

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
9 SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA
10

11 BRIAN JOSEPH DRISCOLL,
12 Plaintiff,

Case No.: 3:15-cv-01162-BTM-
LL

13 v.

**ORDER RE JUDICIAL
RECUSAL**

14 METLIFE INSURANCE;
15 ANHEUSER-BUSCH INBEV INC.;
16 and DOES 1 to 100,

Defendants.
17

18 The Clerk of Court invited the parties to respond to the presiding judge's
19 Notice of Disclosure of Conflict ("Notice"). (ECF No. 139).¹ In response, Plaintiff
20 Brian Joseph Driscoll seeks discovery about the circumstances surrounding the
21 conflict and an appointed attorney. Additionally, Driscoll appears to request that
22 the previously entered summary judgment order be vacated.² For the reasons
23 discussed below, the undersigned Judge will recuse from this case.
24
25
26

27 ¹ Citations refer to material in the Electronic Case File ("ECF"); pinpoint citations are to the ECF-generated page
28 numbers at the top of documents.

² While Driscoll's request lacks clarity, both the Court and Defendants construe his response as a motion to
vacate the summary judgment order. (ECF No. 140, at 3).

1 **DISCUSSION**

2 In the underlying dispute, Driscoll filed several ERISA³ claims against
3 Defendants Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. (“Metlife”) and Anheuser-Busch
4 Companies, LLC (“A-BC”) to recover long-term disability benefits. The Honorable
5 Janis L. Sammartino presided over the case. After cross-motions for summary
6 judgment, Judge Sammartino granted Defendants’ motion for summary judgment
7 and the judgment was entered on November 9, 2020. (ECF No. 132). On August
8 6, 2021, approximately nine months after the judgment was entered, Judge
9 Sammartino submitted a Notice to the Clerk of Court informing the Clerk that she
10 recently learned a family member owned stock in Metlife, Inc., the parent
11 company to Metlife. Judge Sammartino stated she was unaware of the financial
12 interest during the pendency of the case and therefore the interest did not impact
13 her decision. (ECF No. 139). She subsequently recused from the case. (ECF No.
14 141). The Court has been advised by the Clerk that Judge Sammartino also
15 submitted similar notices and recused in other cases.

16 Pursuant to Advisory Opinion 71 of the Judicial Conference Code of
17 Conduct Committee, the Clerk invited the parties to respond to Judge
18 Sammartino’s disclosure in this and other cases. (ECF No. 139). Both parties
19 responded. (ECF Nos. 140, 143). Driscoll seeks disclosure of the circumstances
20 surrounding the Metlife, Inc. stock interest, appointment of counsel, and vacation
21 of the judgment. Defendants argue Judge Sammartino was not disqualified and
22 that her judgment should stand.

23 28 U.S.C. § 455 governs disqualification of judges and requires
24 disqualification in cases where impartiality may reasonably be questioned. See
25 28 U.S.C. § 455(a) (“Any justice, judge, or magistrate judge of the United States
26 shall disqualify [herself] in any proceeding in which [her] impartiality might

27 _____
28 ³ Employment Retirement Security Act of 1974, 29 U.S.C. §§ 1001 *et seq.*

1 reasonably be questioned.”). Subsection (b) enumerates specific circumstances
2 requiring disqualification. See 28 U.S.C. § 455(b)(1-5). Under § 455(b)(4), a
3 judge shall disqualify herself when “[s]he knows that [s]he, individually or as a
4 fiduciary, or [her] spouse or minor child residing in [her] household, has a
5 financial interest in the subject matter in controversy or in a party to the
6 proceeding, or any other interest that could be substantially affected by the
7 outcome of the proceeding.” Additionally, § 455(b)(5)(iii) provides that a judge
8 shall disqualify herself if “[s]he or [her] spouse, or a person within the third
9 degree of relationship to either of them, or the spouse of such a person [i]s
10 known by the judge to have an interest that could be substantially affected by the
11 outcome of the proceeding.” Section 455(b)(4) and (5) require some level of
12 knowledge by the judge. See *Davis v. Xerox*, 811 F.2d 1293, 1295 (9th Cir.
13 1987).

