

Get to Know Hon. Thomas Goethals (Ret.)



With nearly 50 years in the legal profession, Hon. Thomas Goethals (Ret.) brings a rare combination of courtroom grit, intellectual humility, and deep personal conviction to his new role as a neutral at ADR Services, Inc. From criminal trials that captured national headlines to complex civil matters resolved quietly in chambers, Justice Goethals' legal career has been defined by integrity, thoughtfulness, and a commitment to finding the truth—even when the answers are uncomfortable. Now, as a mediator and arbitrator, he's putting his experience to work helping parties reach meaningful resolutions.

Q: Let's start with your background—how would you describe your civil litigation experience?

Justice Goethals: I practiced law for 25 years before taking the bench. I was a trial lawyer. Over more than two decades, I tried nearly 200 jury trials to verdict—80 to 90 percent were criminal cases; the rest were civil—personal injury, probate, business, you name it. I also mediated and arbitrated civil cases. I enjoyed the challenge of civil work just as much as criminal—each case required a different approach, but the goal was always the same: get to the truth and deliver justice.

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

Justice Goethals: I'd say personal injury, wrongful death, business and contracts, construction, probate, trusts and wills, water law, and professional liability. I wrote opinions on all of

those subjects while I sat on the Court of Appeal. Many of those opinions were published. I've also spent a lot of time thinking and teaching about legal ethics and professionalism, which have always been important to me.

Q: What would you say are your core strengths as a neutral?

Justice Goethals: I'm good at reading a room—understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each side and communicating that clearly. I also like people. I listen when they speak to me. When people feel respected and heard, they're more likely to listen in return. That mutual trust is what makes a resolution possible.

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

Justice Goethals: I've tried to stay true to my values—throughout my time as a lawyer, judge, and justice. I've always believed in following the evidence to find the truth. That isn't always easy;

Areas of Expertise:

- Appellate
- Business and Contracts
- Construction
- Employment
- Ethics and Professionalism
- Fee Disputes
- Insurance Coverage and Bad Faith
- Legal and Medical Malpractice
- Personal Injury and Product Liability
- Probate, Estates and Trusts
- Securities
- Water Rights

sometimes the truth is murky, and sometimes it's unpopular. But I've never been afraid to make the hard call. Some of the highest-profile cases I've handled have involved defending the integrity of the legal system itself, and I'm proud of the rulings I made—especially when they weren't popular or easy.

Q: Was there a turning point that led you to focus on dispute resolution?

Justice Goethals: There have been many moments over the years, honestly. I've seen how important it is to protect trust in the legal system. As a judge, that often meant tackling systemic issues. As a neutral, I see my role as more immediate—working on each individual case to help people resolve disputes in a fair, transparent way that reinforces their faith in the process.

Q: When parties are at an impasse, how do you help them move forward?

Justice Goethals: First and foremost, you can't give up. Patience is essential. Sometimes you need to take a step back, pause, and figure out what's really blocking progress. Then you start again—with a little more understanding, and hopefully, a little more flexibility. Often, the solution is already in the room—it just hasn't been found yet.

Q: Outside of law, what in your background contributes to your success as a neutral?

Justice Goethals: I'm an educator at heart. I taught as an adjunct law professor for twenty years at two different law schools, and I always felt like my students taught me just as much as I taught them. I read a lot—fiction and nonfiction—and that curiosity helps me keep perspective. I've always tried to stay open-minded and engaged with the world outside the courtroom.

Q: What motivates you to settle cases?

Justice Goethals: After five decades in the profession, I know just how corrosive litigation can be—even when you win. When you go to trial there will inevitably be a winner and a loser. And neither side can ever be certain how the trial will turn out. Settling a case doesn't mean giving in; it means taking back control. It allows people to move forward with their lives. That's what motivates me: helping people find that way forward.

Q: What is your mediation philosophy?

Justice Goethals: I'm still refining it. I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel here—there are a lot of smart, seasoned neutrals I can learn from. But I do know this: preparation matters, listening matters, and meeting people where they are matters. If we can do those things, we can find common ground. We can resolve cases in a way that respects everyone's story.

Q: What does your follow-up process look like?

Justice Goethals: It depends on the case. Some cases just aren't ready to settle on the day of mediation, and I understand that. That's okay. But I follow up—with phone calls or emails—and will stay engaged if I think there's still a path to resolution. Most cases warrant continued communication, and some need more persistence than others.

Q: How would lawyers who've worked with you describe you?

Justice Goethals: That is hard for me to say but I hope they say I am prepared. Collegial. Willing to work. Opinionated, sure—but fair and thoughtful. I try to be patient, but I'm also direct when I think it's appropriate.

Q: Any thoughts on your role as an arbitrator?

Justice Goethals: Arbitrations are less formal trials. To the extent I can I will let the parties agree on the ground rules. This is their case and they will initially know it better than I do. But generally arbitrations are not about nudging people toward a resolution—it's about reaching a decision. That said, I'll always explore whether settlement is still possible. Early and frequent communication can sometimes bring parties to agreement even in arbitration.

Q: What do you enjoy most about this work?

Justice Goethals: I've always been a negotiator. That's what mediation is all about. And my client during the mediation is settlement. That is my goal. When you can bring people together and get a case resolved—especially one that's been dragging on—it's a great feeling. You can see the relief on their faces.

A Judge's Eye, A Teacher's Heart, A Neutral's Resolve.

From jury trials to landmark rulings, Judge Goethals has seen nearly every corner of the legal world. Now, he brings that full scope of experience—along with the humility of a lifelong learner—to his work as a neutral. In every mediation or arbitration, his aim remains the same: follow the evidence, honor the process, and help people move forward.

Contact:

www.justicegoethals.com

Haward Cho
haward@adrservices.com
[\(949\) 863-9800](tel:(949)863-9800)