

The Affinity Bar Legacy Project

The idea for the Affinity Bar Legacy Project began with Arizona Lawyers for Equal Justice, which recognized the need to preserve the history of Arizona's affinity bar associations and helped spark a broader effort to bring that vision to life.

The project moved to the State Bar's Bar Leadership Institute (BLI), where the Class of 2025 adopted it as their community service initiative and began compiling the histories of the 12 affinity bars recognized by the State Bar of Arizona. The scope quickly exceeded a single year, and the Class of 2026 continued the work through completion.

This article offers just a piece of the now-completed project. Over two years, 31 BLI attorneys documented the histories of the dozen affinity bars, from their origins in the 1970s to today. Some histories were at risk of being lost, while others are still unfolding. Together, they show how these organizations have shaped those who practice law in Arizona. This is not a complete record but an effort to document and recognize these organizations and their contributions, with the understanding that many stories remain untold. Explore more detailed histories of the affinity bars featured here—complete with video interviews, timelines, resources and more: azbar.org/about-us/affinity-bar-association-section

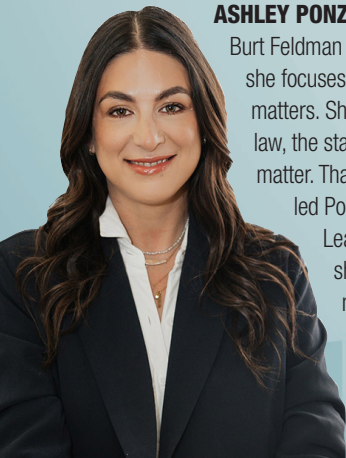
BLI will also host a panel discussion, "Voices of Arizona: Applying Lessons from Affinity Bars to Improve Lawyering and Leadership," at the State Bar Convention in Tucson on Thursday, June 25, 2026, at 10:30 a.m. Leaders from several affinity bars will discuss their work and its relevance to everyday practice.

The Connectors of Ariz

BY AUDREY MILLER &
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AUDREY MILLER is an associate at the Tucson firm Farhang & Medcoff, PLLC. In her spare time, she advocates for individuals and attorneys with disabilities, spends time with her husband and dogs, and writes. She credits participation in the Bar Leadership Institute as one of the most profound and informative experiences of her life.



ASHLEY PONZO is a partner at Burt Feldman Grenier in Scottsdale, where she focuses on complex family law matters. She understands that in family law, the stakes are high and the details matter. That drive to empower clients led Ponzo to apply for the Bar Leadership Institute. At home, she keeps busy as the mother of three children, who remind her who the most important people are in a family law case.

About the Bar Leadership Institute

Begun in 2007 under the umbrella of the State Bar's Diversity Task Force, the Bar Leadership Institute (BLI) aims to identify and foster Arizona attorneys who will take leadership positions in their careers. The selective program provides leadership training, practical skills and valuable networking opportunities over the course of eight months of workshops and events. It also launches its alumni into leadership roles by sponsoring an annual group community service project and encouraging graduates to take part in State Bar activities after graduation. For more information about BLI or to apply for the Class of 2027, visit azbar.org/BLI.

Contributors to the BLI Legacy Project are, alphabetically: Lelia Adams, Kaitlin Amos, Jillian Bauman, Shannon Brien, Chinue Carr, Christopher Channell, Gregory Coordes, Daniel Curiel, Cameron Curtis, Tonée Earle, Christian Fernandez, Kristian Garibay, Javier Gherna, Luan Gurra, Hayden Hilliard, Maura Hilser, Jim Ko, Zubin Kottoor, Chelsea Lynch, Alexander Mallory, Madeline Mayer, Audrey Miller, Ashley Ponzo, Harrison Rice, Elizabeth Schmitt, Vineet Shaw, Danielle Solomon, Clarissa Todd, Trent Waller, Eric Wootton and Diamond Zambrano.

Arizona's Legal Community

How the state's affinity bars built networks of advocacy and access and continue to shape the practice of law in Arizona



The First Connectors

Early in a legal career, a single connection can change a lawyer's trajectory. Arizona's affinity bars are where many of those connections begin.

