

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Attention to Detail

Mediator Steven Sepassi's personable, patient approach sets him apart, attorneys say.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Neutral Steven M. Sepassi began his professional career as a software engineer, and he worked for years on research projects to improve NASA's space shuttle fleet.

"As an engineer, you become very detail-oriented," Sepassi said. "That carried into my law practice, and it's now carried into my mediation practice. I look very closely at the details, and it's amazing how sometimes in the details is where you really find the issue."

By the late 1980s, Sepassi said he'd grown disillusioned with engineering and meeting a couple of different individuals who were pursuing law degrees sparked his decision to make a career change.

"It would get me out there and away from just sitting in front of a computer and writing code," Sepassi said, describing his early interest in becoming an attorney.

"I wanted to have more of a human-to-human type of work and be able to help people," he continued. "I was tired of just sitting there in front of a computer, and it was the human interaction part that really got me interested."

A 1995 Southwestern University School of Law graduate, Sepassi hung his own shingle after he passed the bar, tackling personal injury work as well as commercial disputes and real estate litigation. In 2012, he co-founded Sepassi & Tarighati LLP, where he and his partner did a great deal of insurance defense work, representing charter schools in a range of liability disputes.

"We did the insurance defense, and we also did plaintiff's work," Sepassi explained, noting that experience has helped him as a me-



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diator. "So, we really understood both sides. We had a chance to see the goals and the view of the case from both angles."

Sepassi noted, however, that his interest in mediation dates back to 2003 when he completed coursework at Pepperdine Law School's Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution. From there, he went on to volunteer on mediation panels for the Los Angeles County Superior Court, Ventura County Superior Court and the U.S. Central District of California.

"Trying to resolve conflicts is just really more in line with my approach to life," Sepassi said. "I don't really like conflicts and I try to solve them where I can."

In the fall of 2022, Sepassi started working full-time as a private neutral, and he joined ADR Services, Inc. in August 2023. He's since been tackling disputes primarily as a mediator, handling personal injury, commercial, real estate and school liability matters. But Sepassi also arbitrates cases and is working on uninsured and underinsured motorist matters.

"I'll call it as I see it," he said about arbitration. "I just go straight to the facts and look at where things should lie. ... I sit there as a judge of character, judge of testimony, judge of veracity – all of those are important. But at the end of the day, I call it as I see it."

Prior to mediations, meanwhile,

Steven M. Sepassi

ADR Services, Inc.
Los Angeles

Areas of Specialty:

Personal Injury
Commercial
Real Estate
School Liability

Sepassi said he likes to receive briefs from all of the parties, and he tries to speak with counsel beforehand.

"I always manage to get something different from the telephone call than I do from the briefs," he said. "The briefs are two-dimensional. They're just words on a piece of paper, and you get the basic information, but when you talk to somebody, you get a three-dimensional version of the case. ... That gives me a better feel about what I'm getting myself into and how I can approach it."

On the day of mediation, Sepassi said he doesn't make use of joint sessions, but he does like to begin by allowing parties a chance to tell their stories. When the timing is appropriate, Sepassi said he will often move into a more evaluative approach.

"Sometimes, if I see the parties are becoming very tight with their moves, if I see they are beginning to show resistance to move towards what the other side is asking for," Sepassi said, providing an example, "it's at that point that I try to show one party their case may not be as

solid as they think it is - whether it's the defense or the plaintiff."

Tustin defense attorney Sarita T. Oberly has used Sepassi as a mediator in two different school liability matters, and she said his evaluative approach was particularly helpful.

"He was good at making sure we knew where our weaknesses were but also where our strengths were," Oberly said. "And I'm pretty sure he did the same thing to the other side. It was helpful to have both sides be told frankly, 'Yes, you've got these great facts, but the other side also has this issue, and you're going to have to deal with that.' I think that really helped both sides make a more informed decision when making offers or counteroffers."

Bakersfield plaintiffs' attorney Benton F. McKnight has used Sepassi to settle three different personal injury disputes, and he described the ADR Services neutral as extremely personable.

"He was very good with the clients, and he was just a really nice guy," McKnight said. "He's very attentive, and he's a very pleasant

person. The clients really liked him and felt like he had listened and understood. ... So I think his vast litigation experience gives him both credibility and insight into how to work best with the parties."

Oberly agreed that Sepassi's tremendously personable nature makes a big difference.

"I've gone to mediations where the mediator just doesn't look like he wants to be there at all, and you're just like, 'Ok, I don't feel comfortable now, and I know my client's not going to feel comfortable,'" she explained. "Steve came into the virtual room, and he was positive, he was upbeat, he was personable, and I really think that just made everyone feel a little bit more comfortable."

Los Angeles civil litigator Tyler R. Dowdall used Sepassi to resolve a contentious landlord-tenant case with difficult personalities on both sides, and he said the next time he's looking for a mediator to resolve an emotionally-charged dispute, Sepassi will be at the top of his list.

"He was extraordinarily patient and helpful in talking both directly to

counsel and to the parties," Dowdall said. "It was a long, arduous, unnecessarily painful process, but I think his patience and resilience really is what enabled us to settle the case. I think most mediators just would have said, 'Alright, enough of you two. Get out of here. I'm going home for dinner.' But Steve really stuck with it and got it done."

Dowdall said the significant effort Sepassi put into building an early foundation of understanding really paid off in the end.

"He's patient and willing to put in the time to build trust with difficult, intransigent parties," Dowdall said, "to try to drive the case forward in a way I just don't think most mediators are willing to."

Here are some attorneys who have used Sepassi's services: Tyler R. Dowdall, Tarter Krinsky & Drogin LLP; Sarita T. Oberly, Parker & Covert LLP; Benton F. McKnight, McKnight & McKnight Law APC; Shaun J. Voigt, Fisher & Phillips LLP; David K. Dorenfeld, Dorenfeld Law, Inc.

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