

# VALLEY LAWYER

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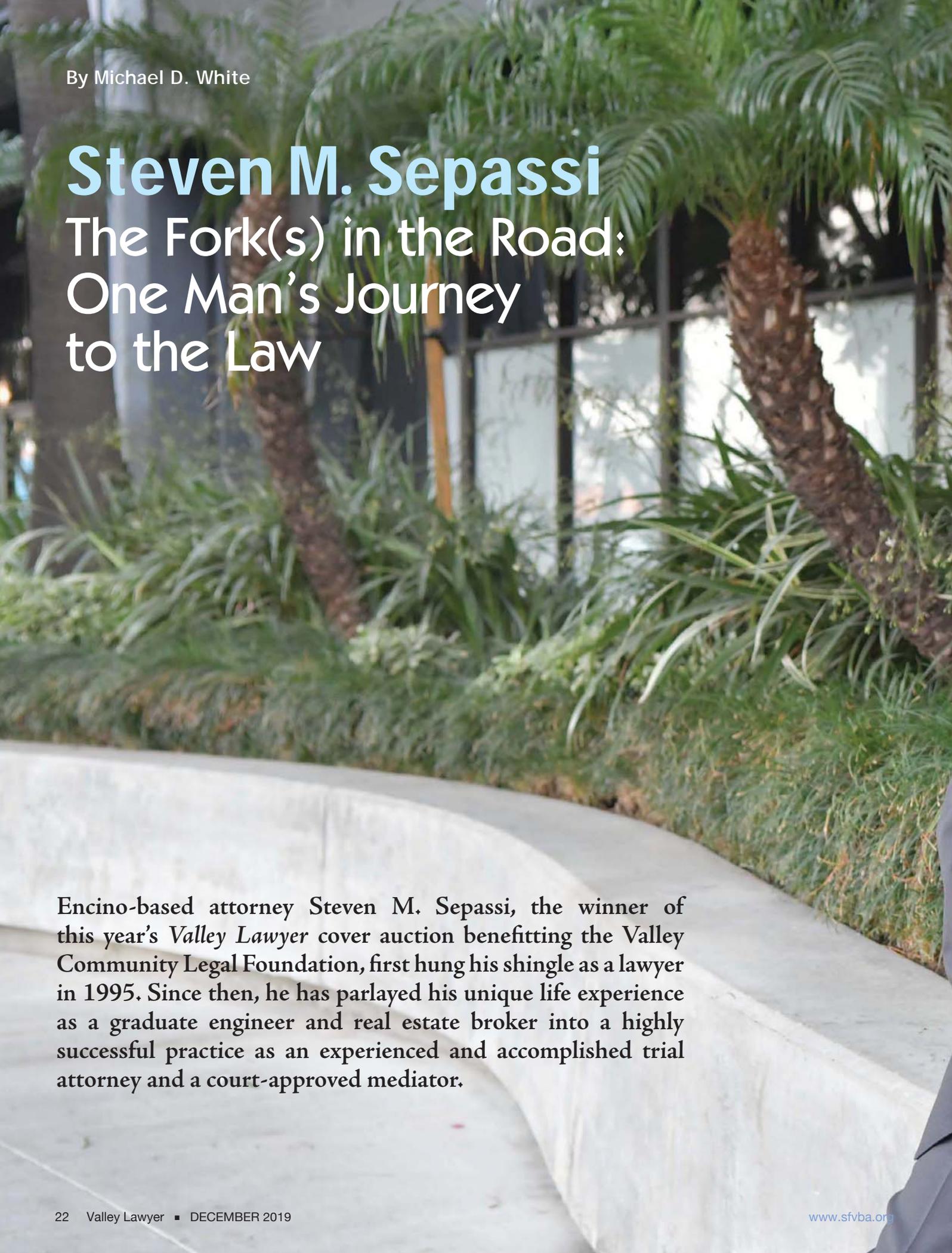
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A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark grey suit, a light blue shirt, and a striped tie, stands in a brightly lit hallway. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background shows a modern office interior with glass walls and recessed lighting.

**Steven M. Sepassi**  
**One Man's Journey**  
**to the Law**

**Changes to the**  
**Bankruptcy Code**  
**for Small Businesses**

**Earn MCLE Credit**



By Michael D. White

# Steven M. Sepassi

## The Fork(s) in the Road: One Man's Journey to the Law

Encino-based attorney Steven M. Sepassi, the winner of this year's *Valley Lawyer* cover auction benefitting the Valley Community Legal Foundation, first hung his shingle as a lawyer in 1995. Since then, he has parlayed his unique life experience as a graduate engineer and real estate broker into a highly successful practice as an experienced and accomplished trial attorney and a court-approved mediator.



