

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Making a Connection

Signature Resolution neutral Roy L. Paul says litigants want to be heard and understood.

By Shane Nelson
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Although it's been quite some time since he was last on a board, mediator Roy L. Paul surfed for 25 years and hasn't forgotten the value of time in the ocean.

"When you have a good day of surfing, nothing can get you agitated," recalled Paul, who still swims often in the Pacific. "And that's important when you're a judge."

A former mayor of Bell Gardens and the city of Downey, Paul worked for 27 years as a judicial officer in the Los Angeles area, starting as a commissioner on the Downey Municipal Court before being elected judge there in 1994. Paul then spent 18 years on the Los Angeles County Superior Court, presiding over cases at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse and in Long Beach along with a stretch as the only judge working from San Pedro's historic City Hall, where he handled maritime disputes.

"You just have to always maintain your cool and your objectivity and respect the other party," Paul said, recalling lessons he learned as a politician and a jurist.

Paul joined Signature Resolution in the spring of 2018, a few months after retiring from

the bench, and works today on mediations and arbitrations primarily in family law, probate, maritime and personal injury – all areas he handled as a judge.

A staunch advocate of preparation, a positive attitude and perseverance as foundational elements for every successful mediation, Paul is quick to insist really listening to litigants – a skill he honed during nearly three decades on the bench – is critical.

"People want to be heard and understood," he said. "Then they can be more flexible. When they think you're just ignoring them and jumping to a conclusion, no one is happy, and you don't get anywhere."

Terence S. Cox, a San Francisco-based maritime lawyer who's been involved in several mediations with Paul, said it's common for neutrals to describe themselves as good listeners, but in his experience, that's not usually the case.

"I find a majority of mediators have huge egos and tend to lecture everybody," Cox said. "Judge Paul is not that. He's a very good listener."

Los Angeles family law attorney Brian J. Kramer, who's worked with Paul in many mediations, described the retired judge as an excellent people



Thomas Kurtz / Special to the Daily Journal

person who relates easily with folks.

"Judge Paul excels at being very patient with very frustrated people, listening to them, hearing them out," Kramer said. "I've had some really angry people go in front of him. Almost to the point that I'm cringing with embarrassment. ... But then by being patient and listening to them, he connects to them, and I've seen it happen over and over again."

Paul's ability to easily relate with litigants helps him quickly build trust with them, Kramer said, noting that trust is critical in any family law case and was especially important when settling a divorce matter involving incarcerated record producer Phil Spector.

"My client, the wife, was very stressed, and this was a very difficult circumstance," said Kramer, who didn't think the case could be resolved. "But I saw Judge Paul do his thing with her, ... and he did it with both sides."

Roy L. Paul

Signature Resolution
Los Angeles

Areas of specialty: family law, probate, maritime, personal injury

Born and raised in Southern California, Paul's father was a carpenter and his mother was a lawyer, who passed the bar in 1958 after completing correspondence law courses. Paul's mother was also elected the first mayor of Bell Gardens in 1961 and served as a city councilmember. But she spent her entire legal career practicing in a converted office in the garage of the family home.

"I watched her deal with people's problems, and she was so good at understanding and bringing closure," Paul said. "And I kind of just followed along her path."

Paul joined the U.S. Navy

straight out of ROTC after completing his undergraduate degree at USC and served two tours aboard the USS Ticonderoga in Vietnam. Paul was active military for five years and spent another 18 in the Naval Reserves before retiring in 1994 as a lieutenant commander.

He said his insistence on preparation stems, in part, from that time in the Navy, and when handling mediations today, Paul asks that attorneys submit briefs well in advance, so he can read everything twice. He will also typically phone attorneys several times beforehand with questions and in search of specifics, so all the parties can hit the ground running the day of mediation.

“Calling me at 10 o’clock at night – I don’t have other mediators doing that,” Kramer said of Paul. “And I welcome it because these are hard cases to resolve. The success gets built going into these things,

knowing the positions, so when he meets the parties, what he’s going to say to them is already well thought out.” Paul asks attorneys to bring to mediations draft settlement agreements that can be modified with details parties agree to throughout the day.

“The end of a mediation means nothing if you don’t get it memorialized in writing and signed by the parties while they’re present,” he said. “If they walk out with an unsigned document, you’re going to be in a lot more work.”

A fan of Zoom meetings, Paul said the technology is something that has allowed him to conduct and settle mediations since the pandemic began, and it’s a tool he’s found remarkably useful. And while he has been scheduling some in-person mediations in recent weeks, the retired judge insists on strict safety protocols and distancing, and everyone must wear masks throughout. He also noted it’s

always been extraordinarily rare for him to have opposing litigants interact.

“By the time they get to mediation, they’ve already built up their hostilities and their agitations, and you don’t need to increase those,” Paul said.

For arbitrations, Paul said he’ll discuss framework and parameters, such as whether or not to abide by Signature’s suggested rules or how to handle evidence and discovery, all long beforehand with attorneys.

“I make suggestions for everything, and I see if there is a consensus,” he said. “I propose one or two options and let them chose what they want.”

Long Beach probate attorney Eric R. Adler, who appeared before Paul when he was a judge and has since used him for many mediations, said the jurist wasn’t afraid to make tough decisions on the bench, and he won’t pull any punches today.

“I’ve had him come in and

say, ‘I read your brief. I get all the piss and vinegar, but you realize that’s not going to fly in court,’” Adler said of Paul. “He’s going to cut to the chase, and he’s going to tell you his opinion, and he’s going to be tough on people he thinks are taking difficult or inappropriate positions. And I think he has a good idea of when that pressure can be exerted to help bring the parties together.”

Adler was also quick to mention Paul produces results.

“Right now, he’s getting some of the most complex cases in LA probate, and he’s settling them,” Adler said. “He’s developing just a terrific reputation in this field.”

Here are some attorneys who have used Paul’s services: Terence S. Cox, Cox Wootton Lerner; Eric R. Adler, Magee & Adler APC; Brian J. Kramer, Brian J. Kramer PC; Vivian L. Thoreen, Holland & Knight LLP; Anthony D. Storm, Storm Family Law PC