



HON. VERNA ADAMS (RET.)

Specializing in Family Law and Probate



Hon. Verna Adams (Ret.) is a nationally recognized expert in mediation and adjudication of complex family law and probate cases.

She is a judicial leader and retired Superior Court Judge with more than two decades of service on the Marin County Superior Court bench. A graduate of Wellesley College (A.B., summa cum laude) and Stanford Law School, Judge Adams has devoted her career to justice, equity, and pioneering systemic change in the family law and probate arenas.

Appointed to the bench in 1999, Judge Adams served in every division of the court—criminal, civil, probate, and juvenile—but her most impactful contributions were made during her 14-year tenure in the Marin Unified Family Law Court and eight years in Probate. As Supervising Judge of those divisions and as Presiding Judge of the Marin County Superior Court, she distinguished herself as an innovative, compassionate, and effective judge.

Judge Adams has always approached the law with a strong belief in minimizing adversarial harm, particularly in emotionally charged matters involving families. She developed and launched California's first Interdisciplinary Settlement Conference program, a model for resolving high-conflict custody disputes through collaboration among judges, attorney-mediators, and mental health professionals. Her leadership extended to the creation of Marin County's Mental Health and Domestic Violence Courts and chairing the task force that established the Legal Self-Help Center of Marin—each initiative driven by her deep commitment to accessibility and holistic problem-solving.

Before joining the bench, she was a Certified Family Law Specialist and highly regarded practitioner in the Bay Area. Her work as both trial and appellate counsel in the landmark case *Marriage of Epstein* (1979) 24 Cal.3d 76 led to the now-codified reimbursement principles in California Family Code section 2640. She was recognized in every edition of *The Best Lawyers in America* from 1993 until her judicial appointment and held leadership roles including President of the Marin County Bar Association and Board President of the Center for the Family in Transition.

Judge Adams' career is marked by accolades that reflect both peer and community respect: she was inducted into the Marin Women's Hall of Fame (2016); the Marin Trial Lawyers Association named her Judge of the Year (2017); and she has received two Special Congressional Commendations (1986, 2016). Most recently, she was honored with the Marin County Bar Association's Lifetime Achievement Award (2024), the first woman in the organization's 90-year history to receive the distinction.

Judge Adams is particularly sought after for complex family law and probate matters, including high-conflict custody issues, characterization and division of assets, support disputes, breach of fiduciary duty, contested conservatorships, financial elder abuse, trust and estate accounting disputes, real property transfers, trust contests, trust administration disputes, and will contests. With an unparalleled depth of experience, Judge Adams brings a rare combination of legal expertise, human understanding, and a pragmatic approach to settlement. She understands that resolving family law matters is about more than just the legal outcome—it's about preserving relationships, fostering stability, and ensuring that all parties feel heard and respected. Judge Adams' approach is grounded in the belief that virtually

every case can be resolved with the right preparation, patience, and perspective. To accomplish this, she prioritizes pre-mediation engagement with the parties through pre-conferences in order to uncover obstacles and set the tone for collaboration. She listens deeply, encourages the parties to articulate their true concerns—including those that may not appear in pleadings—and uses techniques like whiteboard visualization and mediator's recommendations to facilitate resolution. Most of all, Judge Adams recognizes the power of non-monetary settlement terms and strives to identify creative solutions tailored to each family's unique needs. Her ability to distill complex issues into manageable solutions, coupled with her steadfast commitment to fairness and efficiency, makes her an invaluable resource for those seeking a resolution outside of the courtroom.

Her post-mediation follow-up is equally proactive. Judge Adams often secures signed, judicially enforceable Memoranda of Understanding at the close of sessions, assigns deadlines for the completion of written agreements, and schedules follow-ups to ensure execution. Her diligence, coupled with her unwavering dedication to helping families move forward, results in outcomes that are not only effective but lasting.

HEARING TYPES HANDLED

- Mediations
- Consultations
- Private Trials
- Settlement Conferences
- Parental Coordination
- Judgment Signing
- Special Master
- References

JUDICIAL & LEGAL EXPERIENCE

Marin County Superior Court, California, Judge (1999 – 2024)

- Presided over civil, criminal, probate, juvenile, and family law matters, with 14 years dedicated to the Marin Unified Family Law Court.
- Served as Presiding Judge (2008-2009), Supervising Judge of the Marin Unified Family Law Court for 12 years and Probate for eight years.
- Spearheaded the creation of the Legal Self-Help Center of Marin, increasing public access to legal resources.
- Launched Marin County's Mental Health and Domestic Violence Courts, fostering specialized judicial solutions.
- Conceived and implemented the Interdisciplinary Settlement Conference program, a groundbreaking initiative for high-conflict custody cases.
- Mediated and adjudicated thousands of cases, with expertise in complex property division, child custody, and spousal support.

