

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2025

Family Matters

Experience defines retired judge Dianna Gould-Saltman's approach as a mediator

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Retired judge Dianna Gould-Saltman occasionally makes use of silence in her work as a private neutral.

"Sometimes people get to the point where they say – and it may be sincere, or it may be staging – 'That's it. That's my last and best offer. If they don't take this, I'm out of here,'" Gould-Saltman said about her mediations. "And I don't like allowing that emotion to drive the course. So, I will, perhaps, nod my head and sit there for a moment and let what they've just said sort of echo in their head rather than react to it."

Gould-Saltman handled a family law calendar for the vast majority of her 14 years as a Los Angeles County Superior Court judge, and she practiced family law as an attorney for 25 years before taking the bench in 2010.

Shortly after her retirement in March 2024, Gould-Saltman joined Signature Resolution's roster of private neutrals, and she's since been tackling family law disputes as a mediator and private judge.

When she runs into entrenched positions and intense emotions in her work as a mediator, Gould-Saltman explained that sometimes not reacting can be especially effective.

"When they don't get that reaction, then they have to sit with what they've just said and consider, 'Do I sincerely mean that? Would I really walk out? And since the mediator didn't jump up and run to the other side to transmit my offer, maybe I should think this through,'" the retired judge said. "I want them to think rather than let their emotions drive their positions because my whole purpose there is to guide them to their own decisions toward resolution."



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Gould-Saltman completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology at UC Irvine before enrolling at Southwestern University School of Law, where she graduated in 1985.

"I find people fascinating, and I find interactions between people fascinating," she said, mentioning that she's fielded many questions throughout her career about why she chose to focus on family law.

"I think of family law as being kind of the oncology of law," Gould-Saltman explained. "Oncologists don't give people cancer. They just try to get them through it to the other side. And it's the same with family

law. I didn't give these people a divorce or a custody problem, but my job is to assist them in getting past it so they can move on and heal from the difficulty."

Los Angeles family law attorney Evan C. Itzkowitz appeared before Gould-Saltman when she was on the bench and has since used her several times to settle cases. Itzkowitz said neutrals with her extensive experience in family law are rare.

"She was a certified family law specialist before she took the bench," Itzkowitz explained. "So, she comes with a depth of knowledge and experience that most family law attor-

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neys – or similar judges – do not have. There are some, but it's a very limited group of people that know what it's like from both sides of the bench."

Itzkowitz added that Gould-Saltman is terrific with clients.

"She's very, very easy to get along with. My clients have all liked her very much," he said. "She's firm when she needs to be firm but always kind, always friendly. But she tells them what they need to hear in order to get the case settled."

Gould-Saltman noted that early on in her mediations she tries to inform parties that she will offer frank case evaluations.

"While I don't think I'm mean, I also don't think it's valuable to them if I pull punches when I'm asked my thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of their case," she said. "So, I do let them know ... to try to funnel people toward resolution."

Her approach is a little different from how she tackled things on the bench.

"There's a certain intimacy when you spend an entire day with a family, an entire day with their attorneys,"

Gould-Saltman explained. "You can laugh about stuff. You can wring your hands about stuff as necessary to really be empathetic over the course of an entire day – or even a couple of days. I think that qualitatively makes private mediation different."

Los Angeles family law attorney Laura A. Wasser has used Gould-Saltman a couple of times to resolve disputes, involving what she described as "complicated custody issues."

"The judge is reasonable, wise, strong and extremely compassionate in her mediation skills," Wasser said.

Los Angeles family law attorney Susan E. Wiesner appeared before Gould-Saltman when she was on the bench and has since used her as a private neutral to resolve half a dozen cases. Wiesner said she is "well versed at a very high level in the area of family law."

"She understands complex family law issues, like valuation of businesses," Wiesner explained. "She understands cash flow support issues that are complicated in high-net-worth

individuals. She understands a lot of unique aspects to the entertainment community, which helps as well. ... She would be a wonderful choice for any case involving high conflict custody issues and anything dealing with complex valuation or support issues."

Wiesner said the retired judge also operates with a high level of emotional intelligence.

"She's extremely calm in very tense circumstances," Wiesner explained. "She's very direct and to the point, but she listens very well. ... She doesn't really push her opinion on people, but she has so much knowledge about the field that she's able to break down someone's position and give them things to consider when making their proposals."

Gould-Saltman added, meanwhile, that her work as a private judge allows her the opportunity to do some decision making. But assisting attorneys throughout that process remains a key priority.

"They want to put on their best case, and I want them to put on

their best case," Gould-Saltman said. "And I'll do what it takes to make that happen."

While she thoroughly enjoyed her career on the bench, she's found this new chapter wonderfully fulfilling.

"I feel blessed to have the opportunity to do what I'm doing, and I enjoy every day," Gould-Saltman said. "I loved my staff at the court. ... But the resources were limited and dwindling, and the caseload was increasing. Here, I have the opportunity to do the quality of work that makes me feel much better about what I'm doing."

Here are some attorneys who have used Gould-Saltman's services: Susan E. Wiesner, Susan E. Wiesner, A Law Corporation; Evan C. Itzkowitz, Blevans, Itzkowitz & Cantrell LLP; Laura A. Wasser, Wasser Cooperman & Mandles PC; Steve A. Mindel, Feinberg Mindel Brandt & Klein LLP; Kristina C. Royce, Blank Rome LLP.

shane.nelson@dailyjournal.com