

Innovative

Judge Vedica Puri is adept at finding creative solutions to problems, attorneys say

By Winston Cho

Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — At a hearing last July before the start of a burglary trial, Judge Vedica Puri displayed a stack of transparent masks that witnesses must wear.

All eyes were on the judge to see how she would handle the trial of David Brown, who was facing felony burglary charges and had been sitting in jail for over a year. It was the first criminal trial to resume in the county since the start of the pandemic.

Puri was tasked with balancing safety accommodations for the jury against Brown's constitutional rights.

San Francisco Deputy Public Defender Sierra Villaran, who was representing Brown, balked at the white cloth masks that had a clear plastic cutout over the mouth and nose. She preferred having witnesses wear plastic face shields.

"Looking at someone's expression when you question them is critical to picking a fair and impartial jury," she said.

Puri was in unfamiliar waters. She was sympathetic to the argument as a former trial lawyer with over two decades of experience litigating insurance coverage disputes. Still, she reasoned safety had to come first and that the transparent masks more than sufficed to protect the defendant's rights to confront his accusers while also protecting the public from the virus.

"While some of the witness' face will be obscured, it will be no more than what a beard, for example, would obscure," she wrote in an order.



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"Because a majority of the witness' face will be seen (eyes, eyebrows, forehead and mouth), a jury will be able to assess credibility and demeanor along with the witness' voice, speech and body language."

Solano County Deputy District Attorney Kathleen McBride, who appeared before the judge in hundreds of cases when she was a prosecutor in San Francisco, said the judge's order demonstrates her ability to address novel issues.

"It's not exactly what either side was looking for, but it's inventive and innovative," she said. "It's a creative solution to a new problem that she was being asked to solve as we tread through this new territory of COVID."

Puri said of her ruling, "A defendant's right to confront witnesses

is not absolute." She noted a 1990 U.S. Supreme Court case in which a molested child was questioned by attorneys without the defendant being in the room.

"The No. 1 priority was safety," she continued. "At the end of the day, that's what controlled."

The urgency of the trial, which ended in an acquittal for Brown, was not lost on the judge. The defendant had spent five months in jail longer than he should have because trials were suspended during the court shutdowns. *People v. Brown*, 19012170 (S.F. Super. Ct., filed June 24, 2020).

While the case put the spotlight on Puri, the first Indian-American judge appointed to the San Francisco County bench, as a jurist for the



Vedica Puri

Superior Court Judge
San Francisco County
(San Francisco)

Areas Of Specialty:

Appointed to San Francisco County Superior Court by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2019; partner, Pillsbury & Coleman LLP, 2005-19; senior associate, Pillsbury & Coleman LLP, 2002-05; trial lawyer, Drinker, Biddle & Reath, 2001-02; trial lawyer, Sedgwick LLP, 2000-01; trial lawyer, Alborg, Veiluva & Cannata, 1996-99

Law School:

Santa Clara University
School of Law, 1994

first time she's well acquainted with addressing pressing issues that require her attention.

When she was in private practice as a partner at Pillsbury & Coleman, she helped organize a town hall to answer insurance questions in the wake of the San Bruno pipeline explosion.

"She has a special kind of compassion," said Rebecca Grey, who used to work with the judge at Pillsbury & Coleman and is now a mediator. "It's compassion from strength."

The incident occurred in 2010 when a pipeline owned by Pacific Gas & Electric exploded in a residential neighborhood. It killed eight people, injured 66 others and destroyed 38 homes.

"There are basic questions you don't want to pay thousands of dollars for a lawyer to tell you, but we could do it as a benefit to the community," she said.

Puri did the same after a series of wildfires erupted across Northern California in 2018 and completely destroyed entire cities and communities. She also represented individuals trying to get their claims paid from insurers she said were acting in bad faith.

"There's one homeowner I remember who barely escaped the fires with his life," she said. "The last thing you want to do is nitpick with your insurance company. You just want someone to take the laboring oar and get the company to do the right thing by you."

The judge recollected fielding numerous calls from people who simply needed rent money. She set up a dedicated number to answer spot questions. Most of her work was geared toward helping people get their claims paid or stabilize their lives while they waited for the payments.

Puri has long been involved in caring for her community. After graduating from the Santa Clara University School of Law following her undergraduate studies at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai, India, she moved to San Francisco, which she admired from afar growing up in the South Bay.

"It's just a special place — no more than anywhere else, but it's where I've chosen to call home," she said. "I want to serve the people of this county."

Inside of Puri's chambers hangs a picture of a steep San Francisco hill partially obstructed by the headlights of cars darting along the road. She said the photo "represents everything the city's about — it's beauty and urgency and loveliness."

In the courtroom, Puri was known as a fierce advocate, Grey said. "She loved to try cases," she said. "For her, it was like a high."

Grey recollected mock trials her firm would hold in which Puri excelled arguing for the defense. That's when she said she knew Puri would make an excellent judge.

Another part of it, she said, was her former partner's ability to com-

municate and connect with people.

"She reads people so well," Grey said. "She gets through to them."

San Francisco Assistant District Attorney Sam Beckerman, who appeared before the judge in hundreds of cases when she oversaw a criminal calendar, similarly emphasized her people skills.

"You have judges who come in and are maybe highly efficient but aren't personable," he said. "Then you have judges who are the opposite. She really struck the balance of being personable and kind to everyone while maintaining an efficient courtroom."

Beckerman said he was most impressed by Puri's willingness to admit that she needs to "take a step back and say, 'I need to learn more about this issue because it's so important.'"

Bonnie Chan of the San Francisco public defender's office similarly said the judge is open minded and is unafraid to exercise her discretion when it's appropriate. She recalled a case in which Puri reduced a felony to a misdemeanor over the objection of prosecutors.

"She did it because she could see the effort from the defendant, and she was receptive of that and took that into consideration," Chan said.

Puri now oversees a calendar that includes civil trials, settlement, housing, family law and probate. She's been busy facilitating settlement conferences to deal with the court's backlog of cases as a result of the pandemic.

Here are some of Judge Puri's recent cases and the attorneys involved:

- *People v. Brown*, 19012170 — felony burglary

For the prosecution: Edward Chang, San Francisco district attorney's office

For the defense: Sierra Villaran, San Francisco public defender's office

- *Liu v. Beasley et al.*, CGC-20-588317 — fraud

For plaintiff: Sally Liu, San Francisco

For defendant: Tom R. Normandin, Prenovost, Normandin, Daw & Rocha

- *Korzekwa v. Encore Karaoke Lounge LLC*, CGC-18-570071 — personal injury

For plaintiff: Elinor Leary, The Veen Firm PC

For the defendant: Gregory de la Pena, De La Pena & Holiday LLP

- *Lee v. Megabus West LLC*, CGC-16-554749 — personal injury

For plaintiff: Christopher B. Dolan, Dolan Law Firm, San Francisco

For defendant: John S. Williamson, Williamson Law Group, Santa Ana

- *Ghadeih v. CCSF*, CGC-17-560481 — personal injury

For plaintiff: Ronald P. Goldman, The Goldman Law Firm, Tiburon

For defense: Hunter W. Sims, San Francisco city attorney's office