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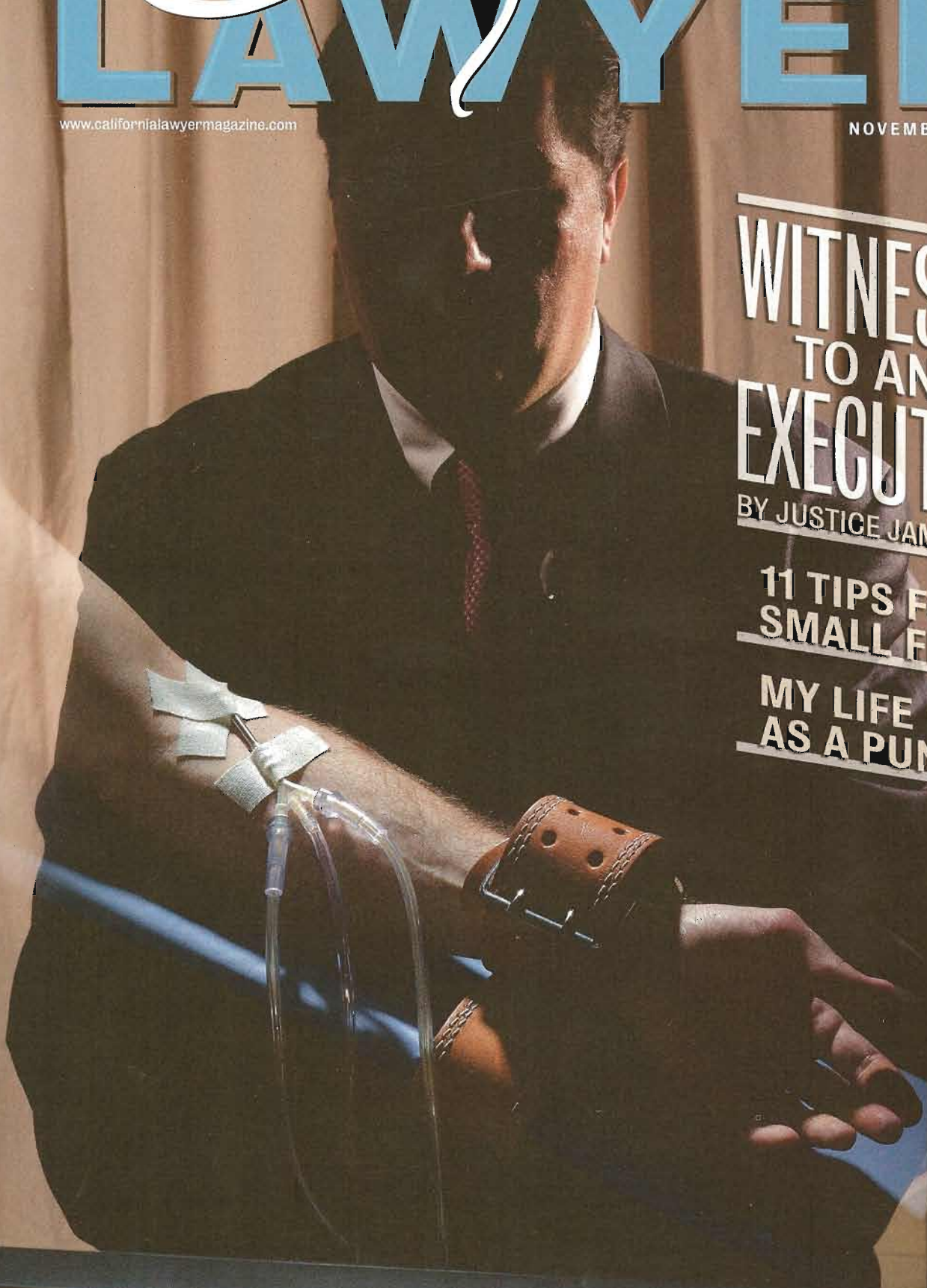
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WITNESS  
TO AN  
EXECUTION

