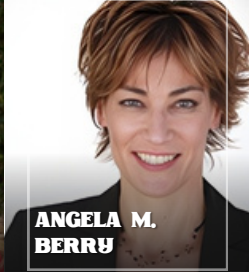


# 2026

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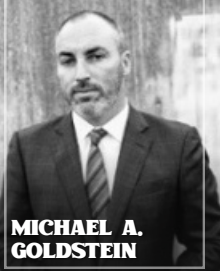
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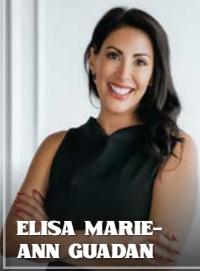
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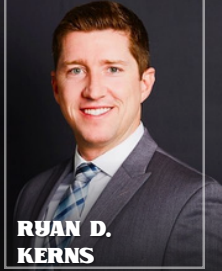
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Meghann Cuniff knew she wanted to be a journalist when she wrote for her high school newspaper in Corvallis, Oregon. She double majored in political science and journalism: news-editorial, at the University of Oregon, where she worked as a reporter and editor for the Oregon Daily Emerald student newspaper.

She interned at The Bulletin in Bend, Oregon, in 2005 then moved to Boise, Idaho, after graduation to intern with The Spokesman-Review's statehouse reporter. Her first full-time professional reporting job was covering the K-12 school districts in northern Idaho as a reporter in the Spokane, Washington-based newspaper's bureau in Coeur d'Alene.

She moved to the paper's main newsroom in Spokane in 2008 to be the night breaking news reporter, then was promoted to the dayside police beat in 2009. She reported on major crimes and trials in Spokane, including the 2008 death penalty trial of serial killer Joseph Duncan and the 2011 federal criminal trial of a Spokane police officer who killed a mentally disabled man in a convenience store. She also founded the Sirens & Gavels blog.

Meghann worked as an editor at the Idaho Statesman before moving to Southern California in 2012 to work at the Orange County Register. She covered the city of San Juan Capistrano from the paper's bureau in San Clemente before moving the Santa Ana office to be the county government reporter.



# MEGHANN CUNIFF

# JOURNALISM EXCELLENCE AWARD

In 2016, Meghann joined the Los Angeles Daily Journal as the legal newspaper's reporter in Orange County. She worked at the Daily Journal for four years, profiling judges and private neutrals and covering major litigation and trials in Orange County federal and state courts. She joined ALM / Law.com in 2021 as an editor and reporter, then became Law & Crime's senior West Coast correspondent in 2022. In December 2022, she gained fame online through her reporting on rapper Tory Lanez's criminal trial in Los Angeles for shooting rapper Megan Thee Stallion. She used her new nickname Meghann Thee Reporter and her huge new online following to create her own news agency, Legal Affairs and Trials with Meghann Cuniff, through Substack and the major social media playforms including Instagram, TikTok and Facebook.

In the last three years, Meghann has built her social media platforms into a hub for newsy clips from trials across the United States. She's using the skills she developed writing about crime and courts for newspapers to bring a newsier approach to the world of so-called content creation, where a legion of people with no journalism skills have thrived for years thanks to the advertising revenue that once sustained newspaper journalism in the United States. Her goal is to educate and inform and also spotlight the humanity that goes on in our courtrooms every day.



Cam Gomez was born in Montebello, California but spent the majority of his childhood in Ventura, California. Cam graduated from the University of California Los Angeles where he majored in political science. After UCLA, Cam attended the University of Southern California Gould School of Law where he met his wife, Serena Patel. Cam was a member of the Public Interest Law Foundation, the Latino Law Students Association, and participated in the USC Post-Conviction Justice Project where he helped his Client receive parole after she served 21 years of a life sentence. Following law school, Cam completed a one-year post-bar fellowship at the Immigrant Defenders Law Center in Los Angeles. His work was primarily in immigration removal defense and post-conviction relief. Cam always wanted to be a trial attorney and applied to the Los Angeles Public Defender's Office.

In January 2018, Cam began his career at the Los Angeles Public Defender's Office. In 2019, Cam was awarded the Charlie Gessler Misdemeanor Attorney of the Year Award. Cam has worked primarily at the Clara Foltz Criminal Justice Center and the Airport Courthouse. He is now a Grade 4 Deputy Public Defender serving as the Deputy in Charge of the Inglewood Juvenile Courthouse. During his time at the Public Defender's Office, Cam has completed 50 jury trials including 20 felony and 5 murder trials. Cam has received Not Guilty verdicts on cases ranging from misdemeanors such as DUI and resisting arrest to serious felonies such as Assault with a Deadly Weapon, Robbery, Mayhem, Attempted Murder and Murder.