Despite their influence, many Arizona attorneys could not readily name an affinity bar. Yet their impact is felt across the state's legal community. What began as small informal efforts to address gaps in representation and mentorship have become lasting institutions that continue to shape the practice of law in Arizona.

In 1988, a law student named George Barnett reached out with a simple idea. He contacted Hon. Paul Tang, then a young lawyer, along with other attorneys and judges of color, asking how they might better support minority law students who were struggling to find their footing.

"That set us off," Tang recalls, "in an effort to identify what we might be able to do to help these students come up with an organization that could achieve that, while also creating something that could support its own members."

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The answer was the creation of the Arizona Minority Bar Association (AMBA). Based in Tucson, AMBA is one of 12 affiliated affinity bars in Arizona. What began nearly four decades ago as a grassroots effort to support minority law students has grown into the organization's scholarship-focused work today. The State Bar of Arizona identifies diversity as a core value, and affinity bars help advance that mission through their work in representation, inclusion and access to the profession.

The story of the affinity bars is, at its core, a story of connections forged across boundaries of race, class, gender and identity. Across them all, a common thread emerged: Each began not as a formal institution but as a response to absence, a gap in representation, mentorship or community. Sometimes, even naming diversity as a core value can be seen as controversial. Yet in compiling these histories, the BLI repeat-

edly saw the ongoing need for meaningful connections between underrepresented groups and the broader legal community.

Controversy is nothing new to affinity bar members. Their histories are rooted in longstanding patterns of discrimination and underrepresentation. Other groups, such as AMBA, have encountered similar tensions.

"There were some members who felt that 'minority' was a pejorative and derogatory term," Tang says. "But we suggested: Hey, look, we didn't create the name 'minority.' That was established long before we set our foot on this earth, and it'll probably be here long after we're gone. So why don't we go ahead and accept the name for what it is and then make it what we want it to mean?"

Connecting Attorneys

Community-building among attorneys is a

common thread in the formation of Arizona's affinity bars. The Arizona Jewish Lawyers Association (AJLA) was founded in 2010 after attorneys recognized there was no organization serving Jewish lawyers in Arizona. It quickly gained momentum, with a happy hour drawing a strong turnout and demonstrating the wide interest.

"What motivated the AJLA originally was just connectivity, just knowing that there wasn't a minority bar or smaller bar for Jewish lawyers was kind of odd to us," recalls Elise Himmelstein, a founding member. "We thought it'd be a good thing to bring people together and see where it goes and just build a community around it."

Many of these organizations began not as formal institutions, but as small groups of attorneys seeking connection in a profession where they were underrepresented. Los Abogados reflects that same organic evolution, while standing as both one of the ear-

At the Native American Bar Association of Arizona's 2025 Seven Generations Awards Dinner and Silent Auction, Robert Miller (center) is honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award, pictured with current and former students in recognition of his enduring impact on Native American law and legal education.



liest and the largest affinity bars in Arizona.

Founded in 1976, Los Abogados began as an informal group of Mexican American attorneys in Phoenix, at a time when only a few dozen were practicing in the Valley. In those early years, members met regularly to discuss issues affecting both the profession and the Hispanic community, gradually expanding beyond conversation into action, including organized lunches and seminars led by members.

Interestingly, the name “Los Abogados,” which is Spanish for “the lawyers,” emerged organically before any formal structure existed. After several initial meetings, members gathered in a conference room at the Arizona Attorney General’s Office, where one of them worked as an assistant attorney general. Various formal names were proposed, such as “Hispanic Lawyers Association” and “Mexican Lawyers Association,” but one suggestion—“Los

