

# Daily Journal

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## Knowledgeable & Fearless

*Vanaman German attorneys say it's an honor to represent kids in special education cases.*

By Shane Nelson

Daily Journal Staff Writer

Valerie Vanaman has spent more than four decades representing children with disabilities, a challenge she understands from firsthand experience.

"For people who have a specific learning disability, it's often genetically linked," Vanaman said. "And I had a learning disability. I didn't learn to read until I was in the third grade, so I understood the struggle of it, and since it is often genetic, I obviously observed it in my family."

The daughter of a math teacher, Vanaman said she was very active in the 1970s with the passage of what is today called the Individuals with Disabilities Act, which makes appropriate education free and available to children with disabilities nationwide. And in the early 1980s, Vanaman said she founded the first law firm in Southern California focused on students with disabilities.

"We are still basically a law firm that represents the families of students with disabilities and students with disabilities," Vanaman explained, "to ensure that under all the various federal laws that they are getting the full protection and education to which they are entitled."

Home to 10 attorneys today, Sherman Oaks-based Vanaman German LLP continues to focus intensively on special education law, but the boutique also now tackles some personal injury cases involving special education students.

"Over time, it really became clear that especially for students who don't speak or who have limited



Valerie Vanaman and David German in their Sherman Oaks office | Justin L. Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

ability to communicate overall, it was almost impossible for their families to find representation," explained the firm's co-managing partner, David W. German, who joined the shop in 2011.

"Just a small component of our practice is focused on pursuing personal injury cases for students with the most significant disability-related profiles - so the hardest people to figure out what might have happened to them and how you might remedy that or how the trauma might affect them," German continued. "For that, we use our special education expertise and our knowledge of students with disabilities, and we partner with different personal injury firms

on those cases."

German said he was handling civil and criminal appellate work before his first exposure to special education law 12 years ago.

"I just really loved it and immediately wanted to do more, and I haven't looked back," he explained. "The people who come to us they're all struggling to advocate for their children, who have unique learning challenges. To have someone come in and put that in front of you and ask for your help is really an honor. To be able to actually help parents be more effective in advocating for their kids and improve their education, again, it feels like a privilege."

German was quick to note he's

learned a tremendous amount about special education law from Vanaman over the years, describing her as an incredible mentor and teacher.

"She's a legend in this area," German said. "There's just no way to overstate the impact that she's had on the lives of thousands and thousands of children and their families."

Although the firm has enjoyed a great deal of success over the years and secured many noteworthy judgments, Vanaman said one accomplishment that stands out took place nearly 40 years ago.

"In 1985, the law was changed to provide that if a parent was a prevailing party in one of these administrative disputes, the school

district had to pay the attorney's fees," she recalled. "In order to make that a reality and make sure the school districts understood that was the law, we did the first case in the federal district court here to validate that law and to say that yes, the law means what it says, and as the prevailing party, you're entitled to attorney's fees."

Vanaman said that win had an understandably significant impact.

"It was very important because lower-income families who don't have the money to go pay a lawyer cannot get what their children need unless there's some ability for the attorneys to do the work and get paid for it," she explained. "Those students are often the ones who suffer the most in this system."

More recently, Vanaman German secured a \$45 million jury verdict last November on behalf of seven-

year-old nonverbal autistic twins in a case against the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, involving claims of battery and negligent infliction of emotional distress. *Wong v. Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District*, 19STCV05418 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Feb. 19, 2019).

Whittier attorney Darin W. Barber, who frequently represents Southern California school districts in special education cases, has opposed Vanaman German on a number of separate matters over the years, and he described the attorneys there as formidable but always professional.

"Valerie would probably be embarrassed if I called her the matriarch of special ed at this point, but I truly believe that," said Barber, who first met Vanaman 25 years ago.

"For such a longtime she's been the go-to person. Parents will use

her name as a threat, saying 'I'm just going to call Valerie Vanaman's office,'" Barber continued with a chuckle. "She's definitely well respected. She's definitely a formidable opponent. But first and foremost, she really cares about children, and she's extremely well versed in the law. So I think her ability to merge the two to help a child but keep reasonable expectations not only for the big picture but the long term is critical for the settlements and judgements she obtains on behalf of her clients."

Santa Monica special education attorney Arlene Bell first met Vanaman in the early 1980s, when Bell was a special education teacher and Vanaman was representing some of her students.

"Valerie was one of the reasons I went to law school because I used to see her coming to the meetings

and representing kids that I was teaching, and she was the only one doing it," Bell recalled. "So I thought, 'Gee, I would really like to do the same thing.' ... When she would come to the meetings back then, representing the students, I was just really impressed with her and just loved what she did."

Bell represents disabled students and their families these days, and she said Vanaman remains her go-to for any question about special education law.

"She's very, very willing to help," Bell explained. "She's also fearless. She's confident, and she's extremely knowledgeable. And she has this formidable presence whenever she enters a room full of school district representatives. She's not swayed by anybody. She questions everyone, and she holds them accountable, and she wins a lot of cases."