Cam's proudest accomplishment is his July 2022 Not Guilty verdict in a murder trial where his 80-year-old client was acquitted following a successful self-defense argument. Cam lives in Los Angeles with his wife Serena and 2 children, Kiaan and Mia.



# RICHARD HUTTON AWARD

## RISING TRIAL ATTORNEY

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In November 2021, Jose Godinez aka Mr. G was arrested for a shooting near his home in Cypress Park. Following the shooting, Mr. G drove down to Chula Vista where he was taken in to custody. After being assigned the case, Cam went to visit Mr. G at Men's Central Jail and the two immediately bonded. Mr. G looked like Cam's grandfather, so their trust was instant. Cam told Mr. G he believed they could win. There were no negotiations or request for an offer other than time served. The case went to trial within 6 months from arraignment.

During the pre-trial process, Cam would visit Mr. G at MCJ once a week. They would discuss trial strategy, self-defense, and anything else that was on Mr. G's mind.

After the Preliminary Hearing, Mr. G was taken to the hospital due to heart issues. Cam immediately went to visit Mr. G at USC General Medical Center. Cam told Mr. G to stick with him for a few more weeks and Cam would get him back home to his family. The trial went forth in the original 60-day period and after a one-week trial in front of Judge Deborah Brazil – Mr. G was acquitted; after only an hour of deliberations. He was acquitted on a Friday and by Saturday was back home with his family where Cam went to visit him and bring him some King Taco – just like they had planned for months. Victory was especially sweet because Mr. G's wife came to every single court appearance while he was in custody. Mr. G was released after the acquittal back home with her. In 2025, she passed away, but they were able to spend those years post-trial back together.

# CAMERON J. GOMEZ



This year's recipient of the Hon. Robert Takasugi award for judicial excellence is H. Clay Jacke II, who sits in Dept. 104 of the Foltz Justice Center where he has handled long cause felony cases since 2021. "Clay" as he is familiarly known, was appointed to the bench in 2012 by Gov. Jerry Brown, Jr. A long-time defense attorney at the time, with 13 true death penalty cases and scores of LWOPs' to his credit, Judge Jacke was literally "snatched" by presiding Judge John Cheroske of the Compton Courthouse to begin hearing felony preliminary hearings as his first assignment. In 2016 he took over Dept. F in Compton when Judge John Doyle retired, where he remained until his current assignment in Dept. 104 downtown.

Born in Los Angeles in 1958, Judge Jacke's father, Hurdle Clay Jacke, was already a well known and respected criminal defense attorney in Los Angeles. "Senior" Jacke practiced from 1955 until 1995. Jacke II graduated from Drake University, Iowa, in 1980. He originally planned on a career in finance, but found it not to his liking. An encounter with a recruiter at Drake from Southwestern Law School greatly influenced Judge Jacke, and he earned his law degree in December, 1982, after just two and one-half years of study at Southwestern.

The Senior Jacke had long and secretly wanted his son to follow in his footsteps as a lawyer, but never applied any pressure. After passing the bar in 1983, father and son soon became "Jacke and Jacke." In 1984 the two moved to the newly-built Promenade West Condominium, and four years later purchased a large unit in Suite 302, where Judge Jacke practiced until his appointment in 2012.

**HON. H. CLAY JACKE II**



# HON. ROBERT TAKASUGI AWARD FOR JUDICIAL EXCELLENCE

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The Criminal Courts Bar Association awarded H. Clay Jacke Sr. the Justice Award in 1980, in recognition of his dedication to the criminal justice system and the community at large. Judge Jacke continues his father's legacy of excellence and fairness every day.

Judge Jacke and his wife Natalia will soon celebrate 40 years of marriage. They are the proud parents of two daughters and a son, and four young grandchildren including twin girls soon to be three.

Up for reelection this year, Jacke will begin a new six year term in January as there were no contestants for his position. Asked how to best describe his role and goal as a bench officer, Jacke responded, "I am absolutely biased toward fairness." Small wonder he is so well liked and respected by all sides as a long cause judge in the "CCB."



# PRESIDENT'S JUSTICE AWARD

FOR THE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Joseph H. Low IV is nationally regarded as one of the most skilled and influential Trial Lawyers in America—known not only for the number of record verdicts throughout America and trials all over the world, but also for the rare human connection that he is able to form with the jurors through his storytelling techniques and his deep listening abilities that help bring the story to life for all types of jurors.

He is one of just a few trial lawyers that have mastered both civil and criminal trial practice and was the only trial lawyer to be named to the Top 100 Trial Lawyers list in civil law and simultaneously by criminal law organizations. Joseph Low represents the catastrophically injured, the wrongly prosecuted human beings whose stories reveal that they are merely the collateral damage from acts of big government and greedy corporations.

Low's path as a trial lawyer was shaped by legendary attorney Gerry Spence, who personally invited Low to attend his trial college in 1998—despite Low being only a first-year lawyer. That invitation sparked a 25-year mentorship. Spence's philosophy and guidance became the foundation of Low's courtroom success.