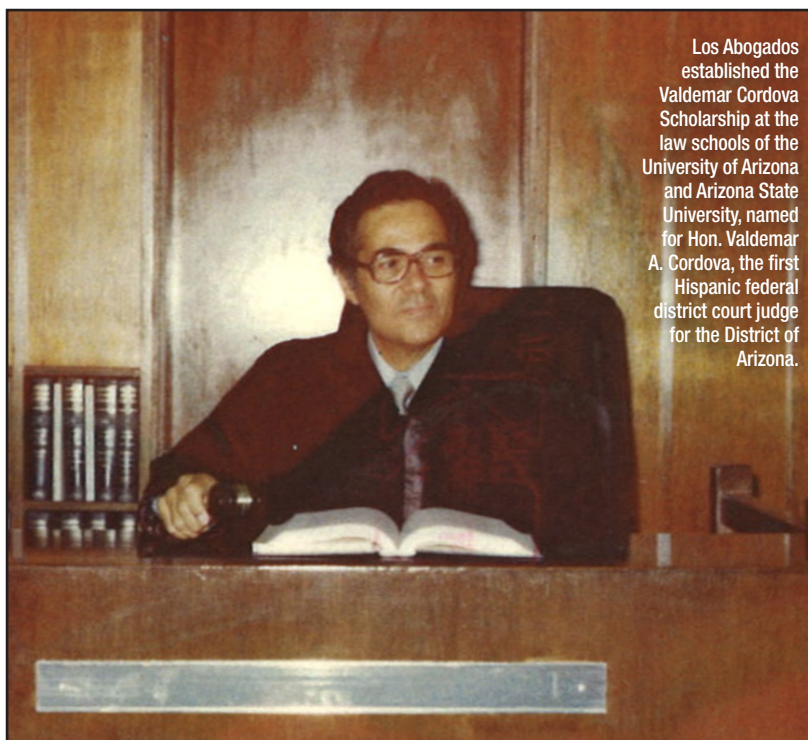
Abogados”—stood apart to the members at the time because it was culturally grounded and immediately resonant.

Over time, Los Abogados evolved from this close-knit network into a cornerstone of Arizona’s legal community, formally incorporating in 1988. Today, it operates as a pipeline organization, supporting individuals from high school to the bench. Its scholarship programs, including the Valdemar Cordova Scholarships, and its mentorship efforts have long helped students and attorneys find a foothold in the profession.

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Some of Arizona’s affinity bars are unique to the state. Others, such as the Iranian American Bar Association (IABA), are part of national organizations, connecting Arizona attorneys with a broader network. The Phoenix chapter of IABA links local attorneys to that national community, with a focus on advocacy and professional development.

“When I was in DC, I started meeting Iranian Americans who were involved with the IABA, and it was a really great resource to network and to meet other attorneys,” says Meenoo Chahbazi, the Phoenix chapter’s outreach director. “I made some really good friends through the organization.”



Los Abogados established the Valdemar Cordova Scholarship at the law schools of the University of Arizona and Arizona State University, named for Hon. Valdemar A. Cordova, the first Hispanic federal district court judge for the District of Arizona.

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Although the chapter is “tiny but mighty,” Chahbazi says, it is a bridge between Iranian American attorneys and the broader Arizona legal community.

Connection within these communities goes beyond networking. It shapes how attorneys see their work and their place in the profession.

Robert McWhirter of the St. Thomas More Society explains, “You get to know people, but also in terms of just having a fulfilled, full, professional life ... that’s uniquely a lawyer. Being an accountant is a perfectly valid, legitimate kind of profession, but they don’t have a history and tradition and ethos that lawyers have in terms of representing clients.” Rooted in a shared Catholic tradition, the St. Thomas More Society offers a space for attorneys to engage in faith and practice.

AMBA’s president, Matthew Scarber, explains the importance that affinity bar

communities hold for their members.

“I’ve learned a lot about Arizona and Arizona’s legal communities, and I think that it’s a great community of lawyers out here in Pima County,” he says. “We’re close-knit. We want to make sure that the attorneys here succeed, that they know how to be professional, and that they can be helpful to one another and helpful to the community.”

AMBA’s membership reflects a broad coalition of underrepresented communities, including Black, Latino, Asian Pacific Islander and Native attor-



Timothy Basista accepts the AZ LGBTQ affinity bar scholarship award at the Drag Happy Hour 2.0 event at Charlie's Phoenix, June 2023.



