

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Listening First

Retired judge Victoria Wood brings compassion, legal insight, creativity to role as a neutral.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Retired judge Victoria D. Wood tries to begin her mediations with an open mind. “You can read the briefs and talk to attorneys and kind of formulate an idea of how you think it should go and where it should land,” Wood said. “But if you aim for a goal, I think you can miss opportunities for creative resolution.”

Wood explained that through careful listening, she often encounters unexpected chances to bridge the gap in a dispute.

“When somebody mentions on a side note that there’s something that really bothered them,” Wood explained, “that’s maybe a chance for an easy resolution - not a total resolution - but part of a resolution I never would have thought of without listening.”

A 1997 UC Davis School of Law graduate, Wood began her legal career as a litigator, tackling workers’ compensation cases. But she soon became a chambers attorney at the 1st District Court of Appeal in San Francisco and later was counsel for the Napa County Superior Court.

“To be writing appellate opinions for the state was an incredible honor, and I loved it,” Wood said. “I learned so much and realized that it was my comfort zone - rather than advocating one position or the other but to instead look at both sides and try to figure out what the right result is.”

In 2013, Wood was appointed as a commissioner for the Napa County Superior Court, where she handled criminal and family law calendars. Gov. Jerry Brown elevated her to a judgeship in 2017, after which she tackled appellate, civil, juvenile and family law assignments.



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“The last few years on the bench, I was a supervising family law judge and was doing a lot of settlement conferences,” Wood recalled. “And I realized that the days when I had settlement conferences, I was really jazzed up, really enjoying the work and really finding it gratifying to bring resolution for people. And then I realized, ‘You know what? I think this is what I actually would like to focus on and do for my career.’”

Wood retired from the bench in early 2024 and joined ADR Services, Inc. last February. She’s been working since to resolve cases as a mediator, arbitrator, private judge and discovery referee, focusing regularly on family law, probate, estates and trusts, employment, personal

injury, real property and commercial disputes.

Wood noted that as a family law private judge, she works hard at helping both sides to understand her decisions.

“It’s really a goal of mine in making rulings to have both sides understand the ruling - to understand why I got there, even if they disagree with it,” she said. “You can’t always have that happen, but ... that is my hope, that everybody - even if I rule against them - at least they feel like they had a fair hearing.”

Before her mediations, Wood likes to receive briefs from all the parties and speak over the phone with counsel. She noted that in

Victoria D. Wood

ADR Services, Inc.
San Francisco

Areas of Specialty:

Employment
Personal Injury
Family Law
Probate
Trust and Estates
Real Property

family law cases, she tries to arrange a pre-mediation phone call during which the attorneys for both parties participate.

“Getting us all aligned and on the same page - sort of as a team to help bring a resolution for the divorcing couple as opposed to starting off against each other,” Wood explained. “I really appreciate when people are willing to take that approach.”

Wood noted that while joint caucuses on the day of mediation are unusual for her, she has made use of that approach on occasion. Carefully listening to the parties is, however, an early objective.

“I let the parties know, ‘I want to hear from you directly,’” Wood explained. “I’ve read about the case. I’ve read about you. But I want to hear it out of your mouth, how you’re feeling’ and give them a chance immediately to get a little bit off their chest. That always seems to be like a release valve for them.”

Walnut Creek probate litigator Lara J. Heisler used Wood recently

as mediator on a particularly contentious case, and said she excelled at helping the parties to feel heard.

“Her superpower is that she is very emotionally in touch with what is driving the fight underneath it all,” Heisler said. “And she comes up with creative ways for the parties to get to the meat of what they’re really fighting about.”

Heisler noted that during the mediation, Wood did at one point bring the litigants together in the same room.

“She did a breakout, where she insisted that the attorneys were not to speak and only the parties were to address one another with her mediating,” Heisler recalled. “And they had a really good heart to heart.”

Napa family law attorney Vanessa K. Wills appeared before Wood when she was on the bench and has since used her as a private judge.

“She’s got great legal acumen combined with high emotional intelligence,” Wills said. “She’s really got a way with people - particularly people who are undergoing emo-

tionally challenging issues. ... On a human level, she’s very talented.”

Wills also praised Wood’s command of the law.

“You can’t forget her strengths as a jurist and as somebody who can pick up the law and understand how things function quickly and then use that in the context of dispute resolution,” Wills said.

San Rafael trusts and estates litigator Paul B. Gruwell used Wood recently to resolve a complex case involving many parties, and he said he appreciated her evaluative approach.

“She was willing to roll up her sleeves and open the probate code, open the welfare and institutions code and really push back a little bit on different arguments to test those theories and test the different settlement positions of the parties,” Gruwell explained.

Like Wills, Gruwell noted Woods’ understanding of the law.

“I found her to be great to work with, quick on the uptake, understood the issues, pushed back where

appropriate,” he said. “But she also helped the parties negotiate and steer towards their own settlement.”

Wood said her decision to refocus her career has thus far been wonderfully fulfilling, in part, because helping people to resolve their disputes is truly a gift.

“They will cry tears of joy,” Wood explained. “They are just overcome with relief. Even if they entered a mediation hoping they were going to get a million dollars and they only got \$250,000 - there is still just such an incredible relief that it’s over. ... And it just feels like a true service to people, helping them get through that process.”

Here are some attorneys who have used Wood’s services: Rachel H. Rosenfeld, Heisler Rosenfeld Zaragoza LLP; Vanessa K. Wills, Vance & Wills PC; Paul B. Gruwell, Ragghianti Freitas LLP; Lara J. Heisler, Heisler Rosenfeld Zaragoza LLP; Jason P. Brown, Fisher & Phillips LLP.

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