In memoriam: Jake Dear

Jake Dear passed from this life on June 5, 2026. We are heartbroken for his wife and soulmate Mo, their son, his wife and the rest of his family. We ourselves are bereft that Jake now lives only in our hearts and memories.

It says a lot that a man who dedicated his professional life to the California Supreme Court for 40 years, rising from clerking in Justice Stanley Mosk's chambers to becoming the Chief Supervising Attorney for the entire court, including heading the chambers of two chief justices, Ron George and mine, has hundreds of friends and admirers. Much is known and has been written about Jake's professional ascent. Many of us sought his counsel, relied on him, trusted his keen and exacting judgment, and told him our stories. We admired, respected, and trusted him implicitly, not just because he was a brilliant scholar, tireless researcher, extraordinary scrivener, engaged listener, oenophile, and world traveler. Jake understood and had unyielding compassion for all the ways we humans find ourselves at odds in the world. He was so much more than his resume, his accolades, and his CV could capture. Indeed, this is a tribute to and about our friend Jake.

Jake was beloved in life and now in memory. Beloved. I knew him and observed him

with others. He was in all things a peacemaker. He welcomed you, always, no matter the circumstances or the rush of business. He was patient, he contemplated, he mused adroitly, he understood the complexities and foibles of humans, and he maintained confidences. He was naturally giving and thoughtful, from a cup of tea to a witty observation, to a case cite, and a photo montage of one of his and Mo's fabulous vacations. Unwittingly, and unbeknownst to Jake, he set an example of the kind of human being all of us wish we could be.

Here are some thoughts and memories from others about Jake.

Few could claim Jake's wisdom, experience, and mastery of California law. California Supreme Court Justice Joshua Groban recalled that even before he started at the court "I began to hear an oft-repeated response to every hard question that was asked: 'Ask Jake.'" And from his first day onward "that mantra repeated itself a thousand times," said Justice Groban. "Every tricky question, every quandary, every historical inquiry, got the same response: 'Ask Jake.' The hardest questions always went to him. Always."

Even more than just the go-to resource, Jake was a master technician. Ronald M. George, California's 27th chief justice, remembered Jake for his devotion to the craft of writing: "As Jake and I worked together to resolve the issues presented by a case, the two of us enjoyed collaborating in 'word-smithing' the origins and nuances of unusual words that found their way into the high court's opinions." Court of Appeal Justice Danny Chou remembered him as "not only a great legal scholar and writer," but as "a wonderful person who became fast friends with everybody he met." Justice Chou described Jake's role as "a great representative of the high court and a true protector of the institution." As do we all, Justice Chou lamented: "He will be greatly missed."

Nor was there a better, faster, or more sought-after editor. Retired Court of Appeal Justice George Nicholson called Jake "a master of words, editing, and literary style." Before finalizing each edition of California Legal History "in but a few hours Jake did a copy editing and literary review of the entire manuscript, each containing hundreds of thousands of words of text." Justice Nicholson called Jake "a matchless and meticulous editor and writer," one who "found errors most editors would never

find.” Same here, said retired Court of Appeal Justice Dan Kolkey: “For Jake, no point — even a point in an email — was too small not to be improved. That was Jake in a nutshell.”

California Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu remembers Jake’s exemplary public service, dedication to the court, and spirit of optimism. “For more than four decades, Jake Dear served the California Supreme Court with distinction, providing measured and trustworthy counsel to many justices, myself included. No one has been more dedicated to the court than Jake, and he exemplified public service in everything he did. In addition to his legal acumen, I will miss his positive spirit and unfailing optimism, which set a wonderful tone for our everyday work together.”

Retired California Supreme Court Justice Ming Chin captured Jake’s mix of committed service and joie de vivre: “I had the privilege of working closely with Jake for over 24 years at the Court. Brilliant, scholarly, and eloquent, he enriched our law and our lives not only through his gifts as a writer and lawyer, but also through his devotion to family, delight in fine wine and food, keen wit, and generous spirit.”

The details mattered for Jake, said his longtime colleague and friend Neil Gupta. “Whether it was a one-page order or a 150-page opinion, he shepherded every comma, period, or semicolon into its proper place. Even the wrong type of dash or apostrophe would not go unscathed. Jake did it because he knew that even the slightest error would fray the credibility and legitimacy of the court’s decisions. Because if the court can’t correctly punctuate a decision, then what else did it get wrong?”