Members and volunteers of the Arizona Black Bar gather at the 2025 MCBA Hall of Fame Dinner, with Arizona Justice Maria Elena Cruz, center.

neys, while remaining open to all who support its mission.

Mentorship within the affinity bars also helps carry the profession forward, giving younger attorneys a way to learn from those who came before them. Without those opportunities, many young lawyers, particularly those from underrepresented groups, can feel disconnected from the practice.

“I understand what it’s like to not have a mentor and to be searching for that connection, to be searching for that information, to be searching for that guidance,” Scarber says.

The LGBTQ+ Bar Association places a similar emphasis on mentorship and visibility, creating pathways for law students and attorneys to connect with supportive professional networks. Wil Comer, general counsel with the Arizona Education Association and a past board member of the association, says, “One of the accomplishments for the organization that I am most proud of is that it has become a place for upcoming law students to find connections with practicing

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attorneys and law firms that are supportive of our representation and our community.”

For many law students, those connections translate into a stronger sense of readiness for practice. Affinity bars offer not only guidance but a sense of community and shared resilience.

Comer says, “My involvement through this organization has shaped the lens of how I understand and connect with people that may have the needs that I’m privileged enough to say that I was able to obtain from the legal experience and the legal knowledge that I have up until this stage in my life.”

He continues, “But there’s always going to be someone out there who might just not see themselves represented, and if I’m that person who can show that and be visible so that someone behind me feels encouraged to do the same things that I’ve done within my career, it’ll all be worth it in the end.”

A core function of the affinity bars is connecting attorneys to the communities they serve and helping ensure the legal system is applied fairly. As Scarber describes it, the goal is for the legal community to reflect the people it represents.

Connecting Communities

Minority populations have long been underrepresented in the practice of law, a gap that has contributed to a sense of disconnection from the legal system in many communities. Affinity bar associations emerged, in part, to address that divide.

Founded in 1971 as the Arizona



Black Lawyers Association (ABB), the organization took shape at a time when only a handful of Black attorneys were practicing in Phoenix. Its early efforts focused on increasing visibility and supporting future Black lawyers, according to retired Court of Appeals Judge Cecil Patterson, a founding member who moved from Virginia to Arizona after law school.

“I spent a lot of nights at community meetings in Phoenix trying to learn the community, understand the people, talk to as many individuals as I could, to understand what they saw as the issues here and what the community was like,” Patterson says. “I would see people when I went to Legal Aid in 1971 and 1972 who would stop and talk to me as a curiosity. They had never seen anybody like me practicing.”

Patty Ferguson Bonhee, a member of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe, explained the need behind the Native American Bar Association, founded in 2007.

“We needed a space where there could be support for Indian law and pro-sovereignty, pro-tribe. And we needed a space

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that wasn’t just focused on Indian law, but was focused on supporting the development of Native attorneys, no matter what area of practice they were in.”

Raymond Etcitty Jr., a committee chair of the association, describes a parallel development within the Navajo Nation, where the bar association evolved alongside the Nation’s courts, helping regulate practitioners within a sovereign legal system. “The Navajo Nation, as a sovereign entity, had its own laws and litigated before its own

courts around the 1970s. The judges on Navajo and Indian Legal Services saw the need to create their own bar association and begin to develop their own membership.”

Connections with minority communities often extend beyond individual legal needs into broader advocacy. Meenoo Chahbazi of IABA points to the 2002 National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, implemented after 9/11, which required Iranians to register. Shortly after its formation, the IABA campaigned against the program,

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which was dismantled in 2016.

"There were some horror stories about 85-year-old men having to go and register and then being detained," Chahbazi says. "And all they did was just live as peaceful green card holders."

Efforts to bring communities together to address individual and systemic challenges continue.

As Judge Patterson explains, "We kept plodding along because our purpose was to gain visibility, gain a reputation as responsible professionals, and to have an impact in the local community with regard to representing our people."

