

GARY S. GREENE*

“We Shall Return”:

Music, Loss, and Resilience After the Fires

Dedication: As I completed writing this article, I heard the sad news that my dear friend Selma Moidel Smith passed away. Selma was an attorney when few women entered the profession, a composer and musician when most professional orchestras did not allow women, the first woman editor-in-chief of California Legal History and an honorary member of the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic. She touched the lives of so many. We will miss her deeply.

January 7, 2025, was a devastating day. It was on that day that the Pacific Palisades and Eaton fires erupted in Los Angeles County, claiming twenty-eight lives and destroying more than 16,000 structures. The fires upended the lives of thousands, touching people of every race, religion, culture—and profession. Among those impacted were lawyers and judges who are also members of the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic, Legal Voices, and Gary Greene, Esq. & His Big Band of Barristers.

As 2025 began, our musical groups were immersed in preparing for beautiful spring concerts, meeting weekly to rehearse. Then suddenly the fires stopped the music. Yet remarkably, the first members to ask about resuming rehearsals were those who had suffered the greatest losses. “When is our next rehearsal?” they asked. Music, for them, wasn’t a luxury—it was a lifeline. Some musicians fled their homes with nothing but their instruments. Others lost everything, including their instruments. Still, within two weeks, borrowing where necessary, we were making music again.

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Justice Arthur Gilbert: A Home of Music Lost

The Honorable **Arthur Gilbert**, Presiding Justice of the California Court of Appeal, Second District, Division Six, is not only a distinguished jurist but also the key man of our big band. When I first met him about fifteen years ago, we discussed creating a first rank big band composed of lawyers and judges. It would consist of seventeen members and myself as the band leader. It would be modeled after the famous big bands of the 1930s and 1940s that were led by Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and others. Justice Gilbert liked the idea and agreed to be our piano player. He and his wife Barbara offered their home as the rehearsal venue for the band. The Gilberts hosted every band rehearsal at their house from May 17, 2012, until the day it burned down—January 7, 2025.

On that devastating day in 2025, the Gilberts lost their home and all their possessions including the justice's cherished Fazioli . . . one of the world's finest pianos. It had a powerful and rich sound with a wide dynamic range, from the softest pianissimo to the most powerful fortissimo. When the band rehearsed, the sounds emanating from the Gilbert home attracted neighbors who stopped by to listen. Visitors included actresses June Lockhart and Diane Keaton. The music brought life to the neighborhood. All that ended on January 7, 2025. There was no longer a home, no personal effects, no Fazioli and no place for the band to meet and play music. How does one cope with such a loss?

In Justice Gilbert's own words:

The fire, not content to take our music, our recordings, our CDs, our piano, and the set of drums I kept at the house, it also took the special place where the Big Band of Barristers rehearsed Tuesday nights, 7:00 P.M. This was the meeting place where all the musicians were at home. Show up, no formalities. The lawyer musicians came from work with their instruments to where they made music.

Beforehand, we rolled up the Persian rug and pulled it to the side. We set up the folding chairs and music stands under which we placed newspapers to collect the spit that periodically spilled when the brass players emptied their valves. To produce a sound that captivates also involves what I call, for lack of a better term, earthiness. This is akin to the opposite reaction to every action.

If only to play again, with our musical entourage. Gary found a place and several weeks after the conflagration we met for a rehearsal. It was different. In place of my concert grand was a digital keyboard with a passable sound system. I was so inspired that despite limited practice, my

“chops,” (jazz term for technique) were relatively good. We played and during that rehearsal, for the first time since our loss, I felt joy and a sense of peace of mind. At the end of the rehearsal, I spontaneously proclaimed to my fellow musicians, “We Shall Return!” They cheered. The plans I approved for our hoped-for rebuilt home provide for a large room for the piano and the band to once again rehearse.

