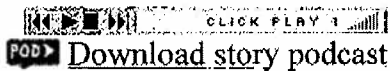




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## Graduates of Riverside's 'great little law school' thrive



07:32 PM PDT on Sunday, October 5, 2008

By RICHARD K. DE ATLEY  
The Press-Enterprise

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### CORRECTION:

A previous version of this story gave the wrong name of a judge who graduated from the school. The judge is Christopher Yeager of Imperial County. Also, the tuition at the school was incorrect. It is \$3,260 per semester for the 2008-09 academic year.

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John G. Evans knew exactly who to tell first when he learned Gov. Schwarzenegger appointed him as a Riverside County Superior Court judge.

Retired Riverside County Superior Court Judge Elwood Rich.

Evans wasn't just giving the good news to his mentor, he was also telling the dean of his law school.

"I was proud to go over there and tell him first," Evans said recalling the July day at the Riverside Historic Courthouse when he told Rich the news.

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Elwood Rich

Evans, who took the bench in Indio this week, is not the first judge produced by Rich's California Southern Law School, established in 1971 as the Citrus Belt Law School.

He is the seventh.

Evans is a 1979 graduate. Private defense attorney and Riverside Community College board member Virginia Blumenthal is a 1975 graduate.

Blumenthal was called earlier this year by the Daily Journal legal newspaper "one of the highest profile criminal defense attorneys in the Inland Empire."

San Bernardino County District Attorney Michael Ramos, a 1988 graduate of the unaccredited Riverside school, refers to it as "that great little law school."

There are risks for students attending unaccredited law schools.

Success rates for passing the state bar exams are far lower than for students from accredited schools -- ones that have met or surpassed standards of the American Bar Association and the California State Bar.

Accreditation takes "a very serious and enormous investment in terms of library, faculty and facilities," said Victor Gold, dean of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles.

Schools such as Loyola are not-for-profit, Gold said. People considering unaccredited schools need to see it "in the context that you are dealing with a business" and check reputations carefully, he said.

Rich, 87, warns of unaccredited schools that never seem to fail students -- a ploy to keep tuition coming.

He said California Southern aims at getting first-year students to pass the "baby bar," a required test that Rich calls "consumer protection" against unscrupulous outlets.

In the Inland area, the University of La Verne College of Law received provisional American Bar Association approval in 2006.

### **Working Students**

Earning civil service and teacher salaries, and far from any accredited law schools in the 1970s and 1980s, Evans, Blumenthal and Ramos were in circumstances that gave them limited choices.

Ramos was a San Bernardino County probation officer who had graduated from UC Riverside in 1981. It was tough studying law and holding down a full-time job, he recalled.

"I still remember studying before I came to work, studying during the two breaks in my shift, reading during my lunch break, going to the Y for a workout after work, studying until it was time to go to school, getting a drive-through, fast-food dinner and then going to school," Ramos said.

"It ended at 9:30 or 10 at night. I got home between 10 and 10:30, and then it would start all over again. Those were long days," he said in a telephone interview.

That type of experience creates a special bond with other California Southern students who have succeeded, said Blumenthal. Hers was the first four-year class to graduate from the school.

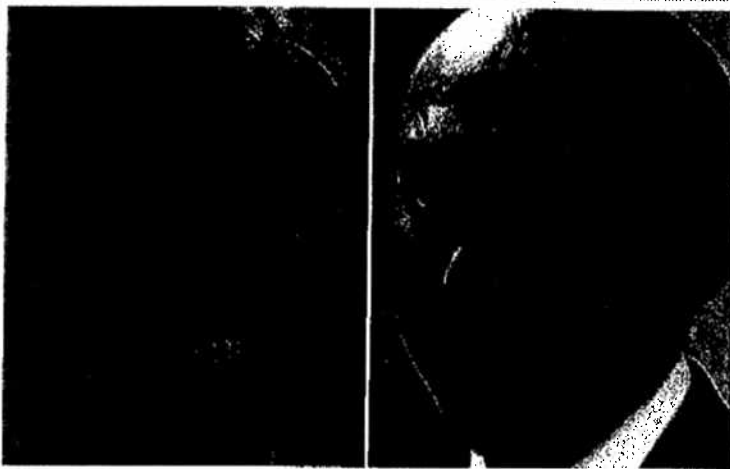
"I have always been very open about where I went to law school," she said. "I went to a nighttime, unaccredited law school. I find no shame in that. ... People who finished that school and passed the bar have worked very, very hard.."

