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Retired Marin judge Verna Adams leans on deep family law experience to drive settlements

With decades of family law experience, retired Judge Verna A. Adams is helping parties resolve disputes through preparation and practical solutions at ADR Services, Inc.

By Shane Nelson
Special to the Daily Journal

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Although retired judge Verna A. Adams served more than 24 years on the Marin County Superior Court bench, she didn't spend much time in trial.

"In the Marin court, I was very proud of the fact that I didn't really try very many cases because I settled them," Adams said. "I only had a full-on, trial top to bottom maybe two or three times a year. We had a lot of preliminary skirmishes - temporary orders, that sort of thing."

A 1970 Stanford Law School graduate, Adams spent 28 years as a family law attorney before her 1999 appointment to the court, where she presided over civil, criminal, probate, juvenile and family law calendars.

Adams also supervised the Marin Unified Family Law Court for 12 years and the probate courts for eight years.

She retired in the spring of 2024 and joined the ADR Services, Inc. roster of private neutrals a year later. Adams has since been tackling family law and contested trust and estate disputes as a mediator and private judge, but she hasn't yet issued any orders.

"In my experience, those cases—even though they're in the private judging setting—they tend to result in a settlement," Adams noted. "I mostly mediate. That's what I really like to do."

One of the essential ingredients for successful mediation is "preparation, preparation, and then more preparation," Adams said. She reads submitted briefs carefully and arranges separate, pre-mediation calls with counsel on both sides.

"Just to find out what each side is worried about," Adams explained, "any issues they may have with their clients, any unusual things that I need to know that will help me better help the parties get to yes."

She offered a concise description of her overall approach to mediation. "I think my process is very much: 'What do you want? What do you need? And how can we get it for you?' And I try to think out of the box to find creative solutions."

Adams noted a few strategies she turns to today that she could not use on the bench.

"In family law, folks can agree to a payment of a lump sum in lieu of spousal support. Judges can't order that," she said. "And there are creative property division techniques. Sometimes people will agree, for example, to put some of the disputed property in trust for the benefit of their children. Judges

Verna A. Adams

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Former Marin County judge now mediates complex family and estate disputes

can't order that. ... So, I really try to help people find creative solutions to their problems, so they can get on with their lives."

One mediation tactic that attorneys occasionally employ is not particularly helpful, she said.

"If they're making what is their last and final offer—their bottom line, the other side can either say yes or no and that's the end of it. If they get to that point, they should really mean it," Adams explained. "Because the other side may say, 'OK. You want an answer? The answer is no, and I'm leaving.' I've seen that happen, and I've seen the side who made the last, best, final offer look a little shocked, thinking, 'It's only 3:30. We aren't done yet.' ... Sometimes a feasible, proper, decent settlement can get lost when that happens."

San Francisco trusts and estates attorney Ciarán A. O'Sullivan has used Adams to mediate three recent cases and found her extremely knowledgeable about the practice area.

"With those eight years as supervising judge in probate, she gets the dynamic of this practice exceedingly well, and you don't have to explain as much to her as you do to some mediators," O'Sullivan said. "There are mediators that will include trusts and estates litigation in their list of specialties, but she's a specialist."

O'Sullivan also really appreciated the work Adams put in before the mediation.

"She's read everybody's briefs and dug in deep," he explained. "And she does start out in each room, getting to know the clients and making the parties comfortable with her, explaining the process. ... But she gets down to the nitty-gritty pretty quickly."

San Rafael family law attorney Romy S. Taubman appeared before Adams when she was on the bench and has since used her as a private neutral to resolve four challenging cases.

"Her intellect and knowledge of the law is outstanding," Taubman said. "Her combined 40-plus years of family law experience—both as a practitioner and a judge—make her uniquely qualified to work with even the most difficult cases, whether it's custody or financial issues."

Taubman said Adams' evaluation of her case's strengths and weaknesses was particularly helpful.

"She brings a warmth and I would say compassion to the client because she's seen what they've gone through," Taubman explained. "She was a very, very experienced litigator. You don't find many judges who have actually done what we do and are viewing it from our perspective. ... She's masterful at helping settle cases because she understands the value of compromise and settlement economically and emotionally to the clients and to the attorneys."

San Rafael litigator Scott A. Slomiak used Adams recently to resolve two cases involving family law and trust and estate issues and said he wouldn't hesitate to recommend her.

"She knows how to be direct, but how to soften it when necessary," Slomiak said regarding Adams' evaluations of his cases' strengths and weaknesses.

"But what I would say is if you have a very weak legal case, she's not going to prop up a poor argument just to see one party be happy," Slomiak added. "She's going to provide her opinion as she's aware of the law to help get the case settled."

Adams said she's grateful to continue working meaningfully in practice areas where she's already dedicated so much of her legal career.

"In both family and contested estate law, the parties have a relationship," she explained. "So, I feel like I'm helping real people solve their real problems."

Here are some attorneys who have used Adams' services: Romy S. Taubman, Taubman Dias Dominguez LLP; Ciarán A. O'Sullivan, The Law Office of Ciarán O'Sullivan; Scott A. Slomiak, Law Office of Scott Slomiak APLC; Robert R. Cross, Skootsky & Der LLP; Rachel E. Castrejon, Law Office of Rachel Castrejon.

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