

Finding Your Way to the Table



HON. HALIM DHANIDINA (RET.)
Orange County

A former appellate justice and superior court judge with 25 years across every level of the legal system, Justice Dhanidina brings rare analytical depth and practical insight to his work as a neutral.



ALLISON ECKSTROM
Orange County

A former Big Law partner with two decades of class action experience, Allison brings rare subject matter depth to wage and hour, PAGA, and complex workplace disputes.



ANGELA J. REDDOCK-WRIGHT
Los Angeles

A mediator, employment and Title IX attorney for three decades, Angela brings subject matter depth, cultural fluency, and genuine human presence to every matter she mediates.

Some careers follow a straight line. Others take a longer route — through courtrooms and law firms, through trials and verdicts and the quiet realization that there might be a more meaningful way to do the work. Allison Eckstrom, Hon. Halim Dhanidina (Ret.), and Angela J. Reddock-Wright arrived at dispute resolution by three very different paths. What they share is a conviction that they are exactly where they are supposed to be.

At what point did you realize that private dispute resolution was where you wanted to build your career — was there a specific moment, or was it more of a gradual shift?

DHANIDINA: When you're a judge, you watch colleagues retire and move into mediation and arbitration, and in the back of your mind you think, maybe that's something I'll consider one day. Over time, as I explored what that world

actually looked like, I began to see that it was really the ideal fit — in large part because it's the only job I've ever had where, if I do my job correctly, everyone is better off than when they came in. Every other role I've had, half the people would be better off and half would be worse off. In a way, that makes it especially gratifying.

ECKSTROM: I figured it out around 2012, about twelve years into practicing law. I was more senior, I was in mediations in a lead role, and I started picking up on the patterns — how cases flow through litigation to settlement, how both sides evaluate damages and risk, how negotiations track. I became genuinely fascinated by the mediation process while I was a participant on behalf of a client. I took the course at the Straus Institute while I was still in practice, which I found invaluable. And then I waited for the timing to be right personally, financially, and for my family. I was methodical and calculated about it. But I knew a long time ago.

REDDOCK-WRIGHT: My personality was always drawn to conflict resolution, even as a child, before I had words for it. Even as a litigator — although a fierce advocate — I always approached things with an eye toward resolution and how we could use the litigation to create better outcomes on all sides. When I specifically understood how one becomes or pursues a career to become a mediator, I was a third- or fourth-year associate. A female partner on her way to retirement told me she was going to be a mediator, and I said, how do you become one? She had just taken the course at Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution at Pepperdine. From that moment, twenty-six years ago, it was always in the back of my mind that I wanted to become a mediator and that I would take that path. I took the course in 2010 and never looked back. While still litigating and conducting investigations in high end employment and Title IX matters, it took me about ten years to get to the place of feeling that I could take the leap to become a full-time mediator. But I always knew it was where my path

was leading.

“It’s the only job I’ve ever had where, if I do my job correctly, everyone is better off than when they came in.” — Hon. Halim Dhanidina (Ret.)

You each bring deep substantive expertise from your careers into the mediation room. What follows you in — and how does it shape the conversations you’re able to have?

DHANIDINA: The people who hire me appreciate my perspective on the legal issues — especially to the extent that my judicial career can inform those perspectives. What I’m finding, though, is it’s not so simple as walking in as the judge and telling one side they’re right. I try to identify very practical considerations that go beyond the legal arguments. I had a mediation recently where I told the attorney: you have a beginning-of-summer jury. That means college students returning from school setting their jury service, and public school teachers who deferred until summer so they could travel later. That is a very different jury than if you were picking it in October. That kind of firsthand practical knowledge — I watched it happen every year on the bench — has real value that lawyers sometimes aren’t attuned to until they sit with a mediator.

ECKSTROM: Well over ninety percent of my mediations are wage and hour, class, and PAGA actions — that was my area of expertise in practice, and many of these lawyers know me because I worked alongside them or across from them at one time. I think they come to me because they trust that I know the subject matter. Having a mediator who understands the exposure from every angle and can explain it in an objective way matters enormously in these cases. But I’ll say something else: I love people. I was an aggressive litigator and I had my moments with opposing counsel, but I also made a lot of friends on both sides. With mediation, I get to spend my day with

genuinely great people — smart, diverse, different careers and backgrounds. The relationship-based nature of this work is something I really gravitated toward.

REDDOCK-WRIGHT: Subject matter expertise in employment and Title IX cases is a big part of what I bring. And as a woman of color, I sometimes am hired when the parties are looking for someone who can bring a particular cultural perspective (i.e. such as the Crown Act) and sensitivity to cases involving race, sex, and other workplace dynamics. But I also think I get hired when both sides feel their clients need someone who will be a genuine listening ear — empathetic, trust-building — while also bringing real depth of knowledge. Even on the company or employer side, the owners or decision-makers sometimes genuinely need to be heard and walked through what resolution actually means for them. I try to show up for both sides in that way.

“On any given day, I have to show up as the light in a really tough situation — bringing hope, energy, and the unshakeable belief that we can get this done. That is the job.” — Angela Reddock-Wright

What made Signature the right answer when you were deciding where to build this next chapter?

ECKSTROM: I needed the backend support — the marketing, the case management, the infrastructure. Signature came out of the gate as the gold standard of the private dispute resolution space, so I figured, why not go for the top. My case manager is amazing. But what I didn’t fully appreciate until I made the transition was how lonely I was going to feel not being at a law firm surrounded by my work family. Signature filled that. I’ve met so many people and made so many friends. It filled something I hadn’t expected to miss.

