

Bonnie L. Sabraw
ADR Services, Inc.

Judicial Profile

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Career Highlights: Age: 62 Affiliations: ADR Services Location: San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento Areas of Specialty: real estate, personal injury, commercial/business, employment Rate: \$425 per hour

By Dhyana Levey
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO - For former Alameda County Superior Court Judge Bonnie Sabraw, retirement hasn't exactly been relaxing. Although she did get to take that road trip through the East Coast and Canada just after leaving the court's complex litigation department in September, she hasn't finished as many books or ridden her horses as much as she had hoped she would.

Instead, she spends three to four days a week either working in her home office in Castro Valley or at the offices of ADR Services in San Francisco. Sabraw, 62, now uses her past courtroom experience as a mediator and arbitrator.

While she's no longer making high-profile rulings from the Alameda County bench, Sabraw continues to work with attorneys on disputes similar to those she presided over as a Superior Court judge. She handles real estate, personal injury, business and employment cases.

She said she doesn't conduct her mediations with any one "set-in-stone" style.

"I handle mediation based on needs," she said. "I want to leave it open and let people express themselves however they feel they need to. I encourage them to talk about issues they couldn't talk about in trial but are important to them."

Brian B. Miles, a partner with Walnut Creek's Miles Miles & Westbrook who used Sabraw's mediation services for a dispute involving

neighbors, said he found her demeanor so modest and approachable that it was hard to guess she had spent 20 years as a trial court judge.

"Her style is very effective because she is comfortable with herself," Miles said. "There's no pounding the table and demanding X, Y and Z. There's no saying, 'If you don't do this, you will lose trying the case.'"

In arbitrations, Sabraw said, she needs to be more assertive because she has to render a decision for the parties, and that's why she said she prefers mediations.

"It's a very satisfying experience to bring the parties together to solve a dispute," Sabraw said. "In arbitration you are deciding it for them."

The recession, she said, has actually boosted her employment and real estate workload because people are forced by financial circumstances to settle for less money or can't afford to keep litigating.

"I've had some real estate cases where, because of pressures from the financial institution, a party either wanted to settle but couldn't afford to or decided to settle for an amount less than they would have otherwise," she said.

Attorneys who work with Sabraw say her knowledge as a trial court judge allows her to bring realistic, educated suggestions to her arbitrations and mediations.

Dante Foronda, a partner with Erickson, Beasley & Hewitt in Oakland who worked with her on an eminent domain case, said she offered an invaluable perspective of what a judge and jury would do if the dispute was brought to trial.

"I think she understands the realities of a strong or weak legal argument," said Benjamin L. Stock, a partner at McDonough Holland & Allen's Oakland office who used her services on another eminent domain case.

While on the Alameda County Superior Court bench, Sabraw presided over criminal cases, family law and civil trials before going to the complex litigation department in 2007.

Noteworthy cases she handled include a highly publicized cell phone action, in which customers claimed carrier Sprint Nextel had unfairly charged them for early termination fees.

She briefly left retirement in January to rule on the Sprint Nextel jury trial, throwing out a jury verdict to Sprint and granting a new trial after ruling the jury hadn't properly followed its instructions.

Sabraw also presided over California Environmental Quality Act cases, including one in which environmentalists sought damages from wind turbine manufacturers for birds killed by the turbines.

"I was blessed as a judge to work on a cross section of cases," she said.

Sabraw became a deputy district attorney for Alameda County after graduating from San Francisco Law School in 1979. She went into private practice at Hayward's Varni, Fraser, Hartwell, McNichols & Rodgers in 1981.

Gov. George Deukmejian appointed her as a judge to the San Leandro-Hayward Municipal Court in 1988 and in 1993, Gov. Pete Wilson elevated her to the Alameda County Superior Court.

She said she misses the personal interaction she had with other judges and court staff, but her retirement in September came at the proper time.

"I had my 20 years on the bench," Sabraw said. "And I realize this role now is an extension of the type of work I did as a judge."

Here are some of the lawyers who have used Sabraw's mediation and arbitration services:

Benjamin L. Stock, McDonough Holland & Allen; Mark J. Hancock, Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold; Dante Foronda, Erickson, Beasley & Hewitt; Edward C. Schroeder Jr., Selman Breitman; Philip T. Prince, Philip T. Prince Law Offices; Brian B. Miles, Miles Miles & Westbrook; Virginia L. Ekelund, Law Offices of Terence Daniel Doyle; Carrie E. Croxall, McNamara, Dodge Ney, Beatty, Slattery, Pfalzer, Borges & Brothers; William F. Burns, Law Offices of William F. Burns; Claudia J. Gorham, Meyers Nave Riback Silver & Wilson; L. Louis Spitters Jr., Law Offices of Louis Spitters; Ira J. Spratley, Law Offices of Brian J. Har

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