Yet Jake always remembered what the law was for, and embodied the idea that law and its institutions are about people. Jennifer O’Connor described him as “the beating heart of the court for many years.” Beyond a professional’s “careful attention to detail and encyclopedic knowledge of court arcana, Jake was an unfailingly kind and supportive colleague.” Never one to care for titles, despite his high status at the court “he was always approachable, cheerfully answering any question he was asked. He will be missed.”

Erin Rosenberg described herself as lucky to work with Jake, who “was always generous with his time,” despite being “extremely busy” as the court’s chief

supervising attorney. Ever the student, Jake "delighted in the court's quirky history." She recalled a case that pivoted on his sleuthing turning up evidence of the court's practices and an unreported decision from the late 1800s. "He was a true public servant, with a strong sense of integrity, selflessness, and unwavering commitment to the public good. I am grateful for his mentorship and will miss him terribly."

Jake's colleague Kyle Graham captured the struggle of writing this memorial: "I have rewritten this blurb several times, because as soon as I write down one thing I learned from Jake, I remember another. I will always remember the joy and enthusiasm with which he approached his work, his decency, and his commitment to doing the right thing."

Knowing that a good walk will solve most problems, Jake had a "daily ritual of a mid-morning 'constitutional' walk around Civic Center Plaza for 20 or 30 minutes" with Hal Cohen to discuss the challenging legal issues they were grappling with "and the deeply personal family matters that could only be shared with an intimate close friend." And Ira Ellman will remember Jake's ability to stay on task in any circumstance: "Whether a task for the Court or three weeks in France, Jake always organized things to ensure it was done right, a trait he maintained to the end."

That trait explains what happened to retired Superior Court Judge Barry Goode as he raced to reach Jake just two days before his death with news "that his State Senator and Assemblymember had authored a resolution recognizing Jake's extraordinary service to the people of the State of California, thanking and commending him for his service." Concerned that the mailed original would not reach Jake in time, Judge Goode included the resolution's text. Said Judge Goode with a twinkle, "Jake was touched. But ever the eagle-eyed editor, he suggested a change to one of the 'whereas' clauses that would, of course, have improved it. Jake was as sharp as ever, and a legal craftsman to the end."

Away from the court, Jake's passions were travel, food, and France. Retired California Supreme Court Justice Kathryn Werdegar recounted a tale from the fall of 2010 while she and her husband David were traveling in France with Jake and his wife Mo — a story that combined all three of Jake's passions. "It was David's 80th birthday. Jake wanted to honor David. A cake? A special wine tasting? A four-star

restaurant? No. Cheese. Jake had engaged one of France's Master Fromagers to give us a private tour and tasting. And so one crisp September afternoon you would have found Jake, Mo, David and me, together with our host, gathered around a small table in the fromagerie, discussing the fine points of creating cheese and savoring the results. A birthday to remember."

David Ettinger reflected on Jake's approach to life "with enthusiasm, whether it was travel, wine, or the California Supreme Court, and described Jake as "empathetic, sincerely caring for the many people lucky enough to have him as a friend and/or colleague." He admired Jake's "rare, enviable combination of high intelligence, erudition, and common sense."

Jake loved tea and used it to connect with people, often inviting Erin Rosenberg for tea in his office, "where our conversations would range from particularly thorny cases to the best places to dine while in Amsterdam." Matthew Scarola declared that "Jake may well have served more cups of tea than anyone else in Civic Center. I'd bet many of those cups were just an excuse to visit with him. Mine were." Jake would be glad to know that.

From Jake's friend and long-term colleague, Beth Jay, "three words sum up my friend Jake: smart, passionate, and positive. He seemed perpetually upbeat, delighting in new discoveries about the court, wine, good food, and travel. I suspect his daily lunch of leftovers from incredible dinners prepared by his multi-talented wife, Mo, played a role. Thinking of him, I recall our arguments about where 'only' should be placed in a sentence, his satisfaction on finding a picture of one of the obscure transient locations of the California Supreme Court, the wonderful photos he sent from his travels, and so much more."

For his quiet labors Jake sought no laurels or public glory — yet over decades his thoughts influenced the law and life for millions of Californians. And at the end, as always, Jake was ready. We will never know his like again.

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