

## Up Front



Thrifty attraction in Village at Westfield mall.  
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## News & Analysis



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# 'Silicon Suburb' Takes Shape in Santa Clarita Valley

**TECHNOLOGY:** Skilled workers, city incubator fuel startups.

By **MARK R. MADLER** Staff Reporter

The San Francisco area has Silicon Valley and Santa Monica has Silicon Beach.

But the burgeoning tech community in the Santa Clarita Valley doesn't have a catchy nickname.

"Silicon Alley" has been suggested although that name already refers to a section of Manhattan. **Tania**

**Mulry**, a Santa Clarita-based consultant to startups, likes "Silicon Suburb."

**Erick Arndt**, a part-time tech entrepreneur in Santa Clarita and founder of the group **SCV Startup**, has no problem with that name either.

"If you don't have anything else, that might be the best," said Arndt, who was behind one startup that failed and is now working on a second.

Indeed, known as a suburb for Los Angeles – albeit one with clusters of biotech and manufacturing companies – Santa Clarita finds itself nurturing a growing cluster of tech entrepreneurs



**Mulry**

who seem comfortable being far from the center of the industry in Silicon Valley and inland from Santa Monica.

"We have brilliant people here," Mulry said. "I am glad to see we are starting to get together, starting to see investors come up and take a look at these companies and starting to pull together an ecosystem of

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# FREAKY FARM

PHOTO BY MIKE BAKER

Harvest: Tony Dighera with crop of fresh Pumpkinsteins.

## Fillmore grower scales up Halloween produce

By **CAROL LAWRENCE** Staff Reporter

**T**wo years ago, Fillmore grower **Tony Dighera** was on the brink of losing his business just when his obsession – growing pumpkins in the shape of a Frankenstein head – finally paid off.

National media outlets put his product in the spotlight. Retailers including **Whole Foods Market Inc.** showered him with thousands of dollars for the ghoulish gourds he calls Pumpkinsteins, saving his business.

Then last fall, excessive heat right before the pumpkin harvest wiped out Dighera's high-cash crop.

Once again, he found himself on the brink. This time, his other crops – organic leafy greens and vegetables – saved his business, but just barely.

The grower has lived the boom-and-bust cycle common to entrepreneurs. Experts say many don't survive because they can't ramp up production quickly and sufficiently enough to meet demand once their products are finally discovered by consumers.

But Dighera, faced with orders for 200,000

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# Bison Market Getting Beefier

**FOOD:** Antelope Valley rancher gets high price for low-fat meat.

By **HELEN FLOERSH** Staff Reporter

It's not as if herds of shoppers are thundering into supermarkets and restaurants to buy bison meat. Nonetheless, demand for it has surged.

The owner of Los Angeles County's sole bison ranch can attest to that: she's seen prices for the meat – extra lean and sweet – climb along with its popularity.

**Cyndee Donato**, who runs the **AV Winery and Buffalo Co.** in Lancaster, has for years managed a small herd of bison nearby as part of a breeding project. There are between six and 12 animals on her 200-acre property at any time, and her family-owned business processes and sells meat from

two or three of them every few years. Between meat from external suppliers and her own herd, she sells about 2,500 pounds of bison meat every year in her retail shop at the winery, where she also carries venison, rabbit and wild boar, among other exotic game.

"It's difficult to make a comparison across the board, but I can retail ground buffalo at \$10.99 per pound right now and ground venison at \$8 (a pound), which shows you the pressure on ground bison," she said. For comparison, ground beef retailed for \$3.69 on average in July, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The bison industry is reaching out to ranchers to persuade them to raise more animals. That's because demand is outpacing the supply: Bison-meat sales have increased more than 22 percent in the last five

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## PROFILE

**Louis Perry** is on television regularly and has been featured in dozens of articles. All this so-called earned media he's gotten – and continues to enjoy – is worth a small fortune, yet Perry has neither paid for public relations counsel nor spent much at all on advertising.

How does he keep his name in front of the public? Perry, who founded the Encino private guard business **Kadima Security Services Inc.**, explains that he has developed a kind of do-it-yourself strategy designed to garner attention – and lots of free publicity.

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PHOTO BY DAVID SPRAGUE

Counselors: Senior Associate Attorney Bradley Mancuso, left, with Principal Lead Trial Attorney Lawrance Bohm at the offices of Bohm Law Group in Woodland Hills.

# Record Payouts Point to Growth for Valley Office

**LAW:** Lawrance Bohm has won some of the largest employment verdicts ever.

By **STEPHANIE HENKEL** Staff Reporter

Trial lawyer **Lawrance Bohm** already represents former employees in high-profile cases against rock star **Eddie Money** and Olympic snowboarder **Shaun White**. And he has won some of the largest employment verdicts in legal history.

But he still wants to grow his Valley presence at his Woodland Hills law office, aiming to double its size by the end of this year.

“That case (Shaun White’s) began in our Woodland Hills office,” he told the Business Journal. “Now it is a top story in world news.”

Bohm has won what are believed to be the two largest single-plaintiff employment verdicts in U.S. history, totaling over \$353 million. He started his own law practice Sacramento-based **Bohm Law Group Inc.** in 2005, which currently has approximately 20 attorneys spread across five offices throughout the state.

However, as his case load grows in the Valley with much of the legwork of the Money and White cases taking place at the firm’s Woodland Hills location, Bohm has big plans to further his focus in the 818 and engage the local community.

## Switching sides

Bohm attended college at the **University of California, Irvine** and earned a partial scholarship to **Tulane University** in New Orleans for law school.