Private Family Law Practice, Bay Area (Before 1999)

- Practiced Family Law, handling complex litigation and alternative dispute resolution.
- Certified Family Law Specialist (since 1982) by the State Bar Board of Legal Specialization.
- Counsel in *Marriage of Epstein* (1979), a landmark case shaping California reimbursement law.

EDUCATION

- Stanford Law School, J.D.
- Wellesley College, A.B. (*summa cum laude*)

LEADERSHIP & PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT

- Marin County Bar Association, Past President & Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient (2024)
- Family and Children's Law Center, Founder & Board Member
- Center for the Family in Transition, President of the Board of Directors
- Strategic Evaluation Committee, California Judiciary, One of 19 judges statewide selected by the Chief Justice (2012)
- Continuing Legal Education Presenter, Regular speaker for California judges and legal professionals

AWARDS & HONORS

- Lifetime Achievement Award, Marin County Bar Association (2024)
- Best Judge in Marin, Pacific Sun (2020, 2021)
- Judge of the Year, Marin Trial Lawyers Association (2017)
- Inducted into the Marin Women's Hall of Fame (2016)
- Special Congressional Commendation (1986, 2016)
- Rally Leadership Award, Rally Family Visitation Services

DISPUTE RESOLUTION PHILOSOPHY & EXPERTISE

- Mediation & Arbitration: Extensive experience in settlement conferences and mediation of complex family law disputes.
- Judicial Settlement Conferences: Proven success in resolving cases pre-trial through facilitated negotiations.
- Pre-Mediation Preparation: Conducts in-depth pre-mediation conferences to uncover key settlement obstacles.
- Post-Mediation Follow-Up: Ensures enforcement of settlements through structured follow-up procedures.
- Collaborative Approach: Utilizes psychological insights and non-adversarial techniques to minimize litigation impact.

NOTABLE CASEWORK & CONTRIBUTIONS

- Marriage of Epstein (1979), 24 Cal.3d 76 – Shaped reimbursement law in California family courts.
- Developed Marin County's Interdisciplinary Settlement Conference for high-conflict custody disputes and is a co-author of "The Interdisciplinary Settlement Conference: A Grassroots Alternative for Resolving High-Conflict Parenting Disputes in Lean Times," 53 Family Court Review 4, pp. 632-649.
- Created and presided over Marin's Mental Health and Domestic Violence Courts, advancing specialized judicial support.

AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION

Family Law

- **Character and valuation of property:** hard-to-value businesses; division of illiquid investments; allocation of tax liabilities; community interest in closely held family businesses; tracing for separate property reimbursement claims; equitable apportionment (Van Camp/Pereira/ Moore/ Marsden claims)
- **Complex deferred compensation issues:** stock options; RSU's; signing bonuses; loan claw-backs; allocation of equity compensation

- **Spousal and child support:** establishment, modification, and enforcement of orders; determining child support when the support payor has extraordinarily high income; generational wealth
- **Pre- and post-marital agreements:** unique arrangements; documenting or re-characterizing property transfers made before marriage or before written agreement in place; cultural differences; age differences; high-asset transfer upon marriage
- **Contested separation date:** long gap in alleged separation dates; equivocal communication about separation
- **Reimbursements/post-separation accounting:** Watts/Jeffries charges; Epstein/Family Code §2640 reimbursements; Stallworth reconciliations
- **Child custody/visitation:** relocation; international jurisdictional disputes; developmentally appropriate parenting plans; overseas travel or extended temporary relocation; substance abuse; incarcerated parent
- **Parenting coordination:** school choice; medical treatment/inoculations; inter-cultural disputes; annual calendars; holidays and religious celebrations; refuse/resist dynamics; monitoring therapeutic intervention
- **Elder and adult children disputes:** new spouse inheritance fears; financial support imbalances
- **Multi-jurisdictional disputes:** arrangements and disputes between two U.S. states or between California and another country
- **Family Law discovery disputes**

Probate, conservatorships, estate and trust matters:

- **Complex trust and estate issues:** will contests; probate and/or conservatorship accounting issues; petitions for removal of trustee or conservator; breach of fiduciary duty claims; disputes related to real property and personal property assets
- **Elder abuse:** claims relating to personal and/or financial elder abuse and conservatorship accountings
- **Probate, conservatorships, estate and trust discovery disputes**