Connecting Generations

The demographics of the legal profession are shifting in measurable ways. For the incoming class of law students enrolling in 2026, 36,651 of 74,443 students identified as belonging to an ethnic minority, and 43,457 identified as female or non-binary, according to the Law School Admission Council—reflecting an increase from the

previous year.¹ The growing presence and visibility of these groups are due, in part, to the work of organizations like the affinity bars, which now serve as a bridge between a more diverse generation of lawyers and those who came before them.

Earlier generations set out to build that path. As Judge Patterson recalls of the ABB, "We got our charter in 1971, and the organization began to try to develop a presence in the Valley, because to that point, there had only been two African American lawyers here. It was also geared toward giving Black lawyers some visibility, so that it would encourage young people who are coming along to look in that direction. It's not an impossible direction. It's a little hard work involved, but it pays benefits at the end."

Judge Tang describes the responsibility he feels toward today's students.

"It seems as if when you're a younger lawyer, in particular a person of color, you feel like you've got to work a lot harder than the person next to you, who may not be of color. You feel this weight, this thought that if you somehow don't make it and you fail,

or you stub your toe, that anyone after you will potentially be impacted in terms of his or her or their ability to enter the field."

As the profession evolves, younger attorneys are finding new ways to navigate and define their paths. Sheena Chiang, a member of the South Asian Bar Association (SABA), recalls, "Sometimes we'll joke that it's not always been really encouraged or celebrated for South Asian kids in the law to seek careers in a public or a government sphere, so it's been really great to reach out to attorneys that have had some similar experiences within their own parental communities to discuss, this might not be what our parents or our aunts and uncles wanted for us to not pursue big firm life, but this is what we're doing, and this is how we're going to educate the older generation as to why this is important."

Chiang describes younger attorneys taking over leadership roles within SABA.

"That's really a testament to generational transfer of knowledge and growth on a scale that has met our needs. It's really been fun to watch, especially from my vantage point, because I wasn't the old guard; I was like the mid-guard. And now I'm still involved, no longer serving the leadership, but I get to go to the events and have a really good time with what the younger leadership has been able to accomplish. And I really see a lot of the fruits of that labor within the community. It's only going to get better."

Future Connections

Across Arizona, affinity bars do more than connect attorneys. What began with informal gatherings, mentorship efforts and responses to exclusion has grown into lasting institutions that bridge generations and identities. Preserving these histories is an act of reflection and a way of ensuring that the lessons, relationships and leadership created through these organizations continue to shape the next wave of lawyers and the future of Arizona's legal community. 

ARIZONA AFFINITY BARS AT A GLANCE

Arizona Asian American Bar Association azasianbar.org

- Founded in 1993, this bar works to increase the representation of Asian American attorneys in Arizona.
- Its flagship Thomas Tang Scholarship honors one of Arizona's most influential judges while supporting future attorneys.
- The organization blends professional development with direct community engagement, including legal services and outreach.
- Programming addresses issues affecting Asian American communities, from immigration to emerging technologies. Its work focuses on turning representation into access, advocacy and influence.

Arizona Black Bar arizonablackbar.com

- Founded in 1971 as the Arizona Black Lawyers Association, at a time when few Black attorneys practiced in Phoenix. For years beginning in 1993, it was known as the Hayzel B. Daniels Bar Association, honoring its founder.
- Early efforts focused on increasing visibility and encouraging more African American students to enter the profession.
- It formed in response to barriers in representation and support, beginning with small informal gatherings.
- Advocacy, community service and mentorship remain central to its work today.

Arizona Jewish Lawyers Association

jewishphoenix.com/organizations/az-jewish-lawyers-association

- It was founded in 2010 after attorneys recognized there was no organization for Jewish lawyers in Arizona.
- Early events drew strong turnout, showing clear demand for a Jewish legal community.
- The bar emphasizes accessibility, relying on sponsorships rather than membership dues.
- Programming expanded quickly beyond social events, including initiatives like a Holocaust CLE. Its focus remains on connecting Jewish legal professionals and building community.

endnotes

1. YTD US Applicants from Region/State of Permanent Residents, Law School Admissions Council, April 5, 2026. [Report.lsac.org/VolumeSummary.aspx](https://report.lsac.org/VolumeSummary.aspx).