BY JUSTICE JAMES A. ARDAIZ

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MY LIFE  
AS A PUNDIT



## My Life as a Pundit

BY DEAN JOHNSON

It's 3 a.m. on October 31, 2005. The cell phone rings on my nightstand. The assignment manager at Channel 7 gets right to the point: "Dean, Bush has just nominated Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court. We need you in front of a camera by 4:30." Forty-five minutes later I have showered, dressed in the dark, and rendezvoused with a reporter and camera crew. Midway

through putting on my makeup (yes, we do wear makeup, and yes, you do have to put it on yourself), it hits me. I am getting paid to stand in front of a television camera. I have become a pundit.

It all started in 2004 when the Scott Peterson murder trial came to my home county, San Mateo, on a change of venue. With the trial came a media circus that threatened to reduce this human tragedy to the level of professional wrestling. Lawyers handed out résumés in the courthouse square. Others offered to trade "inside information" for appearance fees. Much of the analysis that found its way to TV was either misinformed, inaccurate, or simply made up on the spot.

At home my wife finally got fed up with my talking back to the TV. On a rainy Tuesday morning, she challenged me to call the networks and tell them that they were wrong. That afternoon, I made my first appearance on national TV. Apparently, I did OK. By the end of the week, I had commented on the Peterson, Kobe Bryant, and Rush Limbaugh cases. By the end of the guilt phase of *Peterson*, my typical day included a 4 a.m. "hit" for CNN, an 8 a.m. segment on Court TV, sound bites at noon for the "media pool," a 3 p.m. segment on MSNBC, and a 6 p.m.

wrap-up for local news. Saturday evenings were usually reserved for Fox.

Somewhere in the middle of this real-life reality show, I acquired a second profession. I became a television journalist, complete with my own confidential sources, press card, and personalized IFB (the little microphone that goes in your ear). Fortunately, ABC News's local reporters were there to tutor me in the arcana of TV journalism. Even better, they had a news director who obviously had a keen eye for talent and was willing to pay for my services.

I haven't quit the day job yet, but the paycheck does help cover my overhead. And I have learned a few things: First, if you're thinking of going on TV,

do it for the experience, not the "exposure." Clients hire you because you are a good lawyer, not because you are on TV.

Second, being "objective" doesn't mean saying the first thing that pops into your head. As lawyers, we have it relatively easy: The client's interests dictate which side we argue. But for TV legal analysts, impartiality demands a lot of reflection, particularly when two opposing sides are fighting for your attention.

Third, TV is harder than it looks. Reporters work insane hours every day to uncover the truth. And forget Ted Baxter and Ron Burgundy—running a news

show from behind an anchor desk is as demanding as flying a fighter plane. If you're good at it, it just looks easy.

Fourth, good analysis beats inside information anytime. In June 2005 I told my news director to watch for a major story involving Sandra Day O'Connor. Four days later Justice O'Connor resigned. I have since correctly called the turn of almost every development in the Supreme Court nomination process, not to mention the CIA leak investigation and the NSA wiretaps. It isn't inside information; it's just conscientious legal analysis.

Finally, I love television. I am ecstatic when my segment trounces the competition in the ratings. I still get an adrenaline rush when the anchor does a "tease" announcing that "ABC7's legal analyst Dean Johnson" will be "coming up" after the commercial break. And I am thrilled when strangers start conversations with me on the street. Apparently, they feel that since I come into their homes and talk to them, it's OK to continue the conversation in person. They are absolutely right, and I hope they never stop.

When I was growing up in small towns in the South, TV was our only window to the outside world. TV showed me the tragedy of Vietnam, the quiet dignity of the civil rights movement, and the triumph of landing on the moon. TV is still our window on the world. Legal stories are a mainstay of today's news. The public cannot comprehend the events of the day without a grasp of legal issues. TV was important to me as kid, and it's important now. That's why, when I roll out of bed at 3 a.m., I do so with a smile.

Stay tuned ... **CL**



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