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Longtime Katten partner Zia Modabber to join Signature Resolution

Zia Modabber, who represented Michael Jackson, Trent Reznor and other marquee clients, is leaving Katten after nearly four decades to join Signature Resolution.

By Douglas Saunders

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After nearly four decades at the center of high-stakes entertainment litigation, Katten Muchin Rosenman's longtime Los Angeles managing partner Zia F. Modabber is joining Signature Resolution as a mediator as the firm transitions to new leadership.

Katten announced that Christine Noelle Fitzgerald, the firm's lead West Coast real estate investment and finance partner, will become Los Angeles managing partner on Jan. 1, succeeding Modabber, who has held the role for nearly a decade while chairing the Entertainment and Media Litigation practice.

Modabber will retire from active practice in February 2026 to join Signature Resolution as a neutral.

In an interview with the Daily Journal, Modabber said he had never planned to be a lawyer. After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, where he competed as a gymnast, he was preparing to move to Paris to coach a club team. A chance conversation with a former teammate altered that path.

"I'm not somebody who grew up thinking that I wanted to go to law school. In fact, I wasn't even thinking of going to law school after I graduated college," Modabber said.

The suggestion led him to a paralegal job in San Francisco and a new trajectory. "I thought, 'It's really time to get out of the gym. Let's try this,'" he recalled. "About



Zia Modabber and Trent Reznor together many years ago

three to four months in I knew it was going to be a career. I saw what the lawyers were doing, taking depositions, going to court, and doing things that looked fun."

He took the LSAT and applied to law school at the last minute. After graduating from Loyola Law School, he was eventually recruited by legendary entertainment attorney Howard Weitzman to join Wyman Bautzer.

"I was pretty excited to have somebody like Howard pick up the phone and call me," Modabber said.

With Weitzman as his mentor, Modabber was quickly immersed in high-profile, high-stakes litigation. Then, seven years into his career, Weitzman abruptly left private practice for an executive role at Universal. "And that's when my own career really started," Modabber said.

Later, he would go on to represent marquee clients, including Michael Jackson and Chevy Chase, sparking a steady stream of referrals.

"Once you're the lawyer for clients at that level and people see what you've done, you start getting re-

ferrals ... and it kind of snowballed from there."

As a trial lawyer, Modabber developed a preparation style distinct from Weitzman's collaborative approach, preferring to draft his own openings and closings. "Howard was fine having others work up drafts for him, because he was incredible at delivering it in a way others just couldn't," Modabber said. "That was a gift."

Among his most notable matters was a federal jury trial in New York for Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent

Reznor against a former personal manager. The dispute was over allegedly exploitative management deals and financial mismanagement. The case went to trial as Reznor prepared to tour. *Reznor v. J. Artist Management, Inc.*, 365 F. Supp. 2d 565 (S.D.N.Y. 2005).

"There's always pressure in trials, but I felt a lot of pressure on this one. If it had gone the other way, it could have been really tough at that particular time. Luckily, it didn't," Modabber said. "To be able to do that for him was incredibly gratifying."

Modabber has remained a part of Reznor's professional team, and years later during the COVID-19 pandemic, Modabber watched Reznor's recorded Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction speech from home.

"I'm watching ... and heard my name come out of his mouth," Modabber said. "To be mentioned,

by him, that publicly, and with the others he named, kind of blew my mind."

Throughout his career, Modabber has emphasized mentorship. His advice to young lawyers is simple: "First and foremost, be a really good lawyer."

Representing celebrities and others in the entertainment world, he said, requires discretion. "For celebrities in particular, the things I am involved in and see are not stories for me to tell. Their celebrity status is theirs and theirs alone," Modabber said.

He joined Signature Resolution after years of selecting its neutrals for his own cases. He said he had a tough time choosing among the ADR firms to join but found Signature the best fit.

Leaving Katten after nearly four decades is bittersweet. Modabber recalled the firm's support when Weitzman departed. "Katten leaders

said, 'What can we do to help you? How can we support you?'" he said. "It generated a lot of loyalty in me." That loyalty endured, he said, because leadership always lived its stated values. "They said it. They meant it. And they showed it to me every day."

After years of being constantly "switched on," Modabber said he is ready for a different pace.

"I have a curious mind. There are other things I want to do. I felt this had run its course for me," he said. Mediation, he added, allows him to work in "bite-size, smaller pieces" and "control and enjoy my life a little more."

Katten Chairman Gil M. Soffer praised Fitzgerald's appointment. "We are thrilled to have Christy helm our LA offices. Her exceptional judgment, strategic vision and deep experience in real es-

tate finance have earned her the respect of clients and colleagues alike," Soffer said. "Christy's highly trained understanding of client business needs combined with her collaborative spirit will help guide the offices into an exciting new chapter, one for which Zia's leadership helped pave the way."

Like Modabber, Fitzgerald has spent almost her entire legal career at Katten, where she joined as a summer associate from Loyola Law School after Modabber recruited her.

Looking back on a legal career that began with a paralegal job nearly four decades ago, Modabber has no regrets.

"I would not trade it for the world," he said. "The road I went down was quite the road."

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