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Higgs attorneys reunite to share memories of veteran firm

By **DOUG SHERWIN**, The Daily Transcript
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Vince Bartolotta wasn't out of the Marines Corps a day when he reported for work at the San Diego law firm **Higgs Fletcher & Mack** on May 1, 1974.

"I still had the high and tight haircut and just came from Balboa Naval Hospital," he said. "I came right in and was ready for duty."

Bartolotta recalled his humble beginnings at one of San Diego's oldest law firms during the group's reunion gathering Thursday on the USS Midway. Approximately 250 past and present employees of Higgs Fletcher & Mack swapped stories of their time at the firm, which was founded in 1939.

Among the attendees was Patti Cooksey, a retired legal secretary who was with the firm for 41 years, and Joe Turner, a retired partner who worked for the firm for 33 years.



Higgs Fletcher & Mack Managing Partner, John Morrell, left, poses with Patti Cooksey, a retired legal secretary who was with the firm for 41 years, and Joe Turner, a retired partner, during the firm's reunion. Photo: Higgs Fletcher & Mack

Bartolotta said he was offered much more money by other firms around the country but decided to join Higgs because of its people.

"We'd run through Balboa Park, change at the 'Y' and come back to work raring to go," he said. "It was kind of special here."

The firm's reputation for integrity also resonated with him.

"They had a reputation of being first-class people ... your word is your bond ... and I liked that a lot," he said. "I'm from Pittsburgh, and that's been my philosophy my whole career."

Bartolotta took over the practice of the late Henry "Pitts" Mack, inheriting his long-time secretary, Margaret Kendall, whom Bartolotta says "taught me how to practice law."

Bartolotta worked as an associate at the firm until 1978, when he declined a partnership to form his own firm with fellow Higgs attorney Mike Thorsnes, which is now called **Thorsnes Bartolotta McGuire**.

Bartolotta left Higgs on good terms, simply deciding he didn't like doing insurance defense work anymore.

"They were just as gracious about my leaving as they were about my coming," Bartolotta said. "They threw me a giant going away party. They're a class act."

While at Higgs, Bartolotta worked with Gregg Sindici, who refers to his tenure from 1973-89 at Higgs as the "glory years."

"The collection of people we had was amazing," Sindici said.

Now an employment trial lawyer at **Littler Mendelson**, Sindici said Higgs has been able to succeed because its model works.

"And they've been able to adapt, which is a very difficult thing to do in today's environment," he said.

In today's ultra competitive legal environment, where partners switch addresses and large national firms absorb local shops with regularity, Higgs has stayed true to its roots. John Morrell, the firm's managing partner since 1997, said the firm doesn't have any desire to merge with a national firm or acquire an international footprint.

"We're oriented to San Diego and the businesses and individuals who live here," he said. "We're focused on the San Diego economy."

The firm has acquired other small, San Diego-centric firms, like McInnis, Fitzgerald, Rees & Sharkey, over the years.

Charlie Rees who started with McInnis Fitzgerald in 1960, said the two firms were a good match.

"Both firms had similar interests," he said. "Both were very old firms with a fine reputation."

Rees retired shortly after the merger in 1999.

Sindici, while happy at Littler Mendelson, said he's pleased to see Higgs remain largely unchanged since he left.

"I've got to say, along with many, many people, I would be disappointed if Higgs Fletcher & Mack had become partner to a merger," he said.

While at the reunion, Sindici was reunited with his secretary of 22 years, Lulu Bautista, who returned to Higgs and is now secretary for attorneys Jim Peterson and Alexis Gutierrez.

Former San Diego County District Attorney Paul Pflugst practiced at Higgs from 1988-95 and then rejoined the firm in 2003 after serving eight years as D.A. He said the reunion is an example of one of the firm's strengths.

"It says law firms can be friendly places," Pflugst said. "They're part of our family. It's not a cold and impersonal profession. It can be warm and caring. That's counter to the stereotype."

The firm has thrived because it's "not a billing machine," Pflugst said. "We don't place a premium emphasis on billing clients and running up hours. We try to find the balance between personal life and professional development."