*Photos by Ron Murray*

**T**HERE IS AN OLD EXPRESSION ABOUT reaching a fork in the road of life—the moment of decision—when the voice inside says that the time has come for a major choice of options and the realization that, on whichever path we choose, the career niche we seek may well lay beyond yet another fork.

For attorney Steven Sepassi, his moment(s) of decision came as numerous forks along multiple paths that led him from pre-revolutionary Iran to the San Fernando Valley via Missouri, a seat on the SFVBA Board of Trustees, and a successful career as both an attorney and a mediator.

### **A Future Cast in Concrete**

Arriving in the U.S. in 1975, 17-year-old Steven M. Sepassi was set on the road to obtaining an education in civil engineering and returning to his native Iran to start an engineering design and construction firm.

“That probably best explains my diverse career path later on,” he says. “I was really only following the path that my parents envisioned. ‘Go to school. Become a civil engineer. Come back here and start a business.’ So, that’s what I did as the youngest kid in the family.”

“It was PanAm from Tehran to New York and TWA from

New York to St. Louis,” he remembers with a chuckle. “My older brother and sister were going to school in Missouri, so it was just a natural move. I just knew I wanted to come to America.”

The Revolution that tore Iran apart in the late ‘70s compelled Sepassi to take another path. Enrolled at the University of Missouri, he wound up on a winding course that would lead him, eventually, to the San Fernando Valley and a career in the law.

He started questioning his ‘cast in concrete’ career plan his first semester of engineering classes. “I really wasn’t sure that I liked it and I started thinking about changing; but, change to what? I had no idea at the time.”

In his third year at Missouri, though, he enrolled in a computer programming course and, later, a computer logic class that, he says, “really captured me. I would stay up, literally, all night just to do the reading and the studying. But in order to change direction, it would have meant switching majors from civil engineering to electrical engineering. I was advised to finish what I had started.”

Three more years would garner Sepassi both Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in civil engineering at ‘Mizzou,’ as well as learning how to water ski on the Lake of the Ozarks!



*Sepassi (far left), circa 1973, with his family at the airport in Tehran, when one of his brothers was leaving to study in the United States.*

## Nagging Doubt

Sepassi decided to head west, arriving in Los Angeles in 1981 and earned the equivalent of a Doctorate-level degree in Structural Mechanics from the University of Southern California, while working for a small company that developed engineering software.

Sepassi remembers some people being perplexed by his accent. “They couldn’t figure out if I had a Midwestern accent or some kind of foreign accent that had gotten mixed up with a regional U.S. accent.”



Five years and a move into management at Rockwell Aerospace in Downey followed, developing and supporting CAD/CAM software systems that were used by the engineers and technicians working on the Space Shuttle program.

“The doubt of whether this was what I really wanted to do continued when I became the manager of CAD/CAM Systems,” says Sepassi. “I just kept doing what I was doing because I felt I had no other options.”

He hadn’t, in his own words, found his “niche.” “My brother was a civil engineer with Caltrans while I was at Rockwell, and he suddenly quit and went into the real estate and mortgage business in the late ‘80s when real estate was going through the roof,” he says. “So I left Rockwell when it relocated to Seal Beach, which meant an even longer



commute to Orange County from Woodland Hills, with even more time away from my family.”

A spell in the real estate and mortgage field got Sepassi thinking about going into the law. That work had brought him into contact with several lawyers. “I saw what they did and liked what I saw” says Sepassi. “I never really had mentors to learn from along the way. I was an immigrant raised with the notion that you did what you had to do to survive, whether you liked it or not, the reality that I had no home to go back to if I failed, and the ambition born of necessity.”

The venture into real estate unraveled after a year, and that, says Sepassi, “was the trigger that got me thinking seriously about going to law school. We had a partnership dispute, it took a while to resolve and, meanwhile, my wife started her own mortgage company. We were doing okay, but I realized that that wasn’t really my thing either.”

## The Law Beckons

The transition to the law, interestingly, has a thread that, he says, stretches all the way back to ‘Mizzou.’

