

MICHAEL J. OLECKI, 1959-2017

LA litigator argued civil rights case that set a \$18M record

By Shane Nelson
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Longtime litigator Michael J. Olecki, who argued a record-setting \$18 million civil rights verdict against the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in 2006, died suddenly on April 4. He was 58.

Remembered by colleagues as an extraordinarily intelligent attorney, who often formed lasting friendships with clients, Olecki helped found Santa Monica-based Grodsky & Olecki LLP in 2003.

"He was the kind of lawyer even lawyers liked," said Courtney L. Puritsky, an associate at the firm who worked with Olecki for 10 years. "He was honest and had integrity, but he was very, very smart and seemed to always be one step ahead in terms of strategy."

In his 2006 closing arguments for the federal civil case against the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Olecki made strategic use of Google on behalf of his client, Raul Ramirez, a Compton teacher falsely accused of assaulting a teenage girl then wrongfully jailed for 10 months despite evidence that would have cleared him. *Ramirez v. County of Los Angeles*. 04-CV06102 (C.D. Cal., Feb. 16, 2006).

"Michael told the jury that when you Googled Raul's name, the only thing you saw was he'd been arrested for this horrible assault on a minor," said Allen B. Grodsky, Olecki's longtime firm partner.

"And he told them, 'You need to come up with a verdict so big that the next time somebody Googles Raul's name, what comes up will only be his judgment against the sheriff's department for wrongful arrest and



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wrongful imprisonment,'" Grodsky added.

Olecki, who tried the case with attorneys Michael Sobel and Michael H. Artan, won a 2007 California Lawyer of the Year Award from the Daily Journal for his work on the verdict.

Ramirez hasn't forgotten Olecki's effort during his trial. The two stayed connected over the years, according to the teacher, who said Olecki went out of his way to advise him afterward about how to best manage money for his family following the verdict.

"Some attorneys are very animated," Ramirez said. "But Michael presented in a very genuine, soft-toned but confident way, [and] when I think back to the power of his words in our case, they will be forever with me. But what I'll miss most is I've lost a brother. He was that good of a person."

In 2002, Olecki worked another headline-grabbing case with Brian S. Kabateck, the founding partner at Kabateck Brown Kellner LLP, handling comedian Ed Mc-

Mahon's \$20 million lawsuit against his home insurance provider over a toxic mold infestation.

During the settlement negotiation, Kabateck said the "enigmatic" McMahon went on an six-figure shopping spree at the Beverly Hills Hotel after he and his wife were forced to leave home without their clothes. Attorneys for the insurance provider felt the excursion's cost was way out of hand.

"Michael looked at the opposition and said, 'Yeah, you might have an actual complaint if we were talking about anybody else but a celebrity like Ed McMahon,' who needed to have clothes from the Beverly Hills Hotel," Kabateck said.

"He sold them on the idea that Ed's shopping spree, which by all standards was exorbitant, actually made complete sense, because he was Ed McMahon, and that was the kind of lawyer Michael was."

Raised in Cleveland, Olecki completed his undergraduate work at Haverford College before receiving his law degree from the University of Virginia in 1986.

Olecki's wife, retired attorney Karen E. Bodner, said her husband loved his dogs and spending time on their ranch near Sequoia National Park, where he would split wood or snowshoe. Riding his bicycle to work was another of Olecki's favorite pastimes, Bodner said.

"Michael said you get a completely different perspective on Los Angeles when you're on a bike," she said.

Along with his wife, Olecki is survived by his sister Christine Morford.