

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Former judge Suzanne Bolanos draws on judicial, Senate experience as mediator

Drawing on experience as a federal prosecutor, San Francisco judge and counsel to Sen. Edward Kennedy, retired Judge Suzanne Ramos Bolanos says successful dispute resolution begins with trust, candid communication and helping litigants realistically assess the risks of trial.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Years before she joined the San Francisco bench, retired Judge Suzanne Ramos Bolanos learned the value of building consensus while serving as counsel to Sen. Edward Kennedy in the early 1990s, when he chaired the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee.

“He just got so much accomplished,” said Bolanos, who worked for Kennedy for two years. “Of course, that was a different time, when the Senate was less divided.”

She recalled that Kennedy devoted considerable effort to cultivating relationships across party lines.

“He was very good friends with Orrin Hatch, for example, the very conservative Republican senator from Utah,” Bolanos said. “There were just so many things that Senator Kennedy taught me about how to work with people and build relationships and build trust. He was very impressive in that way.”

Raised in a Spanish-speaking household in Oakland, Bolanos called the opportunity to work for Kennedy “a dream come true for my whole family.”

“My parents are immigrants,” she said. “And for them, the Kennedy family — they were just idols, heroes.”

Bolanos discovered her interest in the law while studying political science at UC Berkeley before earning her law degree from Yale Law School in 1989.



Gary Wagner / Special to the Daily Journal

After eight years in Washington, D.C., where she also served in Vice President Al Gore’s office, Bolanos returned to California because she “really wanted to get into the courtroom.” She joined the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Northern District of California as a federal prosecutor before Gov. Gray Davis appointed her to the San Francisco County Superior Court in 2003.

“I was the first Latina to be appointed a judge in San Francisco, and I’m proud of that because part of what I worked on during my career was really access to justice for

everyone,” Bolanos said. “And I felt like that appointment really gave me the opportunity to open the door for others.”

After retiring from the bench last April, Bolanos joined ADR Services, Inc., where she now handles employment, commercial and medical malpractice disputes as both a mediator and arbitrator.

In arbitration, she emphasizes efficiency, particularly in resolving discovery disputes before motion practice begins.

“I’ll meet for informal discovery conferences, where I try to work

Suzanne Ramos Bolanos

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out the dispute before anybody files any motion papers,” she said. “That just takes so much time, resources and delay. And knock on wood here, but I have so far been able in all my arbitrations to resolve the discovery disputes through informal discovery conferences. And I really think that’s better for parties.”

Her mediation process likewise begins before the parties ever meet. After reviewing the briefs, Bolanos schedules a Zoom or telephone conference with counsel to discuss the case candidly.

“The purpose of the meeting is really for them to confide in me about what they believe the real value of the case is and to hopefully open up to me about what their client’s mindset is,” Bolanos said. “I understand the attorney is an advocate. They’ve been hired by the client to defend their position. ... But the pre-mediation call is an opportunity for the attorney to say to me, ‘Listen, this is where my client is at, this is what we’re going to say during the mediation, but the truth is, here’s where I think we should land, and please help me persuade my client.’”

When mediation begins, Bolanos draws on her experience as a policymaker, prosecutor and judge to

help litigants realistically assess the strengths and weaknesses of their cases.

“I spend a lot of time with clients, helping them really try to understand and visualize what a trial is going to look like, and if they don’t resolve this matter, what is it going to mean in terms of time, resources, and emotional stress ... to present their case to a jury and get a verdict,” she said. “I think once clients are fully educated about that and have a full appreciation of what that means, they often understand a settlement is really in their best interest.”

San Diego plaintiffs’ attorney Chandler C. Roth recently retained Bolanos to mediate an employment dispute and praised her rapport with clients.

“She was very kind and understanding and empathetic towards my client’s position while also providing some direct feedback about weaknesses in his case and where he might struggle at trial,” Roth said. “And I thought that was really useful because it shows the client — for better for worse — those strengths and the weaknesses. Sometimes when you have attorneys who believe in you so strongly — as my co-counsel and I did believe in our

client’s case — it can be really nice to have a third-party perspective. ... And she really spoke to my client rather than speaking above him or around him.”

Attorney Andre R. Bollinger, who has used Bolanos to mediate employment, personal injury and landlord-tenant disputes, said she consistently earns clients’ trust.

“A lot of times you leave mediations not getting quite what you wanted,” Bollinger said. “If you’re the defendant — probably paying more than you wanted to. And if you’re a plaintiff — accepting less than you wanted. But my clients haven’t typically left that way. They have perhaps wanted more, but she has helped them to see that it’s, number one, a good amount and, number two, it’s not always just about the money. Having certainty, having the resolution come much earlier than a trial are really beneficial things.”

San Diego litigator Christopher C. Saldana, who has used Bolanos in three employment and landlord-tenant mediations, said her willingness to provide frank evaluations makes her particularly effective.

“I would absolutely recommend her to any lawyer in any civil case

- whether on the plaintiffs’ side or the defense side,” Saldana said. “There have been several circumstances in which she’s flatly told me she thought our position was not the stronger position. ... But that’s very helpful towards getting each side to assess what their relative potential for success is down the road and where you should wind up from a settlement perspective.”

Saldana said Bolanos combines experience, credibility and persistence in a way that distinguishes her from many neutrals.

“Her approach to the process, her experience - and her demeanor probably as much as anything else - along with her willingness to try to get something done is fairly unparalleled, quite frankly,” he said. “She is one of the best neutrals I’ve worked with, and I would without hesitation recommend her.”

Here are some attorneys who have used Bolanos’s services: Andre R. Bollinger, Saldana Bollinger & Gonzalez APLC; Chandler C. Roth, Gruenberg Law; Christopher C. Saldana, Saldana Bollinger & Gonzalez APLC; Leigh A. White, CDF Labor Law LLP; Phillip R. Di Tullio, Baker & McKenzie LLP

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