“I had a friend whose boyfriend was going to law school in Mizzou and I’d see him carrying these huge books to and from class and, to me, it looked so prestigious, but it wasn’t anything I even dreamed about because I thought, ‘You’re crazy. You’d have to advocate and talk in front of people and

convince them. Are you kidding?’ It would be about as far away from being an engineer as you could imagine.”

A meeting with the Dean of Southwestern Law School lifted the fog. “I don’t remember exactly how the meeting was arranged, but, after I shared my feelings and where I was in my life, he was very supportive and said, ‘You are the best fit. You have an engineering background which is rooted in logic and method, and you don’t want to be someone chasing real estate agents.’”

Was the law, then, the “niche” he’d been seeking all along? “Like everything else I’ve ever done, at first I wasn’t sure and was wondering what I’d gotten myself into. My brother suggested that I go into patent law, but, by then, I’d come to the conclusion that, maybe, I shouldn’t listen that much to my brother,” says Sepassi with a chuckle. “I had decided I didn’t want to ever again fall asleep over another technical document.”

“What was really enjoyable to me, particularly in the first year, was reading about what happened to real people,” he says. “I was fascinated by the facts. I don’t know why, but each case was like a story to me.” This fascination with the facts and their effects on real people were the sources of Sepassi’s transition to mediation, which he was yet unaware of.

Four years working at his wife’s mortgage company during the day and evenings attending Southwestern meant “I had no life. It was difficult, but it was enjoyable because, for the first time, I was doing what I really wanted to do. Meanwhile, my wife was raising our two boys.” He also took on the role of the class representative in the Student Bar Association at Southwestern.

A stint at the Civil Tax Division of the U.S. Attorney’s office, and then a year of internship at the U.S. Bankruptcy Court, brought Sepassi to starting his own general law practice in the San Fernando Valley. When asked what area of the law he practiced, Sepassi—who has served as a pro-bono mediator for the Los Angeles Superior Court, the Ventura Superior Court, the Second District Court of Appeals, and the U.S. District Court, as well as a Temporary Judge—would answer with the quip, “I can tell you what areas I don’t practice in. They were family law, which can be heartbreaking, and criminal law, where you deal with people’s liberty and, sometimes, their very lives.”

“I’ve done a lot in different areas of the law over the years and it’s only over the past seven years or so that we’ve reduced our areas of practice to insurance defense and plaintiffs work. I’ve been doing mediations for years, but it is becoming more and more a larger part of my practice.”

### **A Niche Discovered**

There comes a point, says Sepassi, “when you look at all of the experience you’ve gained and see if it helps you to do what you choose to do better. The litigation experience as

a defense counsel, as well as representing plaintiffs, helps greatly in working with both sides of an issue and has given me insights in mediation that I otherwise would not have,” says Sepassi. “I can weigh both sides and come up with a strategy that means reaching a fair and equitable settlement.” He now considers himself the “village elder,” the sage that helps the parties resolve their issues.

The “beauty of resolving a dispute is circumventing the lengthy and emotionally draining process of litigation and the uncertainty of a trial. I’ve been there; I know what it feels like to win and I know what it feels like to lose.”

Many lawyers who wind up in litigation, he says, “don’t understand the end game, the trial, because they haven’t done many of them, perhaps none. They haven’t taken a case



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all the way through a trial to see how they have to convince a bench officer or 12 people in the jury box. When a case goes all the way through trial, there's no way to know what's going to happen and smart, astute trial attorneys know that."

The heart of mediation, he says, "is that it's the single best opportunity for the parties to be in control; they can decide what's going to happen with the case. At trial, they have no control over the outcome; they may think they're in control because they think they have all the facts, the best experts, and the best attorney, but even then, you still don't know how the judge or the jury will decide."

The goal is to come to an equitable resolution and "stop the bleeding," says Sepassi. "There is a right time for everything. The parties must have been allowed to gather the

facts, develop a strategy and then see their position. What is most helpful in a mediation is the certainty that the parties know where they stand, know what they have and know what they need."

That makes it a lot easier to get them to come "to a common understanding and resolution" of the case, he says, considering the nexus between engineering and the law.

The two are not that far apart, says Sepassi. "When I was at Rockwell, we were supporting the people who were building systems and plotting vehicle entry and re-entry modes that astronaut crews depended on for their lives. That's part of what I've carried over into my mediation practice. You have to pay attention to the details in cases that have a direct impact on people's lives." 

