

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Family Value

Thomas Trent Lewis brings 4 decades of experience to his practice as a family law neutral.

By Don DeBenedictis
Daily Journal Staff Writer

In the 41 years since Thomas Trent Lewis became a lawyer, he spent just one of them not working in family law.

Lewis was a family law attorney exclusively for 26 years, then a family law judge on the Los Angeles County Superior Court for 13 more. Since January, he's been a neutral specializing in family law. By the end of this year, Lewis figures he will have mediated or sat as a pro tem judge in about 100 family law matters.

That's one reason Southern California lawyers who practice in the field think so highly of him. "He was one of us," said Stacy D. Phillips of Blank Rome. "He didn't forget what it was like."

"He's been in our shoes," agreed Lionel P. Levin of Levin & Margolin in Beverly Hills, who described Lewis as an effective mediator with an excellent demeanor.

His long experience as a judge also means he has seen and dealt with all the challenges family law cases may present, Levin added. "He was very good at trying to help people out. He was willing to give people honest advice."

Another reason the lawyers appreciate Lewis may be that he taught them. He is a principal author of the Rutter Group's practice guide on family law, as well as the program director of the company's California Family Law Reports branch.

"He teaches the yearly update," Phillips said.

And as Lewis himself pointed out, "Anyone who's become a certified family law specialist in the last nine years has probably taken the course that I teach on getting ready to take that exam."

Lewis didn't decide to go to law school until he was 25. A UCLA alumnus, he attended the University of La Verne College of Law, graduating in



Justin L. Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

the firm became Rehwald, Rameson, Lewis & Glasner.

Family law appealed to him because of the wide range of topics and issues it can present, from child welfare to corporate valuation. "It involves every element of

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— Stacy D. Phillips

1978. Soon after, he went to work for a small firm in the San Fernando Valley.

By year two, he knew what he wanted to do. "I told the partners, if you want me to stay, I'm going to specialize in family law," he said. "They were very supportive of that." He soon made partner, and

human economic and social dynamics," he said.

The practice area was important enough to him that he became a certified family law specialist in 1985, just as soon as he had the requisite five years of practice in.

Many years later, he helped develop the specialization's

Thomas Trent Lewis

Signature Resolution
Los Angeles

Areas of specialty:
Family law

programs and requirements as the chairman of the advisory panel on family law for the California State Bar Board of Legal Specialization. He went on to chair the full board for two terms beginning in 1997.

He also served as the president of the California Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, and he was president of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association in 1993.

By the early 2000s, Lewis

was respected enough in the field that he was able to work about a third of his time as a mediator and private judge pro tem. So he applied for the bench, going onto the Superior Court in early 2006.

He became the supervising judge of the court's family law division in 2016, serving three years until he retired at the end of last year. He started with Signature Resolution in January.

"I retired with the deliberate intention that I was going to have a third career doing what I had done as a judge, which is help solve problems and work with families in distress and try to bring stability and continuity and peace for families," he said.

Family law attorneys who have worked with Lewis sing his praises. For one, he has an unparalleled knowledge of

the law, according to Ronald Brot of Brot Gross Fishbein LLP.

But more than that knowledge, "he is also a calming influence who helps the parties lay aside the not inconsequential emotion of the moment," Brot said. "He encourages civility by being civil, he encourages respect by being respectful and he encourages empathy by being empathetic."

Jeff M. Sturman of the Sturman Law Group noted that family law matters rarely end with finality because parents stay parents and financial needs stay intertwined. "He has a very good understanding of that kind of dynamic," Sturman said.

Lewis is able to craft agreements that minimize ongoing conflict, he added. "It takes some skill to get people to a

place they can parent a child together."

Phillips commented on Lewis' ability to come up with ideas that neither side proposed but that make sense. "He's not a cookie-cutter," she said. "He's creative, he's strong, he's kind. He knows the law backwards and forwards."

She said family law attorneys in the area give Lewis the sobriquet TTL. Sometimes when she is preparing for an argument or searching for a resolution, she asks herself, "What would TTL do?"

In a way, Lewis is working on that same question. Late last year, before he joined Signature, he earned a certificate in negotiation from Harvard University's Program on Negotiation.

This September, he entered the two-year master's degree program from Pepperdine

University Caruso School of Law's Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution.

So far, he said, the program has largely reinforced what he has been doing.

"I want to be the best mediator and judge pro tem I can be," he said. The coursework is a way to be disciplined and stay up on the area. "There is a lot to understanding how disputes get resolved."

Here are some attorneys who have used Lewis' services: Ronald F. Brot, Brot Gross Fishbein LLP; Stacy D. Phillips, Blank Rome LLP; Lionel P. Levin, Levin & Margolin; Jeff M. Sturman, Sturman Law Group APC; Stephen J. Wagner, Dick & Wagner; Sheila A. Williams, Law Offices of Sheila A. Williams; John Robert Rydell II, Griffith & Thornburgh LLP