

# Life After Trials



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## JONATHAN ANDREWS

*San Diego*

Founding partner of his own successful employment litigation firm and a trial attorney for nearly three decades, Jonathan understands workplace disputes from every angle: how they start, why they escalate, and what it takes to bring them to resolution. That fluency with the emotional and legal terrain of employment law is the foundation of his mediation practice, where he is known for leaning into the human side of conflict rather than around it, creating the conditions for both sides to be heard and move forward.

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Jonathan Andrews built exactly the kind of career that looks, from the outside, like everything you could want. Founding partner of his own firm. Twenty-four years of trial experience. Consistently named one of San Diego's Top 50 Super Lawyers. A practice he had shaped, grown, and led on his own terms. And then, after back-to-back federal trials that ended in success and left him miserable, he started asking a question that changed everything.

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**You built one of San Diego's most respected employment litigation practices — your own firm, thirteen years of leading it, Top 50 Super Lawyer recognition year after year. At what point did you start wondering whether trials were the whole answer?**

I had just come off back-to-back trials — one in the Northern District, one in the Southern District. The first one ended on a Friday. The next one started on Monday. Both went well. By every measure, everything was supposed to be great. Everyone was supposed to be celebrating.

I was miserable. And frankly, I think everyone around me was miserable too. I kept thinking — there had to have been a way to avoid going to trial. What did we miss? These were cases that both sides,

in hindsight, would have said we should have resolved. And that question stayed with me. How could I be better at helping my clients get to resolution before it ever came to that?

That's what led me to enroll in the LLM program at Pepperdine's Straus Institute. And I want to be clear — it wasn't a seminar decision. I jumped in with both feet. I wanted to fully immerse myself, to actually study dispute resolution as a discipline.

Until then, I'll admit: I used to see mediators as something close to a necessary evil. Someone trying to take something from my client, or give something away. That program was transformative. It opened my eyes to everything resolution can be — the real satisfaction of helping all sides find their way forward, the collaborative energy of the process, what it actually means to communicate with a mediator rather than around one. And somewhere in that experience, something shifted in me. It stopped being about becoming a better advocate and started being about something else entirely. I realized I wanted to be a mediator. Not as a bridge to something else — as a career.

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*been a way to avoid going to trial. What did we miss?”*

**For twenty-four years, your job was to win. Now your job is to help both sides find a way forward. How long did that rewiring actually take?**

Honestly — the rewiring didn't take long at all. I think it was always there. What took time was taking the plunge.

You become risk-averse as a litigator. You've been doing one thing, doing it well, for a long time. The idea of stepping away from that is frightening in a way that's hard to explain from the outside. I kept finding reasons to wait — one more trial, one more milestone, a new kid at home, wait until things stabilize. And of course, you eventually realize there is no perfect time. If this is something you want, you have to move forward and bet on yourself.

I had done that when I started my own firm. I had to remember what that felt like. All of the things I'm most proud of came from taking a risk and trusting myself.

But I also want to say this: I went into the transition with intention. I wanted people to understand I was serious — that this wasn't a bridge to retirement, or

a softer version of what I'd been doing. I still wanted to be in my forties when I made the move. I wanted the full LLM, not a weekend seminar. I wanted to be able to say, without question, that I had studied this, worked in it, committed to it. When I finally stepped out of the firm, I wanted to jump in with both feet. That mattered to me.

**Was there a moment you knew the fit was real — that mediation was genuinely where you belonged?**

It came almost instantaneously out of that program. There was something about the work that just spoke to who I actually am — much more than litigation ever did. Litigation is about winning. Mediation is about understanding. It fits my purpose in a way I hadn't fully anticipated until I was in it.

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**You spent your entire career in employment and labor — twenty-eight years on one side of these disputes, understanding how they develop from the inside. How much of that carries into the mediation room?**

Almost all of it, I think. I've been a one-trick pony my entire career — and I mean that in the best possible way. Twenty-eight years in labor and employment law means I've seen just about every scenario that exists in this space. Every nuance, every dynamic, every way these disputes develop and escalate and resist resolution.

That depth adds something to the conversations I have with counsel. Not in a know-it-all way — that's the last thing a mediator should project. But in an understanding way. We can get immediately to the real issues, because I already understand the legal landscape. We don't have to spend time establishing credibility around the subject matter. That frees up the room to focus on

what actually matters: the people, the relationship, the path forward.

I think a lot of attorneys seek me out specifically because of that background. And I draw on it constantly — not just the legal knowledge, but the trial experience. Most mediators don't have a significant amount of time in front of juries. I was fortunate to have a great deal of it, across California, particularly in Los Angeles. That experience gives me a very direct and honest way of speaking with parties about what a case looks like from the outside, without flinching from what's true.