14 Driscoll seeks to have the judgment for defendants Metlife and A-BC
15 vacated on the grounds that Judge Sammartino may have been disqualified
16 under 28 U.S.C. § 455. Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 60(b)(6) is the proper
17 avenue to challenge a prior decision based on the subsequent discovery of facts
18 requiring the judge’s disqualification under § 455. See *Liljeberg v. Health Servs.*
19 *Acquisition Corp.*, 486 U.S. 847, 863-64 (1988). The Ninth Circuit in *Davis* was
20 faced with a similar challenge. There, the presiding judge had previously
21 disclosed a financial interest in the defendant company Xerox on his 1978
22 Financial Disclosure Report. The judge then made rulings on discovery and
23 dismissed one of the plaintiff’s claims. The judge made no mention of Xerox in
24 subsequent financial disclosures. In 1984, the judge wrote to the Chairman of the
25 Judicial Ethics Committee that he had remembered that “some years ago” he
26 had purchased a \$500 warrant issued by Xerox and that he had received \$30 a
27 year in dividends. *Davis*, 811 F.2d at 1294. Regarding § 455, the Ninth Circuit
28 held:

1 We deal here with a statute of great rigidity, which imposes on a federal
2 judge the duty of recusal when the judge "knows" that he or a member
3 of his family has a financial interest, "however small," in the subject
4 matter in controversy or in a party to the controversy. 28 U.S.C. §
5 455(b)(3), (d)(4). Although the statute is sometimes disruptive when
6 applied prospectively, see *In re Cement Antitrust Litigation, supra*,
7 Congress was willing to accept disruptions in return for the perceived
8 benefits of promoting public confidence in the judiciary. See *ibid*, at
9 1311-13.

10 The case is different, however, when the statute is not to be applied
11 prospectively, but to be applied retrospectively to rulings the judge has
12 already made. In such retrospective applications we find wisdom in the
13 observation of the Fifth Circuit interpreting Section 455(a): "Because
14 of the harsh consequences that can result, knowledge of facts should
15 not lightly be imputed to a judge." *Health Services Acquisition Corp. v.*
16 *Liljeberg*, 796 F.2d 796 at 803 (5th Cir. 1986). We are unwilling to
17 presume that because the judge once knew, he could not have
18 forgotten. The right course under § 455(b) as under § 455(a) is to
19 proceed on a case by case basis, determining the existence of
20 disqualifying knowledge at the time the judge sat, in the way that a
21 state of mind is normally determined, from inspection of all the
22 circumstances. If a reasonable person would conclude from all the
23 circumstances that the judge did not have knowledge at the time he
24 sat, his rulings stand. If the circumstances are such that a reasonable
25 person would conclude that the judge had not forgotten but continued
26 to know, his rulings must be vacated. The rule protects against abuse
27 by a party who knows of or suspects a minor financial interest of which
28 the judge is not aware, and who quietly awaits the outcome of the trial
before raising the point. On the other hand, where the financial interest
is substantial or appears to have had the potential of affecting the
judge's rulings, the interest will be one that reasonable persons would
conclude the judge was aware of, whatever his pretense of ignorance.
The judge's rulings will then be invalidated.

Davis, 811 F.2d at 1296.

As the Ninth Circuit noted in *Davis*, the question before the Court is
whether a reasonable person would conclude from the circumstances that Judge
Sammartino knew of the disqualifying family member's stock holding in Metlife

1 during the time she presided over the case. The Ninth Circuit instructed that the
2 question of a judge's knowledge is determined "in the way that a state of mind is
3 normally determined, from inspection of all the circumstances." *Id.* Thus,
4 examination of Judge Sammartino's Financial Disclosure Reports and obtaining
5 a full statement as to when she first learned of the financial interest, all of which
6 were before the court in *Davis*, may be necessary in this case. Furthermore,
7 since Judge Sammartino has denied that she knew of the stock holding during
8 the time she presided over the case, the judge making the determination would
9 necessarily have to make a finding as to her credibility.