After graduating and passing the bar exam, he began his legal career, defending large governments, cities, police agencies and corporations in mainly employment, personal injury and civil rights cases. Bohm did this for four and a half years, taking note of the imbalance of resources between the two sides.

“Big wealthy companies and governments had more than enough lawyers,” he said. “It seemed pretty clear that putting some talent on the plaintiff side of the v, as they say, would be a great way to help improve the

legal system and impact my community.”

He borrowed \$100,000 from his mother-in-law and began his practice in his Sacramento kitchen. As his workload grew beyond the parameters of the capital, he found himself flying down to Los Angeles twice a month to see clients at coffee shops and friends’ offices.

As a result of the increased business in Southern California, Bohm decided to begin his Woodland Hills practice in 2012, which grew out of the living room of his now Senior Associate Attorney **Bradley Mancuso**.

In 2013, they moved into an office on Variel Avenue and less than a year later, moved to their current location at 21051 Warner Center Lane.

“Logistically, setting up an office in Woodland Hills was relatively easy,” said Mancuso. “The area is friendly to businesses; there are plenty of cost-efficient office spaces and many supporting businesses and services in the area.”

Two to three attorneys work out of the West Valley location, which currently has two empty offices. Bohm hopes to fill those spaces with lawyers before the end of the year.

“I have eight people who just took the bar, so if all eight pass, we will have eight new lawyers added to the 20, bringing us to 28 (firm wide),” said Bohm.

He prefers to bring in unseasoned attorneys who have recently passed the bar, so they can learn to practice the “Bohm method,” as he calls it.

## Bohm method

The method is a team-focused approach that incorporates systems and specifications to encourage collaboration and thoroughness when working a case. It lays out how to organize cases, how to methodically work through cases using checklists as well as how to treat clients.

For example, when taking on a client, the firm provides its attorneys with an intake questionnaire so they don’t forget to ask a question that could compromise the case.

“What I did after a certain point, because I knew I had to teach so many people my method, is I took the way I practice law and formalized it,” said Bohm. “I put it into tools that my employees and co-workers can use to

deliver the same high quality of service that I deliver personally.”

For Bohm to personally work a case, it costs clients \$1,000 an hour, while his associate attorneys average about \$400 an hour.

He can command that high price because of his experience, and he has the track record to prove it.

In 2012, the same year he opened his Woodland Hills office, Bohm won what was at the time believed to be the largest single-plaintiff employment verdict of \$167 million in *Chopourian v. Catholic Healthcare West*. The verdict was later reduced to \$82 million, and the two parties settled out of court for an undisclosed amount.

After making several complaints to the hospital, including complaints about patient care, surgical physician assistant **Ani Chopourian** was inappropriately disciplined and later terminated after receiving repeated sexual advances and being denied meal breaks.

Attorney **Michael Artinian** of **Bridgford, Gleason & Artinian** of Newport Beach said several factors played into the determination of such a high verdict. He said Chopourian was a high-income earner, which means she could show high economic damages as a result of being terminated. In addition, the defendant, which now operates as **Dignity Health**, is one of the largest health care systems in the nation, meaning the organization has deep pockets.

“One of the factors that plays into such a big verdict is if you have a big defendant on the other side,” said Artinian. “When it gets to the punitive damage phase, assets of the defendant become an issue and become relevant in regard to jury determination.”

Two years later, Bohm won a nearly \$186 million verdict in *Juarez v. AutoZone Stores Inc.*, surpassing *Chopourian v. Catholic Healthcare West*. He did not disclose firm profits for either case.

In the *AutoZone* case, **Rosario Juarez** was awarded \$872,720 in compensatory damages and \$185 million in punitive damages for pregnancy-related harassment, discrimination and retaliation. *AutoZone* challenged this verdict and later dropped the challenge.

“When dealing with punitive damages, it’s 100 percent conduct driven,” said attorney

**Matthew McNicholas** of Los Angeles-based **McNicholas & McNicholas**, who obtained the largest employment verdict ever against the **Los Angeles Police Department**, worth \$12.3 million in 2014. “Punitive damages are not meant to compensate, they are meant to teach a lesson ... and what is punishment depends on the net worth, value or income of the defendant.”

To combat large punitive verdicts, companies need to remain vigilant when it comes to policy and conduct. **Todd Wulffson**, Orange County managing partner at **Carothers, DiSante & Freudenberg**, warns employers to properly train managers and human resources departments as well as ensure a positive work environment for employees.

“High morale equals less lawsuits,” he said. “If employees feel connected to their jobs and valued, they are much less likely to sue – even if something bad happens.”

## Practice growth

So far this year, Bohm Law Group has won verdicts of close to \$4 million and still has three or four more trials to go before the end of the year.

Currently, the firm is contacted between 125 and 150 times a month from individuals with potential cases. It takes between 100 and 200 cases a year, spread among its 20 lawyers. With these numbers, Bohm has room to grow his practice with more attorneys handling more cases.

The firm has also started its Spanish-speaking legal service called **Tú Central Legal** and plans on moving into other languages like Farsi and Chinese in the near future.

Eventually, Bohm ultimately hopes to grow his practice from five offices to 10 but currently is giving some added attention to his Valley location.

In Woodland Hills, he wants his firm to get involved in more grassroots community outreach by volunteering and donating at local food banks and charities to develop more of a presence in the region.

“Right now we don’t have so many people down here, but we have enough people who can start making an impact – not just on the law but also on the community as a whole,” he said. “I think that’s the second chapter for Bohm Law.”