

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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A Helping Hand

Mitchell Beckloff mediates with an effective balance of kindness and candor, lawyers say

By Shane Nelson

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In his work as a Signature Resolution private neutral, retired judge Mitchell L. Beckloff is paying particularly close attention to clients.

"In the courtroom, it's not really about how the party feels," Beckloff said. "One of the things I really like about mediation is getting to know the parties as people and listening to their stories. Everybody litigating has a story."

Beckloff spent a quarter-century on the bench, serving first as a referee and then as a Los Angeles County Superior Court commissioner before Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed him as a judge in 2007. Beckloff tackled family law, probate and civil assignments before his retirement in the spring of 2024.

As an attorney, Beckloff worked for a few years on bankruptcy and corporate matters after passing the bar in 1989, but he later took up dependency law, tackling child neglect and abuse cases.

"It's emotional work," he said. "But it's worthwhile."

Since joining Signature's roster shortly after his retirement, he's been handling family law, probate and other civil disputes as a mediator, arbitrator and discovery referee.

He's enjoying the chance to help people resolve problems in a way that works for them.

"In mediation, we get to do things you maybe could not achieve in the courtroom," Beckloff explained.

Arbitration is, however, an arena he views a bit more narrowly.

"In an arbitration, the parties should be willing to proceed with some formality," Beckloff said. "There's a



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tendency for things to be a little loose in the way people proceed in arbitration, but it's not an informal process in my view. There's a process, and the process has rules, and people need to follow those rules."

Describing mediation, meanwhile, as a "client-slash-party-driven process," Beckloff said he works hard to be thoroughly prepared ahead of time.

"I think it's essential for the mediator to have a real command of the underlying facts before mediation begins," he explained. "It's one of those things where the effective mediator does a lot of homework."

Los Angeles family law litigator Susannah B. Amen has used Beckloff to mediate four high-conflict cases in the last year, and she appreciated his preparation.

"He calls. He reads everything that's submitted," Amen said. "So, when he walks into a mediation and meets a client for the first time, he is already very well-versed in their case and knows – very often from their lawyer – some things you might not get from a mediation brief in terms of priorities and how the client operates."

Los Angeles trust and estates litigator Julia L. Birkel has used Beckloff as a mediator four times, and she also appreciated how much work he put in beforehand.

"First of all, he's brilliant, and he has a steel trap memory," Birkel said. "And by the time you show up, he's completely on top of the factual and legal issues."

Beckloff noted that applying an engaged and authentic approach

Mitchell L. Beckloff

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to really hearing the parties early on helps him move into a more evaluative discussion about a case's vulnerabilities later in the day.

"I think there's a way to incorporate their stories into the substance of what you're talking about," he said. "Every case is different, and there are things that work in some cases that wouldn't work in others. There are opportunities that might evolve during the course of the day, where you try things you've never tried before. I think part of listening and being engaged is being receptive to what might work."

Birkel said Beckloff's "incredible judicial demeanor" has been productive with a diverse assortment of clients.

"I've already been in front of him with a lot of different personality types, and he is great with everybody," she explained. "Every single client I've had – he walks out of

the room, and they're like, 'Oh my God. You're right. He's great.'"

Amen said Beckloff's combination of legal expertise and interpersonal skills make him an especially effective mediator.

"He's kind. He's empathetic. He's genuine. ... So, he connects really well with the clients and very quickly builds trust with them," Amen explained. "He also reads the room really well. He knows when to push; he knows when to pull back. ... He balances kindness with candor in a way that I find really unique and just really resonates with my clients. My clients feel safe, but they also feel informed."

Los Angeles probate litigator Stefan O'Grady has used Beckloff as a mediator in half a dozen cases and described him as a neutral who cares.

"In what I do with probate and trust litigation, it's really important that the mediator has some empathy

because these are incredibly emotionally driven cases," O'Grady said. "You have people fighting over a loved one's money, and some of the disputes are grounded in facts that date back to childhood. So, you need someone sympathetic, someone who's going to sit, listen and care. And I think that's what Judge Beckloff has that some mediators don't."

Still, O'Grady noted that Beckloff leans on his extensive judicial experience and exhaustive legal expertise to tactfully weigh in on a case's strengths and weaknesses when appropriate.

"Some mediators don't do that, but Judge Beckloff definitely does," O'Grady said. "He's not afraid to tell someone if they have a great case. He's also not afraid to tell them if they have a bad case."

Beckloff was quick to add that it's important to keep in mind just how difficult litigation is for the parties.

"I don't think we as lawyers talk enough about the emotional toll litigation takes on the participants," he said. "Litigation is a black cloud that follows you around that you can't really escape."

And I think there's a great freedom in taking control and getting to a result that you as a party have control over instead of leaving it up to a judicial officer."

Here are some attorneys who have used Beckloff's services: Stefan O'Grady, Keystone Law Group PC; Julia L. Birkel, Hill Farrer & Burrill LLP; Susannah B. Amen, Elkins Kalt Weintraub Reuben Gartside LLP; Molly M. Lens, O'Melveny & Meyers LLP; Benjamin G. Chew, Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP.

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