10 Section 455(a) requires the undersigned judge to recuse from deciding that
11 question if a reasonable person with knowledge of all the facts would conclude
12 that Judge Sammartino's impartiality may be questioned. See *Clemens v. U.S.*
13 *Dist. Court*, 428 F.3d 1175, 1178 (9th Cir. 2005) ("[i]n analyzing § 455(a)
14 disqualification motions, we employ an objective test: 'whether a reasonable
15 person with knowledge of all the facts would conclude that the judge's impartiality
16 might reasonably be questioned'"); *United States v. Holland*, 519 F.3d 909, 913
17 (9th Cir, 2008) (applying same standard). The Court finds that to be the case
18 here.

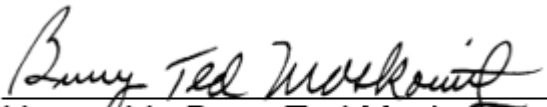
19 The judges on our court are close and we maintain a friendship with each
20 other. We meet on most Mondays to discuss court business. We socialize at
21 least once a year with our spouses. Indeed, most of the district judges and
22 spouses were together for a dinner about six weeks ago celebrating this judge's
23 assumption of senior status. Before the pandemic, the district judges and our
24 spouses would get together for a yearly beach party. Thus, the relationship
25 between the district court judges and spouses is sufficiently close that a
26 reasonable person would question whether the undersigned judge could
27 impartially determine Judge Sammartino's credibility or determine what discovery
28

1 to order in as much as that would implicate her privacy.⁴ These are the very
2 issues that I would be called upon to decide. Therefore, I find that I must recuse
3 from deciding Driscoll's motion.

4 The reasons for recusal on the present motion do not apply to the
5 resolution of the underlying ERISA dispute if the judgment is vacated. However,
6 in *United States v. Feldman*, 983 F.2d 144 (9th Cir. 1992), the Ninth Circuit held
7 that the court cannot parse a case into those issues in which the court has a
8 disqualifying conflict and those in which it does not. If there is a § 455 basis for
9 disqualification, the judge must recuse from the entire case. *Id.* at 145 ("when a
10 judge determines that recusal is appropriate it is not within his discretion to
11 recuse by subject matter or only as to certain issues and not others").⁵ Thus,
12 having held that I must recuse on the present motion, I must recuse from the
13 entire case.

14 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

15 Dated: October 7, 2021

16 
17 Honorable Barry Ted Moskowitz
18 United States District Judge
19
20
21

22
23 ⁴ This case is distinguishable from this judge's decision in *United States v. Barajas-Bandt*, 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS
24 18128 (S.D. Cal. 2011). There, the defendant had threatened Judge Houston and I determined that such threats
25 would not prevent the Court from deciding the case impartially. *Id.* at *8. Here, Judge Sammartino is more akin to
26 a party in the case. As I explained in *Barajas-Bandt*, "if the Court is [] placed in a position where it must assess
27 the credibility of Judge Houston or anyone in his chambers that the undersigned has a relationship with, recusal
28 may be appropriate." *Id.* This Court finds that to be the case here.

⁵ This is not the view of other circuits. The First, Second, and Seventh Circuits approve of partial recusals as an
important case-management device. *See, e.g., Ellis v. United States*, 313 F.3d 636, 642 (1st Cir. 2002) ("[t]oday,
we make that approval explicit: we hold that a judge may, in an appropriate case, decide certain issues and
recuse himself or herself as to others."); *Pashaian v. Eccelston Props., Ltd.*, 88 F.3d 77, 84-85 (2d Cir.
1996) (holding that district court did not err in deciding a motion before effecting recusal and that such was "a
practical and appropriate resolution"); *United States v. Kimberlin*, 781 F.2d 1247, 1258-59 (7th Cir. 1985) (finding
no abuse of discretion where the trial judge issued a limited recusal order).