

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 2024

Guiding, Not Steering

Judge Amy M. Pellman brings clarity and compassion to even the most emotional disputes.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

When retired Judge Amy M. Pellman stepped down from the bench last spring, she wasn't finished with family law.

"Retirement from the bench didn't mean stepping away from that work," Pellman said. "It's just a shift in how I can contribute."

Pellman joined Signature Resolution's roster of private neutrals in March 2024, and she's since been tackling a wide range of family law cases primarily as a mediator.

"After so many years of making decisions in the courtroom, I was ready to help people find their own solutions without the gavel, without the pressure of the trial calendar," Pellman said. "What mediation allows me to do is slow things down, hear people out and offer honest feedback in a way that's really constructive and not just conclusive."

A 1987 City University of New York Law School graduate, Pellman worked for New York Governor Mario Cuomo early in her career and then spent time as a research attorney for the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New York. In the early 1990s, Pellman moved to California, practicing briefly as a civil litigator before discovering her passion for working with children and families as a Dependency Court Legal Services senior attorney and appellate attorney.

"I dedicated my career to working with poor children, children in foster care and other areas of law related to advocacy for children," Pellman said, adding that her last job prior to joining the bench was legal director for the Los Angeles-based non-profit organization The Alliance for Children's Rights.



Justin L. Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

"I never actually practiced family law, but I was heavily recruited when I went on the bench - I think because of my background with kids," Pellman explained. "And I ended up falling in love with it."

Pellman was elected as a Los Angeles County Superior Court commissioner in 2005 and then appointed as a judge in 2008 by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. She primarily handled family law assignments but also ran a Children's Court calendar for a time. Pellman also spent more than a decade as

the only Los Angeles judge presiding over surrogacy cases, and she served as supervising judge from 2021 to 2022.

"I really found a great deal of satisfaction in working with families during some of their most difficult times," Pellman said.

Prior to her mediations these days, the Signature neutral likes to receive briefs from both parties, and she will speak over the phone with counsel beforehand if attorneys feel that would be helpful. On the day of mediation, meanwhile,

Amy M. Pellman

Signature Resolution
Los Angeles

Areas of Specialty:
Family Law

Pellman said she likes to start out with everyone together to discuss expectations and ground rules.

"The most important ground rule is I tell people, 'If you don't feel heard by me - I'm not perfect - tell me, and we'll talk about it,'" the retired judge said, noting that she also mentions creativity early. "Mediation should not be: You get one slice of the pie, and the other person doesn't get that slice," Pellman said. "We can slice the pie very differently, and we have wonderful opportunities to come up with creative solutions. We can make any agreement we want as long as it's not unenforceable, illegal or unconscionable."

Pellman added that she tries to apply a hands-on, realistic approach and doesn't just shuffle back and forth between rooms.

"I engage. I talk to lawyers and parties directly. I ask questions that help get people thinking differently. I am not afraid to gently challenge positions when it's helpful," she explained. "I think the most effective mediation happens when people feel guided not steered - when clarity quietly replaces conflict."

Los Angeles family law attorney Garry M. Gekht appeared before

Pellman when she was on the bench and has since used her to resolve a case as a mediator. He said the Signature neutral clearly does a great deal of preparation work and really "puts the children first in any situation and works backwards."

"Normally, the common ground that any parent is going to have - or any litigant is going to have in any case - is they really want what's best for their children," Gekht said. "They may not agree on what's best for their children, but once she's able to get to that common ground, she builds on that, and everything else falls into place, which makes her incredibly effective."

Gekht also said Pellman is terrific about building trust with clients.

"Even though she's incredibly knowledgeable and very authoritative, she doesn't come off that way," Gekht explained. "She really is able to talk to the clients on their level, get them to be comfortable. And once they're comfortable, they trust her, and that allows her to lead them to a resolution that really allows them to put the emotions away and put the fears away and really resolve the case, which allows the family to then move on."

Los Angeles family law attorney

Laura A. Wasser also appeared before Pellman when she was on the bench and has since used her as a private mediator on four different cases.

"She just has a very calming and reasoned way about her," Wasser said, adding that she's used the Signature neutral in cases where she represented husbands and in others where she represented wives.

"She doesn't get upset," Wasser said. "She's persuasive; she doesn't give up. She calmly chips away at the parties, and in those cases, we went over time, but we ultimately ended up settling. So I have nothing but glowing things to say about Judge Pellman."

Los Angeles family law attorney Kristina C. Royce has also used Pellman as a mediator to resolve four different cases, and she described the retired judge as "masterful."

"For a lot of my clients, it's not just a pure business transaction," Royce said. "They're very emotional. They're very scared. They're very angry. ... But she doesn't talk over them, and they feel like she's validated their feelings and understood them."

Royce noted that she's used Pellman in cases that involved especially complex financial details.

"She will literally sit down with the accountants and be like, 'Walk me through what this means,'" Royce said. "So she's approaching the case not just like, 'OK, the accountants are going to deal with that, and I'm just going to let them handle it.' She's getting in the weeds and understanding what all the finances are, too, which I think is really helpful when she's ultimately trying to negotiate a case."

Enjoying her move into private mediation tremendously, Pellman said she still finds it wonderfully fulfilling to help families.

"Obviously it's not just knowing the law. It's knowing how to help people feel safe enough to let go of the conflict," Pellman said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm kind of an emotional ballast. ... I'm like the steady hand when people are feeling very adrift."

Here are some attorneys who have used Pellman's services: Kristina C. Royce, Blank Rome LLP; Laura A. Wasser, Wasser Cooperman & Mandles PC; Garry M. Gekht, Law Offices of Kaplan, Trope & Gekht; Grace A. Jamra, Jamra, Jamra & Hanasab, LLP; Taline K. Boyamian, Boyamian Law Partners LLP

shane.nelson@dailyjournal.com