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CAL-ABOTA colleagues:

On behalf of the San Joaquin Valley Chapter of the American Board of Trial Advocates, it is with honor, pride, and pleasure to advise that the Executive Committee has nominated Rene' Turner Sample, Esq. for Trial Lawyer of 2026.



INTRODUCTION: The San Joaquin Valley Chapter hereby nominates Rene' Turner Sample, Esq., to be the recipient of the CAL-ABOTA 2026 Trial Lawyer of the Year Award. A trial lawyer for 37 years, Ms. Sample has dedicated her career to the art of advocacy, both as a trial attorney and law professor. She has achieved impressive trial results on behalf of her clients and earned a reputation for civility, integrity, ethics, professionalism, and compassion.

BACKGROUND. EDUCATION AND CAREER PATH: Born and raised in Fresno, Rene' graduated magna cum laude from California State University, Fresno in 1983. In 1985, she married her high school sweetheart, Scott, and in 1987, they had their first child. In 1988, Rene' graduated with distinction from San Joaquin College of Law and started her legal career as an insurance defense attorney at McCormick, Barstow, Sheppard, Wayte & Caruth. (She was the third female McCormick Barstow hired.) In 1989, Rene' tried her first case as second chair with former CAL-ABOTA President Stephen Cornwell. While at McCormick, Rene' went on to try many more cases. She also began organizing the attorney volunteer program for the Fresno Unified School District Mock Trial Program and began teaching the Trial Practice class at San Joaquin College of Law. In 1990, Rene' and her husband had their second child. In 1995, with two young children and her mother having recently suffered

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a serious injury, Rene' accepted a position as staff counsel for Allstate Insurance Company which allowed her to care for her family and coach soccer. While with Allstate, Rene' tried many more cases throughout the Central Valley. In 2000, Rene' and Stephen Cornwell formed Cornwell & Sample, representing plaintiffs. Rene' continued to teach at San Joaquin College of Law while also trying plaintiff personal injury cases. Rene' excelled whether defending or prosecuting cases. She has been generous with her time helping others prepare for trial, and it was common for her to mentor less-experienced trial counsel. In 2017, a solo practitioner who Rene' often worked with (Daryl Freedman) was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Rene' and Stephen took over Freedman Law in late 2017, providing financial security for Mr. Freedman's widow and his employees, while also allowing continuity of representation for hundreds of clients. Before retiring from organizing and coaching the Fresno Unified School District Mock Trial Program and teaching Trial Practice at San Joaquin Valley College of Law, Rene' was often recognized for her contributions to both programs. In 2002, she was honored as Adjunct Teacher of the Year. It was around that time that Rene' became very active with Consumer Attorneys of California, serving as the local president for several years. She also became a frequent program presenter regarding trial practice. In 2002, Rene' and her husband began a long journey trying to rescue their teenage son from drug addiction. Their son has been sober since 2014 and now helps others through his ownership of drug and alcohol recovery programs. Rene' credits her journey with familial addiction as teaching her the power of faith, compassion, and redemption, all of which she believes make her a better lawyer. It has also been the driving force behind the many recovery and Christian-focused boards on which she has served. As an attorney, Rene' has a reputation for being very prepared and quite skilled at cross-examination, but she is probably better known as an attorney who truly cares about and gets to know her clients. She has become the attorney to whom many local attorneys refer their family. As one of the few female plaintiff trial attorneys in the Central Valley, Rene' also handles many sensitive cases (many of which are pro bono), where the way she communicates with her clients is as valuable as her trial skills. In 2015, Rene' was inducted into the Hall of Fame at San Joaquin College of Law. In 2021, after over 40 jury trials, Rene' was the first female from the Central Valley to be admitted into the American College of Trial Lawyers, where she now proudly serves on the State Committee.

REPUTATION FOR CIVILITY: The Central Valley has long been envied for the close relationships shared by local attorneys. Rene' prides herself on her reputation as a trial lawyer who is true to her word and collegial. She is always willing to help others in trial.

ACCOMPLISHED ADVOCATE: Rene' often credits her days as a busy defense trial attorney with preparing her for ABOTA, but it is her plaintiff cases of which she is the most proud. She put herself on the map as a plaintiff attorney with a slip and fall case in 2004 (Macias V. Super Taqueria), where a jury awarded her client \$1,100,000 for a shoulder injury. In 2008, she represented a brain injury plaintiff who was awarded \$2,000,000 (Lutz v. Mudford). In 2017, Rene' and Stephen tried a case

together; the jury there awarded \$1,050,000 for an ankle injury (Bilby v. Infante Trucking). In 2019, she obtained a verdict of \$1,000,000 for a partial leg amputation (Jones v. County of Fresno). Rene' has tried cases against and alongside countless ABOTA members, including two past CAL-ABOTA Presidents and two CAL-ABOTA Trial Lawyers of the Year. Her reputation as a trial lawyer has led to dozens of settlements in excess of \$1,000,000, including a \$10,500,000 settlement for a leg injury in 2019. Trials have slowed down since COVID, but in 2023, Rene' obtained a verdict of \$330,000 in a disputed liability case with a wrist injury (Maloney v. Umova). In 2025, a \$58,000,000 judgment was finally entered for a 2015 41-day class action bench trial in which Rene' was one of the lead trial attorneys (Cortina v. North American Title). In 2025, Rene' also negotiated a \$3,000,000 settlement against Fresno County for an assault on a nurse by an inmate. Opposing counsel on the case was a former CAL-ABOTA President, and together they worked to obtain a meaningful result that respected the plaintiffs' desire for privacy. Ms. Sample's level of preparation and her ability to tell a story to both a jury and in a settlement demand package have allowed her to achieve consistently strong verdicts and settlements. She does not publish her verdicts and does not advertise, but her reputation as a caring and skilled litigator is well known.

MEMBER IN GOOD STANDING: Rene' has been a member of the San Joaquin Valley Chapter since 2005. She was the chapter's first female member. She worked her way up through the local board and was its first female president in 2016. In 2017, she was part of the nominating team when San Joaquin Valley Chapter member Warren Paboojian was named CAL-ABOTA Trial Lawyer of the Year.

CONCLUSION: The San Joaquin Valley Chapter has distinguished itself by producing five past recipients of the Trial Lawyer of the Year award. Our members often encounter one another in active litigation, where we regularly assess each other's trial skills, judgment, and civility. A nomination from our chapter reflects first-hand experience, not reputation alone. We have seen Ms. Sample's advocacy in action and experienced her professionalism personally. Her exceptional body of work, combined with her consistent compassion and civility, qualifies Rene' as worthy to the title of 2026 ABOTA Trial Lawyer of the Year.

Sincerely,

Signed by:

Abigail R. Leaf

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Abigail R. Leaf