Women have long made up 50 percent or more of law school graduating classes, but Blumenthal was a rarity when she began taking classes in 1971, she said.

It didn't matter to Rich, she said.

"I was the only woman in my class," she said. "I was a teacher, and I was also working as a loan officer at the Bank of America," she said. Rich "just always was very encouraging."

Story continues below



Southern California alumni Virginia Blumenthal, left, and Michael Ramos

The faculty is made up of local attorneys and judges who bring real-life lessons to students, sometimes minutes after leaving their law offices or judges' chambers.

About 110 students enrolled for this fall.

"It really is a community school -- students from the community and instructors from the community," Evans said.

"Conveying what can be very nuanced concepts of trial strategy and presentation to folks with no courtroom experience is very challenging," said Riverside County Assistant District Attorney Chuck Hughes, who teaches at the school. "Watching them grasp the ideas and excel is very rewarding."

Hughes said his office recently hired a graduate of the school.

#### **Accredited v. Unaccredited**

In the July 2007 state bar exam, pass rates for graduates of schools with dual American Bar Association and state Bar accreditation was just over 67 percent. It was 11 percent for unaccredited schools.

And statistically, "the more often you take the Bar exam, the more likely you are to fail," says Loyola Law School dean Gold.

He said people looking at unaccredited schools need to consider the risk of never passing the bar and losing their investment of time and money, or spending years outside the legal profession while trying to pass it. "Understand the risks, and make an educated decision," he said.

Like many accredited schools, Loyola offers an evening law degree program. Tuition for one academic year is \$25,340. About 85 percent of Loyola Law School students receive some kind of financial aid, spokesman Brian Costello said.

The current per semester tuition for California Southern, including registration is \$3,260. The school does not qualify for scholarships, so students have to work out payment plans.

California Southern moved into its Elizabeth Street location, formerly occupied by the White Sands night club, in 1986.

Its first home was rented space in the basement of a nearby bank building

The name change from Citrus Belt to California Southern came about in 1991, Rich said, when students asked for a more relevant name.

"They said the area wasn't a citrus belt any more. It was a housing belt." The school started 37 years ago to help students of closed Riverside University, the type of school Gold and Rich warn about.

Riverside University was shut down in 1971, four years after it started, when state investigators found it had issued improper student loans.

California Southern, like Rich, is unpretentious, said Blumenthal.

"All of the schools that are striving for accreditation -- that has never been the goal of California Southern," she said. "They are what they are."

*Reach Richard K. De Atley at 951-368-9573 or [rdeatley@PE.com](mailto:rdeatley@PE.com)*

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### **Nighthawks**

Graduates of note from California Southern Law School in Riverside:

#### **Superior Court Judges, current and retired**

- Judge Douglas Gericke, San Bernardino County
- Judge Christopher Warner, San Bernardino County
- Judge Arthur Harrison, San Bernardino County
- Judge John Evans, Riverside County
- Judge Dale R. Wells, Riverside County
- Judge Christopher Yeager, Imperial County
- Judge Barbara Beck, Santa Barbara County.

#### **Also of note:**

- Riverside County Counsel Joe Rank
- San Bernardino County District Attorney Michael Ramos
- Private defense attorney Virginia Blumenthal

Graduates from California Southern have also served on the staffs of the Riverside and San Bernardino County district attorneys' offices, the public defenders' offices for both counties, and several other government and private law firms throughout the Inland region.

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