Before his passing, Gerry personally named Joseph as his successor at the GerrySpence Method—a legacy and responsibility Joseph carries forward with deep honor.

Low now serves as Vice President, Director of Staff & Curriculum, and Chief Instructor, training lawyers across the country in the art and science of trial work. Low has tried complex, high-stakes cases in Civil, Criminal, Federal, and Military courts.

His work includes groundbreaking advocacy for clients with Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) and PTSD, where he was the first to successfully introduce PTSD and TBI as affirmative defenses in Military capital cases. His courtroom skills have won acquittals for Marines, Army Rangers, Special Forces and Navy SEALs in cases once considered unwinnable.

# JOSEPH H. LOW IV

His record of courtroom victories and landmark verdicts includes:

- United States v. Gonzalez-Lopez 548 U.S. 140 (2006) U.S. Supreme Court victory securing the constitutional right to counsel of choice for all Americans.
- \$150 million against PG&E in John Doe v. PGE, AgWise, et al. Record Verdict
- \$125 million in John Doe v. Common Carrier et al. Record Verdict
- \$72.5 million in Cuevas v. Rai Transport. Kern County record
- \$22.5 million in John Doe v. Agricultural Cooperative. Record Result
- \$11 million in McPhoy v. Ramirez. Record Verdict
- \$11 million in Bough v. J-Squared Construction
- \$10.5 million in Carter v. Kern County School District

Throughout his career, Low has been recognized for excellence by leading legal institutions nationwide. His honors include:

- U.S. v. Magincalda (Pendleton 8 Murder Case). Low's client was only one to walk free, receive an honorable discharge and is now a Criminal Defense Lawyer in Texas.
- U.S. v. Acevedo (Combat Crime Murder Case). Low's client walks free, Low gets his Bronze Star reinstated and awarded, client currently in Law School to become a Criminal Defense Lawyer.
- U.S. v. Nelson (Fallujah Murder Case). Low's client gets case dismissed on day of trial.
- U.S. v. Webb (combat crime murder case) Low gets case dismissed just prior to trial.
- Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Medallion for Excellence in Trial Advocacy
- Daily Journal's Top Plaintiff Lawyers • National Law Journal Top 100 Verdicts
- Recipient of American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA)  
as Outstanding Trial Advocate of the Year.
- Order of the Barristers, among others

Joseph H. Low IV brings military discipline, extraordinary human insight, and unwavering dedication to those he serves. His mission is simple: protect the people, elevate the profession, and win justice for the injured, the voiceless, and the truth itself.



Joseph Gutierrez, the recipient of the Joseph Rosen Career Achievement Award, has produced a magnificent body of work during his 46 years as a premier criminal defense trial attorney. From the outset, when he won acquittals on his first 20 jury trials as a deputy public defender assigned to the Van Nuys Courthouse, Gutierrez has established himself as a low-key but compelling force in a courtroom.

Joe's achievements, which have included more than 80 murder trials, are no coincidence. They are the product of a unique mixture of a zealous devotion to his clients, an indefatigable work ethic, meticulous preparation of pretrial motions, a profound intuition and understanding of human nature that is reflected in piercing cross-examination skills, and a personal integrity and authenticity that earns credibility with jurors. Throughout his career Gutierrez has found time to mentor numerous other attorneys, and is always generous in sharing advice and motions he has written.

A catalogue of Joe's successes would be too numerous to mention, but here is a small sample: an acquittal in *People v. Augustin Morales*, charged with four murders with special circumstances, in a retrial after a hung jury, where there was a signed and taped confession of his client, which Joe argued was coerced; an acquittal in *People v. Tizcareno*, where his client



# JOSEPH ROSEN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

was charged with two separate gang-related murders; a dismissal in *People v. Edward Carrion*, charged with two counts of special circumstance murder following three hung juries; and a dismissal in the high-profile *People v. Gregory Merritt* case, where he represented a Los Angeles County DCFS supervisor prosecuted for negligence under a felony abuse statute in a published opinion by the Court of Appeal related to a widely publicized death penalty case where a mother and boyfriend were convicted of killing her abused child.

Among Joe's high profile clients have been Walter Karabian, former majority of the California Asssembly, Olympic Boxing champion Paul Gonzalez, and NFL player Denzel Perryman. Joe has previously been honored by the Criminal Courts Bar Association with the Jerry Geisler trial attorney of the year award and the Benito Juarez attorney of the year award by the Mexican American Bar Association. This year Joe is also receiving the defense attorney of the year award from the Los Angeles County Bar Association, Criminal Justice Section. Born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, Joe is married with two daughters, both of whom are attorneys.

