

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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B.S. Detector

Neutral Margo Hoy is sharp on the law and is not easily distracted or fooled, attorneys say.

By Shane Nelson

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Margo Lewis Hoy dabbled in several practice areas in the early 1990s after she passed the bar and hung her shingle, but it didn't take her long to recognize family law was what she enjoyed most.

"I liked the fact that it touched on so many different areas of law," Hoy said. "You're talking about contracts — there could be prenuptial agreements. You're talking about real estate, you're talking about bankruptcy, you're talking about maybe torts and domestic violence. It was an avenue where you had a window into every area of law. ... And I thought, 'I'm always going to be intellectually stimulated in this area,' and so far, I haven't been wrong."

A 1992 California Western School of Law graduate, Hoy spent 17 years as a family law attorney and was certified as a family law specialist in 2000. She was appointed to the San Diego County Superior Court in 2010, where she handled a criminal calendar for a time but also spent eight years in family law and served as the supervising judge for the family law division.

Hoy retired from the bench in the summer of 2021 and joined Signature Resolution's roster of San Diego private neutrals that August. While the bulk of her work since then has focused on family law, Hoy said she has handled some contractual disputes along with legal malpractice and real estate matters as well as probate cases — a practice area that Hoy noted frequently incorporates family law issues.



Thomas Kurtz / Special to the Daily Journal

Much of Hoy's time as a private neutral over the past 18 months has involved mediation, but she's also worked as a discovery referee, parenting coordinator and a privately compensated temporary judge.

"I'm really allowed to work with people's schedules," Hoy said of private judging. "And even though it's still a judge and a case, I think it's really collaborative because we are able to have status conferences more regularly if something comes up to deal with the evidence and to deal with any of the problems prior to trial. It's just, in my opinion, a real efficient process for folks to be able to proceed if they're able to."

Family law attorney Michele B. Brown has used Hoy as a mediator as well as a private judge, and she described the Signature neutral as no nonsense.

"She knows the law, so when you go in there with her as a private judge, don't try to pull the wool over her eyes on the law," Brown said. "She is hard nosed on evidence. She is hard nosed on the law, and she will make the tough call. ... As a judge, when you're making an order that's going to leave one spouse with very little assets — even if that is the 100% correct decision under the law — that's a hard call to make, but she's willing to make the hard call. She will follow the law."

Margo Lewis Hoy

Signature Resolution
San Diego

Areas of Specialty:

Family Law
Probate
Real Estate
Legal Malpractice

Before a mediation, meanwhile, Hoy said she likes to receive briefs from both sides, and she also likes to speak separately over the phone beforehand with each of the attorneys.

“Sometimes there’s just something that’s motivating the case that may not be relevant to the evidence or the issues, but it’s there because emotions run high in family law,” Hoy explained. “Attorneys are obviously not going to put that in a brief. But sometimes in that phone conversation they can be real candid with me and tell me, ‘This has been a real hot issue,’ or ‘This is something that my client’s emotional about, and it’s a roadblock.’”

On the day of mediation, Hoy said she’ll make a decision about joint sessions based on the case and the parties involved. She’ll also make use of mediator’s proposals in matters where they make sense but only if all the parties agree on the strategy. Hoy did note, however, that mediator’s proposals are often “not as useful in a family law case just because there’s a lot of moving parts.”

Hoy also noted she likes to employ a mixture of facilitative and evaluative approaches.

“One of the things I think people are coming to me for in the mediation realm is to listen to their side, to hear their arguments, and then — with them knowing I’ve got an ear in the other room — to give them some real, true evaluation of what their strengths and weaknesses are in their case,” Hoy said. “But as far as facilitating goes, the sky’s the limit. One thing that’s so great about mediation is we can be creative, and we can think outside the box. ... You can really do things in a mediation process — bring people together to come to an agreement — often in a way that you could never get in court.”

Family law attorney Gordon D. Cruse said he appeared before Hoy on the bench “more times than I can count,” and he’s since used her to mediate disputes.

“The judge is really good at making sure the clients in a mediation are heard,” Cruse said. “She’s great at listening to them

and giving them direct access in a way you would never get with a judge. And they don’t have to use their lawyer as a mouthpiece. The client can actually talk to her. She’s very approachable.”

But like Brown, Cruse described Hoy as a no-nonsense neutral.

“She has the greatest B.S. detector of any judicial officer I’ve ever met,” Cruse said. “She knows when she’s being snowed, and she knows when somebody is just feeding her a line. And she’s able to work through that. ... She’s just fabulous in the way she does it because she doesn’t say, ‘You’re lying to me!’ She doesn’t alienate the clients. She really keeps them engaged.”

Los Angeles family law attorney Kristina C. Royce has used Hoy to mediate three disputes and said the neutral was exceptional with clients and attorneys. Royce was also a fan of Hoy’s evaluative approach.

“Sometimes mediators will shuffle back and forth, relaying proposals. Whereas other mediators are much more about, ‘This is what could happen if this goes to court. This is

where your risks are,” Royce said. “I think she really gives her evaluative opinion on issues, and I think that’s extremely helpful because I think it gives my client more motivation to settle, and I think it gives the other party more motivation to settle.”

Although so much of Hoy’s legal career has unfolded in San Diego, she said she’s happy to tackle dispute resolution up and down the state.

“Lawyers ask me all the time, ‘Will you travel?’ And the answer is ‘Yes,’” she insisted. “I love the different demographics, and I love the different challenges and the cases. I’m happy to work with lawyers from the different jurisdictions, and travel is perfectly fine with me.”

Here are some attorneys who have used Hoy’s services: Michele B. Brown, Procopio, Cory, Hargreaves & Savitch LLP; Kristina C. Royce, Blank Rome LLP; Gordon D. Cruse, Gordon D. Cruse APLC; Julie R. Barnes, Jones Barnes PC; Shannon B. Miles, Cage & Miles LLP.