I continually tell myself, “Who are we to complain?” Thousands of people are in a similar predicament, all trying to plan for an uncertain future. Solace is elusive, but I have found the certain palliative: music.

Music is truly the essence of life. Both the performer and the listener are taken to another world where they are free from the “trials and tribulations” of a hectic lifestyle. Justice Gilbert’s dual passions for the courtroom and the concert hall serve as an inspiration, reminding us of the harmony that can be achieved when we blend our professional pursuits with our creative passions, and even more so when coping with a devastating loss.

Justice Helen Bendix: Music Amid the Ashes

The Honorable **Helen Bendix**, Associate Justice of the California Court of Appeal, Second District, Division One, is a long-time associate principal violist in the LA Lawyers Philharmonic. Her home in the Pacific Palisades was also lost in the fire. She escaped with only her musical instruments.

In her words:

The only things I took when I evacuated from my home of forty years were my violins and violas. This is symbolic of the importance of music to recovery after losing everything. Playing in orchestras and chamber music provided normalcy in an upside-down world. I focused on my blessings—my family, my friends, my job, and my music. The fire does not define me. These blessings do.

Justice Bendix later welcomed our musicians to rehearse and perform in her new home, continuing to uplift the community through music.

Marc L. Sallus: Recovery Through Community

Marc L. Sallus, Esq., a partner at Oldman, Sallus & Gold, LLP, plays trombone in both my Big Band of Barristers and the LA Lawyers Philharmonic. He is also a sponsor of our musical groups. His Pacific Palisades home, which had hosted concerts overlooking the ocean, was reduced to ashes. He lost everything—including a collection of instruments passed down through generations.

Even as the fires raged, Marc called me to say he had borrowed a trombone and was ready to rehearse. Later, he generously offered his new home as a rehearsal space.

He shared:

I've performed since age six—voice, piano, trumpet, trombone, baritone. I lost every instrument, including the family piano. It hit hard. But friends stepped in. One sent me a baritone. Another, a trombone stand. Someone lent me a trombone. Music and my fellow musicians helped me begin to heal. I've since acquired a new trombone and piano. Though I mourn what I lost, I've been lifted by the kindness of friends.

Nicholas Allis: The Power of Singing

Nicholas Allis, Esq., a member of our Legal Voices chorus, also lost his home of twenty-five years in the fires. He and his wife escaped with only their dog, their cars, and the clothes they were wearing.

Reflecting on those chaotic days, Nick said:

We stayed in motels and with friends, constantly rushing around. One day, I told my children, “Let’s not allow stress to define us. Let’s be calm and happy despite the losses.”

Singing helped me rise above the trauma. It’s a reality different from the chaos—relaxed, communicative, creative. Singing with others creates connection. I once read that when members of a chorus sing together, their brainwaves synchronize. I wasn’t surprised. Thank you to Legal Voices and my church choir for lifting me up.

Other Stories of Resilience

Linda Kaye, our Legal Voices piano accompanist, lost her home and her piano.

Ted Ancona, a bassoonist in the LA Lawyers Philharmonic, lost his home in the Eaton (Altadena) Fire—but escaped with his instrument.

We did everything we could to help musicians replace lost instruments. Despite profound losses, every affected member returned for rehearsals and performed with us at our 16th Anniversary Concert Extraordinaire at Walt Disney Concert Hall on June 28, 2025. It was a triumphant, emotional performance—one that proved the indomitable power of music.

Music: The Soul’s Solace

Music is the essence of life. For both performer and listener, it provides escape, solace, and connection. It lifts us beyond the burdens of daily life—especially in the wake of devastating loss.

Justice Gilbert’s passion for both the courtroom and the concert hall reminds us of the harmony that can be achieved when we blend our professional lives with our creative passions. The hundreds of musicians who’ve performed with us agree: in today’s complex world, music is more than a pastime—it is a vital antidote. It heals. It inspires. It sustains.

And, as long as we have music in our busy lives in the legal profession, **we shall return.**

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