REDDOCK-WRIGHT: Signature represents excellence, and I have experienced that consistently across everything Signature

does, from the caliber of the neutrals, to marketing and client services. It was also an opportunity to work with longtime friends and mentors, and to work with a firm that matched how and where I wanted my career to continue to grow. I have great love and respect for the prior ADR firm I was with and the other ADR firms in the space. It’s difficult to make a wrong choice, but Signature has been a good match for me.

DHANIDINA: Judges grow accustomed to having strong support around them — to focusing on the work and having everything else handled with precision. With Signature, when I rely on my case manager, I know it is going to get done right the first time. I don’t have to second guess it. That has a lot of value. The brand alignment mattered too — it was important that as I built a reputation in this new space, I did it in a way consistent with what came before. Signature’s standard of service is exactly how I want my own reputation to be defined. And then there was the trust factor. A lot of the people at Signature are people I have known over the years, some from before I was even a judge. These are my people. It felt like they were going to look after me, and I was going to look after them.

“Starting over without your work family is harder than anyone tells you. What surprised me is that Signature became that — a real community of people who are genuinely invested in one another.” — Allison Eckstrom

These cases carry real human weight. How do you hold that in the room while staying effective as a neutral?

REDDOCK-WRIGHT: On any given day of mediation, I have to make sure I’m personally prepared to be that light in a really tough situation — to bring a positive attitude, a sense of hope and energy that we can get this done. I’m a big believer in balancing the day. I use the morning to hear the parties out, build trust, build rapport, make room for them to lay out their feelings and their stories.

But at the same time, I'm moving the numbers forward — getting demands and counteroffers on the table early, because if we wait until late afternoon to start talking numbers, in my experience, it has the potential of making for a frustrating day and not providing us the runway to see what the true opportunity for settlement looks like. The goal is to balance the emotional and the practical so that by mid-afternoon we've had significant development on both. Many mediators have a different practice and approach and that works as well.

ECKSTROM: In the single plaintiff space, it's so important to give plaintiffs their time — to tell their story. People need to feel genuinely heard. In the class and PAGA context, the plaintiff usually isn't present, so these cases tend to be less emotional in nature. However, emotions can run high when high dollars are at stake. Employers often invest heavily in compliance, but the highly technical wage and hours laws can still leave employers exposed to liability. The California Labor Code and Wage Orders are genuinely hard to navigate, and the defense often feels frustrated that, despite best efforts, they are still in a position of risk. In these cases, I try to work with both sides to move forward constructively. Letting people be heard takes different forms depending on the case.

Is there a moment in this work that brings you the most satisfaction?

REDDOCK-WRIGHT: There is nothing like helping parties settle a case. When the parties sign off on the settlement agreement and sign off for the night (and sometimes on a later date after the mediation) — I don't even know how to describe that feeling. It is just such a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment and joy that you played a role in helping people reach resolution. This is why I do this work.

DHANIDINA: The whole time after a mediation, waiting to hear whether parties have agreed to a proposal, is like having a jury out. I am genuinely nervous. It is not my case, but I don't know what is going to happen. And when they agree — it is like getting a good verdict back. I

am competitive by nature, so if I cannot settle a case right away I become a dog with a bone. The job is not done until the case is resolved, and the people who hire me know that is the level of commitment they have signed on for.

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What would you want someone reading this to know — someone quietly considering whether this move might be right for them?

REDDOCK-WRIGHT: Be humble. Recognize that you are playing a different role now — one where you are asking parties to trust you with their most difficult matters. Be prepared to go back to basics in terms of what it takes to build a practice. Make sure your heart is genuinely in it, because it is not easy. But it is very fulfilling. You have to put the work in — continuing education, surrounding yourself with other neutrals, continually honing your craft and building relationships across all aisles. It is a practice you build, not a title you claim.

ECKSTROM: Whenever I speak to an attorney who is contemplating the move, I always recommend that they consider joining the federal and/or state court panels to gain actual experience mediating cases. The panel experience is invaluable because you can evaluate firsthand whether serving as a neutral is a good fit for you while also serving the legal community. I also recommend that the attorney find a mentor who can guide them through the transition and training. I had the benefit of two fantastic mentors who guided me for two years before I actually retired from the firm. They shared insight about how to gain experience as a neutral, provided guidance on the business-side of transitioning to dispute resolution from private practice, and provided opportunities to shadow actual mediations.

DHANIDINA: Your pedigree of experience is necessary, but not sufficient. Building a practice in private dispute resolution is like planting a tree. You are throwing seeds out there, and most of them are not going to turn into anything. But you just need some of them to take root. And if you wait long enough, you will have a tree that gives you shade and fruit — you just could not have known it at the time you were planting. You have to have that patience so you do not get discouraged when things are not hitting every time.

“You go to court for what you want. You go to mediation for what you need. Those two things are not the same — and if you are serious about settling, your focus has to shift.”

— Hon. Halim Dhanidina (Ret.)

ALLISON ECKSTROM

Orange County

Allison is a mediator at specializing in employment, wage and hour, class action, and PAGA matters. She is a former partner at Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner and co-leader of its Employment Class and Collective Actions Team.

HON. HALIM DHANIDINA (RET.)

Orange County

Justice Dhanidina is a mediator, arbitrator, special master, and discovery referee. He served as an Associate Justice of the California Court of Appeal, Second District, and as a judge of the Los Angeles County Superior Court

ANGELA REDDOCK-WRIGHT

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Angela is a mediator, specializing in employment and labor, Title IX, mass torts, class action, and Multidistrict Litigation matters. She is a fellow with the International Academy of Mediators, adjunct faculty at USC Gould School of Law, and a past president of the Southern California Mediation Association.