# JOSEPH A. GUTIERREZ

Vanessa Rownaghi is an accomplished attorney and dedicated public servant with over two decades of experience in criminal defense. Born in Iran and raised in Maryland, she graduated cum laude from the University of Maryland, College Park, and earned her Juris Doctor, also cum laude, from the Washington College of Law at American University. While in law school, her article was published in the Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law, and she volunteered with the Innocence Project and participated in the immigration clinic, where she successfully obtained asylum for a client from Burma.

Vanessa began her legal career in 2005 as a public defender in Riverside County, California, where she built a strong foundation in trial advocacy and client-centered representation. She later spent time in private practice, appearing in courts throughout Los Angeles County, Santa Barbara, and federal court in downtown Los Angeles.

In 2008, Vanessa joined the Los Angeles County Alternate Public Defender's Office, serving in branches including Central, Inglewood, and Compton. Appointed Deputy-in-Charge of the Compton branch in 2022 and promoted to Head Deputy in 2024, she now oversees branch operations, mentors attorneys, and continues to carry an active caseload ranging from low-level felonies to murder cases. She also staffs diversionary courts, including Rapid Diversion Court, Community Collaborative Court, and Veterans Court. Vanessa believes strong leadership comes from standing beside her attorneys in the courtroom and values fostering a close-knit, family-like culture among her staff. Over the course of her career, she has completed approximately seventy jury trials, ranging from misdemeanors to complex felony cases.

In one notable case involving seven co-defendants and a 37-count grand jury indictment, her client faced multiple murder, attempted murder, conspiracy, and special circumstance allegations. Following a lengthy jury trial, the client was acquitted of nearly all charges and convicted only of two counts of attempted murder, preserving eligibility for youthful offender parole consideration. The case also involves significant appellate issues stemming from a multi-day evidentiary hearing challenging the search of an establishment occupied by the clients' gang.

Vanessa is deeply committed to serving marginalized and underserved communities and often speaks about her love for working in Compton. She has also rescued and rehomed two dogs found while serving the community. In 2025, she received the Los Angeles County Bar Association Defense Attorney of the Year Award. She lives in Westchester with her husband David, and their two sons, Donovan and Xavier.



**VANESSA A.  
ROWNAGHI**

# JERRY GIESLER MEMORIAL AWARD FOR TRIAL ATTORNEYS OF THE YEAR

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Yusun Kang has 20 years of experience advocating for individuals in the justice system. She began her career with the Riverside County Public Defender's Office, where she served for five years, before dedicating the past 15 years to the Alternate Public Defender's Office.

Known for her exceptional trial advocacy and unwavering commitment to her clients, Ms. Kang has built a reputation as a formidable presence in the courtroom. Her work reflects a deep belief in the constitutional rights and the importance of thorough, client-centered representation.

Beyond her professional achievements, Ms. Kang also serves as a board member of the National League of Young Men, supporting youth development and community service. Outside of her legal and volunteer commitments, she is a proud active sports mom to her two sons.

## YUSUN KANG



# JOHNNIE COCHRAN JR. AWARD FOR THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

Joseph A. Markus and Joseph E. Markus are a powerhouse father-son defense team at the forefront of post-conviction relief under Senate Bill 1437 (Penal Code § 1172.6).

A former homicide prosecutor with 33 years in the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, Joseph A. Markus brings elite courtroom experience to the defense side as co-founder of the Law Offices of Stein & Markus. Since joining the firm in 2021, Joseph E. Markus has quickly established himself as a rising force in post-conviction advocacy, spearheading the team's motion writing and legal research.

Their results speak for themselves: 700+ petitions filed, 400+ cases litigated statewide, and 70 clients resentenced and released.

Through relentless advocacy—and their podcast, *Adjourned for the Day*—they are not just changing the law, but changing lives.

## JOSEPH A. MARKUS & JOSEPH E. MARKUS



# Congratulations

to our deserving honorees.

Cam Gomez

Joseph H. Low IV

Meghann Cuniff

Joseph A. & Joseph E. Markus

Joseph Gutierrez

Hon. H. Clay Jacke II

Vanessa Rownaghi & Yusun Kang

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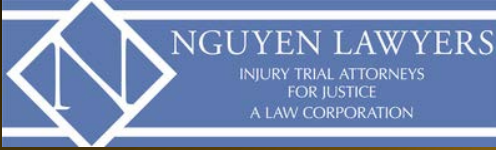


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Criminal Defense Attorney in our Suite.

---

**Joseph A. Gutierrez**

**2026 RECIPIENT OF THE JOSEPH ROSEN  
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

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*We also congratulate all the other 2026 Criminal Courts Bar  
Association Award Recipients.*

---

**Perez & Perez**

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The background is a deep black, adorned with numerous golden starbursts of varying sizes and brightness. Two prominent, glowing golden light trails curve across the top-left and bottom-left corners, creating a sense of movement and elegance. The overall aesthetic is one of luxury and celebration.

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