

Al Ferris (1936 to 2023)

San Diego attorney, former Primerus Board member remembered for his smarts, insight



By Tom Kirvan

In his beloved San Diego, Al Ferris earned a well-deserved reputation as a larger-than-life legal figure, the kind of attorney who combined brilliance, insight, and patience with an unwavering commitment to preparation and detail.

Those were just a few of the virtues of a man who cast a giant shadow of good over the course of a career that spanned more than five decades during a life that came to an end July 20 at age 86 after a lengthy battle with Parkinson's disease.

The founding principal of Ferris & Britton in San Diego, Ferris launched the firm in 1968, just four years after obtaining his law degree from Stanford University, where he also received his undergraduate degree with honors. His time at Stanford, which is traditionally ranked among the top three universities in the country, helped shape the kind of lawyer he became while representing an array of blue-chip clients in matters related to corporate law, business litigation, labor, biotechnology, telecommunications, and estate planning.

In 1984, some 16 years after starting his firm, Ferris welcomed Chris Britton as a named partner, principally in charge of the litigation department. A Duke University School of Law grad, Britton had an impressive resume of his own, spending three years in the U.S. Marine Corps during the height of the Vietnam War before working at a prominent San Diego law firm as a topflight business litigator for seven years.

Britton, who retired nearly a decade ago, not surprisingly developed a special bond with Ferris while building the firm.

"Al and I were friends for 50 years and law partners for 30 of those," said Britton in a special tribute to Ferris. "He was smart, congenial, ethical, all of those and more. I cannot imagine what my own career would have been had it not been joined with his.

"He knew when to lead and when to follow and was good at both," Britton reflected. "Although both long retired and off on separate non-legal paths, the thought that I can no longer call him up to get his take on whatever I was thinking of nor ever again pick up the phone and hear him say, 'Have you got a

minute?' will take a lot of getting used to. I wish (his daughters) Kerry and Gillian comfort and pride in knowing that your father's life was so well-lived."

A native of Massachusetts, Ferris was born in the throes of the Great Depression on September 7, 1936, the youngest child of Lebanese immigrants who had eloped to the United States as teenagers in search of a better life. The family moved to San Diego in 1945 after the death his father. He graduated from Herbert Hoover High School, taking his academic talents to Stanford where he met Jeannie, his wife of 53 years before she died of leukemia in 2015 at the age of 76.

In 1964, Ferris began his legal career as a clerk to the chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California, a coveted job that would help propel him to greater heights in private practice where he was a mentor to both aspiring and veteran attorneys alike.

Michael Weinstein, a UCLA Law grad who headed the Litigation Department at Ferris & Britton for many years before retiring, is proud to be counted among the mentees.

"Al was a skillful and talented lawyer, but more than that he was a terrific human being," said Weinstein, who joined the firm in 1988 after working in the legal department of San Diego Gas & Electric Co. for six years. "He was the most thorough person I ever knew, who also had an incredible analytical ability, a thirst for knowledge, and a special command of the facts in every case he handled. He was really remarkable in that regard. No detail was too small or too insignificant for him to ignore."

As the head of a firm that represented mostly local and regional clients, Ferris put his legal creation on the national map decades ago when he was handling the sale of Mission Cable to Cox Communications in Atlanta, according to Weinstein.

"Mission Cable was a San Diego based company and Al had served as its attorney when Cox offered to buy them to establish a West Coast presence," Weinstein explained. "Al did such an exceptional job in representing Mission Cable during the

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acquisition proceedings that the Cox executives decided they needed him as their attorney from that point going forward. It's quite a tribute when the other side decides to hire you because of the quality of your work."

Cox, which has since grown to become the largest privately-owned broadband company in the U.S. with annual revenues surpassing \$13 billion, has been "a Ferris & Britton client ever since," said Weinstein.

"Aside from all of his legal accomplishments and his willingness to do the due diligence that is required in every case, I also loved that Al was so engaged in what was going on in the world, whether it be politics, current events, sports, or on deeply personal levels with his family and friends. He was in the know on just about any topic."

It was a character trait that he shared with his wife, an acclaimed writer and novelist who won a host of national awards for books appealing to young adults. The couple's two daughters, Kerry and Gillian, also displayed a talent and passion for writing in their respective careers as a sociology professor and as a broadcast journalist.

It was as a couple that Al and Jeannie Ferris became friends with Jack and Sheila Buchanan, the couple that has made Primerus tick for the past 31 years, spearheading its growth from a local legal network to a now international alliance of law firms in more than 40 countries around the globe.

Primerus was in its infancy in the early 1990s when it began to get some positive national exposure, including a story that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* that equated membership with receiving a legal version of the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." The article caught the eye of Al Ferris, who would soon meet with Primerus founder Jack Buchanan to learn more about the growing organization.

"I met with him in San Diego and he was very intrigued by our concept of 'Good People Who Happen to Be Good Lawyers™' and the Six Pillars," Buchanan recalled. "It wouldn't take long for him to help us establish a network of firms in California and then to become a member of the Primerus Board."

As an early believer in the Primerus mission, Ferris also pledged his support in spreading the word about its many benefits, while simultaneously expressing his desire to help uplift the legal profession in the eyes of a skeptical public. He eventually served as vice chair of the Primerus Board, taking a leadership role in expanding its programs, meetings, and learning opportunities.

For years he also was a key figure on the Primerus Accreditation Board, a panel that thoroughly vets prospective members and annually ensures that those who belong live up to the high standards of the organization, according to Buchanan.

"Al fully embraced the culture we were creating based on the Six Pillars, and believed in the importance of developing special bonds that could transcend differences while pursuing a common purpose," said Buchanan, who especially admired the selfless and helpful nature that was at the core of Ferris.

"He was one of the true pillars of Primerus," said Buchanan.

The comment was echoed by Sheila Buchanan, who long treasured the friendship that she and her husband enjoyed with Ferris and his wife.

"He was a brilliant man who also had a great sense of humor and a wonderful smile," Sheila said, noting how Ferris maintained an upbeat attitude and positive spirit even when his health was in steady decline.

"Despite all his health challenges, he still made a point of attending the Global Conference last year, which was just another indication of his dedication and resilience," she said.

Beyond his legal success, Ferris was well known for his love of all things San Diego. He was a regular patron of the Old Globe Theater and Coronado Lamb's Players Theater and served on countless local boards and committees throughout his lifetime, devoting his time and talents for various educational and humanitarian causes.

In addition, he was longtime season ticket holder of the San Diego Padres, while relishing the longtime friendships he enjoyed with assorted Stanford alums in the San Diego community and with a group of self-described "old-timers" in the Primerus alliance.

Perhaps the most endearing epitaph for Ferris appeared in his obit that was published in the hometown paper, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, on July 25. It was a paragraph that attorney Michael Weinstein suspects that Ferris may have had a hand in writing. It went like this:

"Al knew San Diego like the back of his hand, every side street, shortcut, and secret parking lot. He could tell you the best places to get tacos, seafood, and cold beer. He loved history, politics, traveling the world, going on road trips, and eating breakfast at Jimmy Carter's on 5th Avenue."

In all respects, a fitting summary for a life very well-lived.