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HON. Jack J. Gold

Commissioner

Superior Court of California County of Los Angeles

Bar Number:047900

By Don Ray

LOS ANGELES — If music were against the law, Jack J. Gold would be a career criminal, a third-striker, a recidivist's recidivist.

Gold was so deep into the world of music when he was a teenager, he says, that he could very well have made it a career.

Instead, he chose law school, private practice, then public service as a Los Angeles juvenile-court commissioner.

Had he chosen music, he might never have embarked on a career that focused on finding ways to keep troubled young people from becoming lifelong criminals.

For two decades, Gold, 64, has presided over juvenile cases in the North San Fernando Valley community of Sylmar. He's a bench officer with a reputation of not just sitting on his bench.

"He's a street judge," Los Angeles attorney Marlene J. Kabert-Gerson said.

"He cares enough about the kids that he'd go out with the probation officers to see what's going on," Kabert-Gerson said, "and see how the court can help."

Gold's dedication to young people led to programs to clean up graffiti and keep gangs out of the places good kids want to go.

Lately, however, he's become disillusioned because some of those programs are not what they used to be. Politics and the bureaucracy have gotten in the way, he says.

But the music has never left him.

Gold admitted he's been hopelessly addicted to music — the exotic Latin stuff — since he was a kid learning to play drums at Hollywood High School in the late 1950s.

He's still a Latin music junkie today, he confessed. He's careful to control his habit at work. But, more than ever, it's taking control of him when he's off duty.

It all started in high school, Gold said, when he heard a unique beat that seemed to be calling out to him, reverberating from across the Hollywood freeway.

It was the sound of Cuban drums.

He followed the alluring beat, he said, and encountered a group of musicians playing conga drums.

They welcomed him into their world, Gold said, and taught him how to reach his own conga high.

“From then on, when other kids were listening to Elvis and The Beatles, The Grass Roots and what have you,” Gold said, “I was listening to Mongo Santamaria, Cal Tjader, Willie Bobo and all of the old greats.”

After high school, Gold continued to hang with the Latin-music element.

He played with Latin bands around town for a while but, in time, began to question whether he was cut out to be a lifer in that exotic and intoxicating world.

“As I went on,” Gold said, “I saw that maybe being a musician — one of the few Jewish conga players around — was not for me.”

So he went to community college for a couple of years and took a job as an insurance investigator and adjuster. That was his first exposure to the legal profession.

“I saw people going to law school, and I said, ‘If those guys can go to law school, I can go to law school,’” he said.

Gold passed a college equivalency exam and enrolled in the Beverly College of Law, an unaccredited school in the Larchmont Village area of Los Angeles.

The school's mantra, he says, was “You're not here to become a lawyer. You're here to pass the bar. That's our job.”

When the teachers weren't pounding the State Bar Exam into his head, Gold said, he was surviving by working in the insurance industry and, every chance he got, scoring extra cash by pounding conga drums in small clubs from Los Angeles to Oxnard.

By the time he graduated in 1969, he says, Whittier Law School had bought out Beverly.

“That made me a graduate of an accredited law school,” Gold said.

He and a classmate, Stanley Y. Oda, passed the State Bar on their first try, as promised, and went into practice together.

“Not knowing what to do,” he said, “we went to Judge Marvin Freeman and got on the juvenile panel and did court-appointed juvenile and criminal.”

But Gold could always hear the distant drums of Latin music, so he developed a burning interest in music and recording law.

He took every legal course he could find relating to the recording industry and took on record-industry clients.

However, he embraced juvenile work as his legitimate vocation, he said.

“I’ve been doing juvenile the entire life of my legal career,” Gold said, “and music.”

Along the way, he produced a couple of 45-rpm singles, both of which hit the Billboard charts.

“My song, ‘Like They Say in L.A.,’ made it to No. 10,” he said. “It was a mixture of Latin and pop, and we called the band The East L.A. Carpool.”

At the time, Gold said, they tried but failed to convince city leaders to make “Like They Say in L.A.” the theme song for the city of Los Angeles.

“We’re trying to do that again now,” he said. “I’ve submitted an edited portion of it to the producers of ‘Eye on L.A.,’ and we’re waiting to hear from them.”

Gold’s obsession with music took second billing in his life in 1983 when he became a juvenile court commissioner.

He spent much of his free time working with officials from the Los Angeles County Probation Department, deputy sheriffs and local police officers to address the growing graffiti problem in the San Fernando Valley and points north.

The informal consortium eventually came up with a program called Project Heavy.

“We created a complaint line where a person could call up and say, ‘I’ve been graffitied,’ and our kids who were arrested for graffiti would end up going out to clean up the graffiti,” Gold said.

He and Judge Morton O. Rochman also were active in arranging an effective solution to the growing number of juvenile crimes occurring at Universal Studios Citywalk.

“After much fighting and infighting, we got jurisdiction over the Citywalk,” he said. “It was loaded with gang members. We arranged a program where gang officers would go up there on Friday nights and Saturday nights and try and assist in keeping it gang-free.”

Gold says he and other judges began seeing fewer gang-related crimes coming from the tourist attraction.

“That program has since been closed down,” he said and paused.

“Don’t get me started.”

Even though Los Angeles County Sheriff’s officials say they are doing a good job of keeping gang members from causing problems at Citywalk, Gold said he’s seeing more and more cases from there involving firearms and crimes such as purse snatchings.

He also said he’s frustrated that the graffiti program he helped to champion fell victim to politics, even though the Los Angeles Police Department has a new, different program, the Community Tagger Task Force, that is addressing the tagging problem.

