

Get to Know Hon. Verna Adams (Ret.)



With a career that spans decades and hundreds—if not thousands—of civil cases, **Hon. Verna Adams (Ret.)** brings unmatched depth, diligence, and heart to her role as a neutral with ADR Services, Inc. A trailblazer in family law and probate, Judge Adams is known not only for her sharp legal mind but also for her calm, intuitive ability to bring resolution to the most personal and complex disputes. We sat down with Judge Adams to learn more about her experience, approach, and what continues to inspire her in the work of helping people move forward.

Q: How would you describe your civil litigation experience?

Judge Adams: Extensive. Family law and probate come within the general category of civil cases, and over the course of my career as an attorney and trial court judge, I’ve handled more than a thousand of them—including jury trials, bench trials, case management, and settlement conferences of every variety. I’ve seen it all and worked hard to resolve matters efficiently, respectfully, and fairly.

Q: What areas of law would you consider your subject matter expertise?

Judge Adams: Family law is where I have the deepest experience, both substantively and strategically. But I’ve also worked extensively in probate and understand how emotionally complex and legally nuanced those cases can be.

Q: What are your core strengths as a neutral?

Judge Adams: I bring subject matter expertise, intellectual rigor, and most importantly—empathy. I prepare meticulously for every case, especially if the issues are novel. But I’ve learned over time that cases don’t settle just because of legal arguments; they settle when you understand what really matters to the litigants. That’s why I always hold pre-mediation conferences with each party—to build trust and to uncover what may not appear in briefs.

Q: What are you most proud of in your career?

Judge Adams: The cases I’m most proud of are the ones I can’t talk about publicly. I’ll never forget a moment at my 2024 Lifetime Achievement Award ceremony. A man whose case I handled back in 2000 traveled a long distance just to thank me. He told me I had “saved [his] life.” Moments like that—when someone tells me I made a positive difference for them or their family—are more meaningful than anything else I’ve accomplished.

Hearing Types Handled:

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

Q: What led you to focus on dispute resolution?

Judge Adams: I've always believed that the adversarial model doesn't work well in family law or contested probate. It often inflicts lasting damage on family relationships. That's why I helped launch the first Interdisciplinary Settlement Conference program in the country. It brings together a judge, an attorney-mediator, and a mental health professional to help families in high-conflict custody cases. That collaborative model is central to how I work as a neutral today.

Q: How do your personal values shape your approach to mediation?

Judge Adams: My college motto was *Non Ministrari sed Ministrare*—"Not to be ministered unto but to minister." That philosophy is a big part of who I am. I've always found deep joy in service—whether it's to my family, my community, or the people who come before me in a case. Helping people get to resolution in a way that brings peace and dignity—that's what it's all about for me.

Q: What do you do when parties are at an impasse?

Judge Adams: First and foremost, I remain patient. I've found that showing people—through my words and presence—that I still believe they can get to "yes" is powerful. I'll often diagram the disputed issues on a whiteboard to make things clearer. In family law, creative agreements—ones that courts can't impose—can be the key to unlocking settlement. I also offer mediator's proposals when appropriate.

Q: Outside of your legal experience, what makes you a strong neutral?

Judge Adams: Coming of age as a woman in the legal profession at a time when there was no level playing field shaped me profoundly. At Stanford

Law School in 1970, I was one of just three women in my class. When I asked the Dean of Admissions why, he told me that qualified women didn't apply. I knew that wasn't true. That experience—and others like it—taught me that collaboration works better than confrontation, and that determination and preparation are everything.

Q: What's your mediation philosophy?

Judge Adams: I believe that virtually every case can settle with the right approach. Most people want to avoid litigation, and it's my job to help them get there—with clarity, empathy, and skill.

Q: What's your post-mediation follow-up process?

Judge Adams: Follow-up is essential. I aim to get a signed, judicially enforceable Memorandum of Understanding before the session ends. I also give the parties clear deadlines for wrapping up any executory terms and sometimes schedule a follow-up session to make sure everything stays on track. Once it's all done, I send a thank you note. Closure matters.

Q: How do you think attorneys would describe you?

Judge Adams: I'd hope they'd say I'm intelligent, determined, compassionate, and hard-working. I know many have also commented on my sense of humor, which helps! But really, I think they'd say I bring both fairness and focus to every matter I handle.

A Trailblazer with a Human Touch.

Judge Adams brings to mediation the same qualities that made her a respected jurist: deep subject matter knowledge, unwavering preparation, and a commitment to seeing—and serving—the whole person behind every case. Her approach is informed by a lifetime of experience, both in law and in life, and by a belief that resolution is always within reach when handled with care.

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