

THE RECORDER

Lifetime Achievement Award Honoree: John Keker, Keker Van Nest & Peters

By ALM Staff

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John Keker, partner with Keker Van Nest & Peters, is among the honorees of The Recorder's 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award. Read a Q&A with him below.

What key moments or accomplishments have defined your career?

As a federal public defender, I tried lots of cases from 1971-73, and realized I loved it. At first, I thought I would never win a case, losing four before I finally won one. But after that, things got better, probably because I became a better trial lawyer. I also learned how to make trials fun. In one case I arrived in court early and sat at the table closest to the jury box. The prosecutor came in and said, "Move, this is my table." I said, "No. Where does it say this is your table?" The judge was recently appointed, had never tried a criminal case, and agreed with me that nothing in the law says which table is which. The jury hung, 10-2 for acquittal. By the time of the retrial, the judge had been to judge's school and made me sit at the traditional defense table away from the jury. This time the defendant was convicted.

Which achievements are you most proud of or have been the most personally satisfying?

Most satisfying is that in my long 53-year career as a trial lawyer I have tried all kinds of cases, criminal, antitrust, copyright, patent, trade secrets, contracts, fraud, securities (even one case involving theft of a government turkey) and I have helped build a firm which started with two lawyers in 1978 and grew into the powerhouse it is today. We have a national practice and are known as a formidable trial firm all over the United States. I personally have resolved cases all over California, and in Oregon, Washington state, Washington, D.C., New York, New Jersey, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Colorado, Massachusetts, Nevada, Minnesota and Virginia. Many cases stand out in my memory, but three I am proudest of are the acquittal



Courtesy photo

John Keker of Keker Van Nest & Peters

of Patrick Hallinan in Reno, the conviction of Oliver North in D.C. (my first and only time as a prosecutor), and *Santa Clara County v. Trump*, enjoining Trump's efforts to punish sanctuary jurisdictions.

What advice would you give to someone who is beginning their career in law?

If you want to be a trial lawyer, find ways to get trial experience early in your life as a lawyer. Jobs as prosecutor, public defender, assistant county counsel or city attorney and pro bono cases in private firms all give trial experience, as does choosing to work at a firm that actually tries cases. Accept that trial practice can be stressful, looking into the near future with too many things to do and wondering how you can ever get it all done. Also accept that if you aren't too busy you aren't busy enough—there is no middle ground. And overcome your very natural fear of failure, which is built into all strivers who have been successful in college and law school. If you are too scared of losing, you never get a chance to win.