Gold said that the new program is a good one but that the officers who used to make regular visits to his courtroom have been transferred to other assignments and their replacements rarely come to exchange information. Gold believes the public relies on these programs.

“We’re the first lines of their defense,” he said, “but nobody comes and talks with us about it.

“But, then again, you’re talking about a city that has 9,000 police officers under the gun in a place that needs 30,000 minimum.”

There’s no shortage of government and community-based programs out there to help young people, Gold said, but representatives of only a few of them — public or private — come to the courthouse to coordinate their efforts.

“There’s money flowin’,” he said, “but nobody’s showin’.”

Gold said he and the other bench officers in juvenile court are in a position to see emerging trends among juveniles, but, all too often, nobody wants to hear it.

Eight or 10 years ago, he said, he tried to tell the law enforcement community that he was seeing evidence that a Salvadoran gang, known as “M.S.,” was organizing in the Southland.

“There had been a couple of murders at a Tommy’s Burgers by M.S. Salvadoran gang members,” Gold said.

He was disgusted, he said, because he could see what he thought was a major crime problem emerging and nobody seemed to be looking out for the public.

So he wrote a letter to the editor of the Los Angeles Daily News and described what he was certain was a serious problem developing with that particular Hispanic gang.

“Ultimately, because of that letter,” Gold said, “I ended up being transferred — a discipline transfer — to another court for close to a year.”

He said it was punishment because of the racial content of his letter. He said a high-level law enforcement official said the letter was racially motivated.

“‘What do you mean this had racial content?’” Gold remembers saying. “‘I’m a public official. I have to speak out on matters of public concern.’”

He also told them that he has spent most of his life working with and around Hispanics — it was outrageous, he said, to accuse him of racism.

His vindication, Gold said, came a decade later.

“Just months ago,” Gold said, “splashed across the cover of U.S. News and World Report and the L.A. Times, ‘M.S. Gang Has Roots Throughout the United States, Mexico and Central America.’ In drug dealing, murder for hire, prostitution, you name it.”

Gold said he was happy to see it, because now the FBI is in on it.

“It brought home what I said,” he said.

Gold paused and shook his head as if to suppress the sarcasm. But it was too close to the surface.

“I’m sorry, then, that I wrote that letter, huh?” Gold said in an I-told-you-so tone.

“There they are,” he said. “Now what are you going to do about it?”

Gold said that he’s given up on trying to change the entire system but that he hasn’t given up on the young people who come before him.

Deputy Public Defender Philomene J. Swenson has appeared before Gold many times and said she understands his concerns.

“Commissioner Gold has a lot of opinions about graffiti and gangs, and I can understand the frustration,” Swenson said.

However, she applauds Gold for the concerns he shows for every juvenile defendant who appears before him.

“He’s willing to give the young people a chance to prove themselves,” Swenson said, “but if they cross him, forget it!”

She said he’s willing to take into consideration some of the complex issues that sometimes a youth presents.

“Not just that they’ve committed a crime,” Swenson said, “but that they may have family dysfunction and they are maybe a victim of abuse. He is aware of all that, and he takes all those things, I think, into consideration when he’s making a decision about the appropriate thing to happen in a case.”

Encino attorney Daniel Kallen said he shares Gold’s frustrations involving a juvenile system that is changing because of budgetary problems — problems that have resulted in not enough facilities and programs for young offenders.

However, Kallen said, Gold doesn’t let the frustration affect his role as commissioner.

“He’s stern when he has to impose significant penalties,” Kallen said, “but he’s usually willing to give kids at least one chance or two.”

Deputy District Attorney Courtney D. Wheeler Armendariz was Gold’s calendar deputy for two years.

“He keeps in mind the ultimate goal of the juvenile court, which is to help and rehabilitate the juveniles,” Wheeler Armendariz said. “But on the same note, he’s sensitive to the victims’ needs. He’s willing to follow the law but also to enforce the impact of their actions upon the juveniles so they understand they have impacted more than just themselves by their criminal activities.”

Deputy Public Defender Julia Winn Dixon said Gold has the proper demeanor and balance.

“I found him to be very efficient and reasonable to both sides,” Dixon said.

Rochman said Gold takes his job very seriously.

“I think he’s really empathetic to what’s going on,” Rochman said. “From my perspective, he’s an outstanding bench officer. He’s experienced, hard-working and respected by everyone.”

Nowadays, Gold tries not to worry about what he can’t control, he said.

“What makes me happy here is to deal with what comes in front of me,” Gold said. “I’m out of the Don Quixote, Lancelot days.

“To keep myself sane, I have gone back and reacquainted myself with all my musical friends, and I spend a lot of time making music. Some people take up golf; I went back to music.”

Gold now manages and performs in an 11-piece Latin-rock band, “L.A. Carpool,” similar to his first band, he said.

He said he’s amazed at the following his group has on the Internet at www.lacarpool.com.

“We’ve managed to put our CDs on Apple I-Tune, Real Player and Rhapsody,” Gold said. “We’re distributed all over the world.”

He and his group have appeared on television and in the motion picture “Narc.”

When he gets off work, Gold records and re-records tracks for the group’s next CD. If he’s not doing music, he said, he’s at home relaxing with his wife, Rachel Gold, and their 2½-year-old “daughter” Lucy. Lucy has four legs and is half Irish wolfhound and half wheaten terrier.

His son, Jason Gold, 27, is off studying for the State Bar Exam.

Gold also enjoys a good murder mystery.

“In my household,” he quipped, “there are no sports allowed — just music and murder mysteries.”

In all of his years, Gold said, there’s one lesson he’s learned above all the rest.

Music, he said, may be addictive, but it is legal, and it soothes your soul.