

BACK STORY



Hon. Melvin T. Brunetti
Senior Circuit Judge,
Ninth Circuit Court
of Appeals
1933 – 2009

IN MEMORIAM: HON. MELVIN T. BRUNETTI

BY R. CHRISTOPHER READE, ESQ.

Melvin T. Brunetti graduated from the University of California, Hastings College of Law in 1964 without an undergraduate degree. That unusual and remarkable achievement typified his life. Melvin Brunetti said that he was taught in his youth to open every door of opportunity and step through. That attitude of adventure, coupled with his superior intellect and home-grown work ethic, carried him to the pinnacle of the legal profession.

When Mel started kindergarten, he did not speak English. He spoke Italian. His grandparents had all immigrated from Italy. He grew up in a close-knit family in Reno and Sparks. His father operated a grocery store and then established a farm and ranch operation in rural Sparks. His interests in woodworking, photography and farming were all developed and nurtured by his father, while his mother cultivated a sense of compassion for others and a love of education and music. He started playing the clarinet in the fourth grade, and was sufficiently accomplished by junior high school to be part of a small ensemble that performed for school, university and community dances through college at the University of Nevada Reno (UNR). The group was known as “The Keystones” for a time, but were more commonly called “Brunetti’s Band.”

After Sparks High School, Mel went to UNR where he studied engineering. Although he was involved in the school community, even elected the junior class president, he did not finish an engineering degree. Mel left college and entered the dairy business, eventually leading the Minden Cooperative Creamery. Seven years later, he re-entered UNR, leaving behind the substantial business he had built, with its lucrative salary and the airplanes that he piloted, to manage the then multi-state dairy operation.

This time at UNR, he majored in accounting. But another door opened when he saw an announcement for students to attend Hastings Law School in San Francisco. He was accepted without an undergraduate degree. Brunetti often said, “[when I] first studied law, that’s what changed my life.” He had found his passion. Throughout law school he worked part-time for the Arthur Young accounting firm. He discovered another interest in the Bay Area: sailing. Mel graduated from Hastings in 1964. Although Arthur Young offered an attractive salary, Brunetti went home to Nevada.

He started at Vargas, Bartlett & Dixon as a litigator. When he took a criminal appointment in federal court, Judge Bruce Thompson told him, “you’ll do fine. You don’t get paid for this, but it’ll be good for your career development.” Over the next 20 years, Brunetti practiced in firms in Las Vegas and Carson City.

Mel Brunetti served more than 10 years on the Board of Governors of the State Bar of Nevada, with his last year as president. When he was sworn in as president on May 5, 1984, by Chief Justice Noel Manoukian of the Nevada Supreme Court, he said, “there is no substitute for excellence in the practice of law.” His tenure was marked by efforts that supported that goal: CLE credit for programs in law office management, use of alternate methods of dispute resolution, better training for young lawyers, creation of gaming and business sections of the bar, and initiation of efforts to establish a substance abuse program for lawyers. The dominant issue on the board agenda that year was an effort by Old College Law School to obtain a waiver of SCR 51(3) that required Nevada bar applicants to attend and graduate from law schools with ABA accreditation.

During his tenure as president of the bar, Melvin T. Brunetti was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Judge Brunetti was sworn in on April 4, 1985. He served actively on the court, authoring hundreds of opinions, as well as filling numerous administrative roles until his passing on October 30, 2009. The practice of law is better because Melvin T. Brunetti was here. ■

