

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Purposed Approach

COVID-era case backlogs gave Christopher White a new appreciation for ADR work.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Hoping to help the Orange County Superior Court address a soaring case backlog during the COVID-19 crisis, longtime litigator Christopher A. White started tackling mandatory settlement conferences as a judge pro tem.

“I handled dozens and dozens,” White recalled. “I really liked it, and it turned out I was pretty good at settling cases.”

White said volunteering to resolve the small claims matters from the bench deepened his appreciation for the American system of justice.

“They needed their day in court,” White said of the litigants. “And while it may not seem like a lot of money to an attorney who handles big cases, these were people’s lives. And giving them their day in court, making them feel relaxed and welcome, that they could be heard, and then having the responsibility to make a thoughtful and reasoned decision was a really good process.”

A 1990 Loyola Law School graduate, White spent more than 30 years as a litigator, representing defendants in personal injury, construction defect and catastrophic loss cases. In 1999, he cofounded the Orange County civil litigation firm Morrow & White, a boutique he comanaged until striking out full time as a private mediator in March 2023.

“I love the work,” White said of mediation. “At the end of the day, you’re doing conflict resolution, and you get to be a peacemaker, and it feels great.”

White completed training at Pepperdine University’s Straus Insti-



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tute for Dispute Resolution in 2018, but it wasn’t until after his time tackling mandatory settlement conferences as a judge pro tem that he added mediation to his legal practice at Morrow & White. After a couple of years resolving cases part time as a private neutral, the longtime litigator decided he wanted to focus full time on mediation.

“I feel like it’s a privilege to serve as a mediator,” White explained. “I know when I was an attorney, resolving a case was a really good thing. It was helpful, and I appreciated good mediators. So that’s what I’m trying to do, and that’s why I like it so much. It has purpose for me.”

Since joining ADR Services, Inc. last spring, White has been work-

ing to resolve a diverse collection of personal injury matters as well as construction defect, business, employment and insurance disputes. Before mediation, White likes to receive briefs from all the parties and to speak over the phone with counsel. He’s not a fan of joint sessions.

“I do like to start with the plaintiff in almost every case,” White explained. “I want to meet with the plaintiff’s attorney and then just hear from the plaintiff if I can. ... I just want to talk to them, find out how they’re doing, what they want to tell me.”

White will share his thoughts about a case’s strengths and weaknesses with the parties, but he described his approach as a more

Christopher A. White

ADR Services, Inc.
Irvine

Areas of Specialty:

Personal Injury
Insurance
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Employment
Commercial
Real Estate

collaborative one, where he tries to help litigants better understand their options.

"I don't go at anybody at an acute angle of, 'Oh, that's foolish. You're making a mistake,'" he explained. "I just try and tell them, 'Let me tell you what your mediator thinks. Here's how I see some things. Here's what may be the holdup in trying to get to resolution today.'"

White noted that he does make use of mediator's proposals but only when that strategy is agreed to beforehand by all the parties and typically later in the day.

"I want to discover where the parties are at," White said. "And I make it very clear when I issue my mediator's proposal that it's not meant to be a verdict value. It's meant as, 'What do I think this case can settle for today?'"

Glendale defense attorney Thomas P. Gmelich worked on cases with White when the mediator was representing clients, and he used him recently to mediate a highly emotional sexual assault dispute. Although the matter has not settled yet, according to Gmelich,

he did say it's very close and that's thanks to White's mediator's proposal.

"I thought he did a great job," Gmelich said, noting that White employed a very patient approach. "I think he massaged it correctly and read the room and read the personalities, and I think that was needed in this type of emotionally charged case."

Gmelich encouraged other attorneys to seriously consider White for their own cases.

"People tend to shy away sometimes from the new mediators," he said. "But Chris has the experience of a more seasoned mediator even though he's only been doing this for a little while. I think he's picked it up really well, and that's a testament to how he practiced, his knowledge and personality."

Plaintiffs' attorney Spencer R. Lucas of Panish Shea Ravipudi LLP in Los Angeles used White recently to settle a catastrophic injury case, and he agreed that the mediator's personality is a major strong suit.

"He had an incredibly compassionate demeanor with my severe-

ly injured client, which was really helpful in building some trust with my client," Lucas said.

The case featured multiple defendants and a government entity, according to Lucas, who said White worked extremely hard throughout.

"There were some very challenging personalities involved," Lucas recalled. "But Chris worked with all of the parties over the course of several weeks - even after the mediation - and ultimately he was able to get the full case resolved."

Aliso Viejo defense attorney Andrew J. Mallon also worked with White when he represented clients and has since used him to resolve two motor vehicle personal injury disputes. Mallon said the genuine nature of White's personality and approach goes a long way with litigants.

"He was able to really connect with our clients and our carrier representatives as someone who is speaking from experience and authority," Mallon explained. "From a carrier standpoint, all they do is work in volume, and I think he was able to really break down the claim

and speak candidly with our client and our insurance carrier representative about the pros and cons. ... His thoughts and opinions carried more weight simply because of how he approached it and how he communicated it."

Lucas added that he felt White is fair to both sides.

"Even though Chris had a lengthy career as a defense lawyer, I think he nonetheless has a big heart," Lucas said. "But his defense perspective gives him a great ability to communicate with the defense lawyers and the insurance adjusters. And I think his defense perspective is actually very helpful."

Here are some attorneys who have used White's services: Spencer R. Lucas, Panish Shea & Boyle LLP; Thomas P. Gmelich, Bradley, Gmelich & Wellerstein LLP; Andrew J. Mallon, Wood, Smith, Henning & Berman LLP; Conor R. Nideffer, Nideffer Law Group; Doug M. DeGrave, Poliquin & DeGrave LLP.

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