

## Steven M. Sepassi, Trustee

**E**VERY ORGANIZATION HAS its MVP's, but the SFVBA's Steve Sepassi appears to be that rare individual whom everyone respects...but also just plain likes to hang out with. Unfortunately, people who are universally popular are often the modest types: If you ask Sepassi — a litigator who closed his practice to focus on mediation — the secret to his social success, he'll just chuckle.

Still, clues emerge the more you talk to the Iranian-born attorney, who originally joined the SFVBA board in 2017 and “loves the group too much” to stay away ever since. For example, asked about his early legal career, the ultra-friendly Sepassi notes, “I had an Atticus Finch sort of practice, where it's kind of a village practice.” The reference to the decent, small-town protagonist of “To Kill a Mockingbird” could be a clue to Sepassi's own demeanor as a likable everyman.

Keep in mind, however, being down-to-earth doesn't mean you're not a risk-taker. Sepassi began his working life as an engineer, but by the time he was 35, he realized something was missing and took the unusual step of enrolling in law school at Southwestern. Already married and responsible for co-running a mortgage business with his wife, Sepassi put his nose to the grindstone, juggling work and school at night. After graduating and passing the bar, he sensed that being a bit older might be a disadvantage at a big firm and thus hung up his own shingle.

“You know, I never let doubt or fear stop me,” he relates. By 2012, he formed the partnership of Sepassi & Tarighati, LLP, notably defending prominent charter schools in general liability cases; over



time Sepassi has handled everything from small cases to multimillion-dollar disputes involving vehicle accidents, product liability, catastrophic injuries, and wrongful death. He credits it all to his background and family support.

“Attention to detail and being methodical is from my days as an engineer,” he adds. “And my wife was always very supportive. She encouraged me even with [how hard] law school was. That made the difference.”

Having represented both plaintiffs and defendants has given Sepassi a perspective that not every attorney has, and he notes that many lawyers are overly confident about their well-rehearsed arguments, failing to see that the other side may also have a credible case. “Getting too close to the politics of something affects how you are able to look at it,” he says. [I've] always been able to see both sides of things.”

The skill to see a bigger picture and look for a way to resolve issues with civility steered Sepassi toward volunteering as a mediator and temporary judge for the Los Angeles Superior Court. Eventually, Sepassi

closed his private practice to focus entirely on mediation cases — an area that aligns perfectly with his innate sense of fairness. “The job of the mediator is to look at it from a number of lenses...I think what I bring to it is critical and analytical skills.”

Just as Sepassi has seen shifts in his own career, he says that law is in a period of transition, too. He worries about increased political polarization that has seen colleagues no longer get together with those whose views they see as too different. And with people working virtually, some cub attorneys might be more used to scrolling social media after work instead of attending in-person events — with lowered attendance at bar associations and professional organizations across the country the unfortunate result.

“A lot of my cases on Zoom work just as well, it's true — but that doesn't mean we still don't need opportunities to meet our peers in person,” he adds.

And sure, Sepassi would like to see social vibrancy restored to L.A.'s legal world, along with a more bipartisan spirit. But in the end, he's still a natural optimist. The Beverly Hills resident, who has two grown sons but “isn't ready” for grandkids, has found a new passion — golf. As with law school and creating a second career, Sepassi realized after he began hitting the links that he was getting a late start, and was not as good as the players who'd been honing their swing for decades.

“Every opportunity I get, I like to get out there. I'm horrible at it, I'm struggling — but I don't give up,” he says with a laugh. 