ARIZONA AFFINITY BARS AT A GLANCE

Arizona Minority Bar Association theazminoritybar.org

- Founded about 40 years ago to support minority law students through grassroots fundraising.
- It is based in Pima County, with programming that extends across Arizona.
- Membership includes a broad coalition of underrepresented attorneys and allies, united by shared barriers.
- It focuses on scholarships, mentorship and access, while serving as a professional network offering CLEs, referrals and support.

Arizona Women Lawyers Association awla.clubexpress.com

- It was founded in 1975 to address gender barriers in the legal profession and expand opportunities for women lawyers.
- The AWLA developed a strong mentorship pipeline by the 1990s, pairing newer attorneys with experienced practitioners.
- It operates statewide with a central board and four regional chapters serving local communities.
- The bar focuses on advancement and connection through resources, networking and recognition for women lawyers.

Iranian American Bar Association iaba.us/chapters/phoenix

- It was founded in 2012 by now-Superior Court Commissioner Samin Adib, with early growth driven by targeted community outreach.
- Small but intentional in scale, the bar is described by its leaders as “tiny but mighty.”
- It focuses on community education, including “Know Your Rights” programs and outreach on immigration issues.
- The bar engages in civil rights advocacy and pro bono efforts while partnering with other affinity bars to expand its reach.

LGBTQ+ Bar Association of Arizona lgbtqbar.org/programs/legal-professionals/bar-affiliates/

- It was founded in 2015 to create a space where legal professionals could be open about their identities.
- The bar grew from early leadership and advocacy efforts into an independent bar focused on LGBTQ+ issues.
- It is inclusive of attorneys, legal professionals and allies across the community.
- The bar connects members to advocacy and impact litigation while providing direct support through programs like Name and Gender Marker Clinics.

Los Abogados losabogados.org

- Founded in 1976 as an informal network for Hispanic attorneys, later incorporating in 1988.
- Focuses on empowering the Latino community through education, advocacy and a “family” network supporting members at all stages.
- Invests in scholarships, including the Valdemar Cordova Scholarships, honoring Arizona's first Latino federal judge.
- Centers mentorship and pipeline programs, including initiatives like the Professor Calleros Fellowship.

ARIZONA AFFINITY BARS AT A GLANCE

Native American Bar Association of Arizona **naba-az.com**

- Founded in 2007 to support Native attorneys and advance pro-sovereignty, pro-tribal advocacy.
- Focuses on education, visibility and pipeline development through CLEs, mentorship and student support.
- Hosts the Seven Generations Dinner, honoring contributions and funding scholarships for Native law students.
- Emphasizes community service, including initiatives like the Arizona Native Vote Protection Project.

Navajo Nation Bar Association **navajolaw.info**

- Founded in 1978 by Navajo Nation judges to regulate practitioners and support the development of Navajo law within a sovereign legal system.
- Membership is required to practice within the Nation, reflecting its independent courts, laws and procedures.
- Includes both attorneys and tribal court advocates, with pathways to practice through formal education and apprenticeship.
- Serves a large and growing membership across a multistate jurisdiction.

South Asian Bar Association of Arizona **sabanorthamerica.com**

- Began as a small, informal network in the mid-2000s and formally incorporated in 2017.
- Grew from a handful of attorneys to a steadily expanding membership.
- Centers mentorship, connecting law students and newer attorneys with experienced practitioners.
- Hosts events like its Diwali celebration, blending cultural engagement with professional networking.

St. Thomas More Society of Phoenix **stthomasmoresocietyphoenix.org**

- Founded in 1955 to bring together Catholic attorneys and integrate faith with legal practice; reestablished in the 1980s.
- Known for the annual Red Mass at St. Mary's Basilica, marking the start of the legislative session.
- Offers professional and community-building opportunities, including retreats, events and public service recognition.
- Emphasizes inclusivity while maintaining its religious foundation.