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**When you were ready to make the full transition, why Signature — and what did those early days actually look like?**

I'll tell you — the primary driver was the snacks.

In all seriousness: Signature spoke directly to my entrepreneurial nature. When I met with Dario, and when I spoke with Judge Latin about joining, something he said stayed with me. He told me — and I loved this — “You're not going to get work because of Signature. You're going to get work because of you. What we can do is provide the platform.”

I thought that was such an honest answer. And it was exactly what I was looking for. I wasn't looking for a place where work would be funneled to me. I wanted to develop my practice the way I wanted to develop it, with the people I wanted to work with, in the places I wanted to work. My practice had always been all over California, and I wanted to mediate all over California. Signature didn't blink. They thought it was a great idea. That flexibility, that trust — it mattered.

What I also found was that there wasn't a one-size-fits-all approach. It was genuinely: let's figure out what works best for you, and grow it in a way that's consistent with where you want to be. That is exactly how I had always operated. It fit.

And then there's the panel itself. Signature has always had a reputation — on both sides of the bar, plaintiff and defense — for having exceptional neutrals. The opportunity to work alongside people like that, to be part of that community — I felt genuinely honored to be considered.

The support in those early days was something I didn't expect. There wasn't a single idea I brought to them — a marketing initiative, a speaking engagement, a mediation seminar I wanted to host in Oakland — that they said no to. They didn't just approve the ideas. They showed up. Dario flew up for that Oakland seminar. Angela, who had just come on board, was there. The support from the C-suite, from staff, from fellow neutrals — it was the kind of environment where you feel like you can do anything.

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**Employment disputes carry real emotional weight — people's livelihoods, their dignity, sometimes their sense of justice. How do you hold all of that in a mediation room without losing the objectivity you need?**

The first step is knowing it's coming. Employment disputes are inherently emotional — in both rooms. That's not a complication of the process. That is the process.

So when I walk in, I'm already expecting it. From the plaintiff's side, from the defense side, sometimes from counsel. What I

think is essential is giving both sides a real platform — a genuine opportunity to share what matters to them, to say what needs to be said. That cathartic piece is often the gateway to everything that comes after. It clears the path.

A lot of mediators try to manage around the emotion, keep it at arm's length. I think that's a mistake. You have to lean into it. If you pull back from what the parties are feeling, you distance yourself from the very people you need to reach. You have to acknowledge the elephant in the room before you can decide what to do with it — and I think you have to do it right away.

Tears, frustration, anger — those aren't problems to be solved. They're real, they're important, and they're almost always connected to what actually caused the dispute in the first place. If you can help someone move through that emotion — not past it, but through it — toward something more constructive, toward a decision they can make with clarity and dignity, that is the real work of a mediator. That is the part of this that I find most meaningful.

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**As a trial lawyer, you always knew when you'd won. In mediation, what does winning feel like — and is it better?**

It is always better. Without question.

And here's the thing — even when I won at trial, I seldom felt like I'd won. What I usually felt was tired. Relieved, maybe. But not the thing you'd expect from a victory. There was always something unresolved about it, even in the winning. In mediation, I feel like I've won when both sides feel the process worked for them. Not just when the case resolves — though that's obviously the goal, and

it happens the large majority of the time. But the most meaningful measure for me is whether both parties feel they were heard, that they understood something they didn't understand before, that they know why they're making whatever decision they're making.

When that happens — when someone walks out of that room with clarity, with closure, with their dignity intact — that is when I feel like I've done something. Even when a case doesn't settle on a given day, it can still be a success if the process was right. And a resolution that comes from a broken process is never really a success, whatever the outcome.

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**There's a senior litigator reading this — maybe someone who has been across from you at a table, maybe someone who has sent you cases — who is quietly considering whether this move might be right for them. What do you want them to know that nobody told you?**

Start by asking yourself why you want to do it. And be honest about the answer.

There are people who move into mediation because they think it will be easier, or simpler, or a gentler way to finish out a career. And maybe some of those things are true, depending on how you build your practice. But if that's the primary reason — I think you'll find it isn't quite what you expected. Because being a good mediator means genuinely taking off the litigation hat. Not just setting it aside — taking it off. It means listening instead of talking. Being patient instead of strategic. Being curious about people and their disputes in a way that's real, not performed.

Ask yourself: does the process itself speak to me? Not what it can give me,

but the work of it — the resolution, the collaboration, the staying in it when parties are frustrated and the case hasn't moved. If the answer to that is yes, then the next question is how you get there. Get into programs. Volunteer with dispute resolution organizations. Start putting yourself into those rooms and let the community know you're serious. Because here's something I knew intellectually but had to feel to really understand: this work is more demanding, hour for hour, than litigating. The preparation before. The engagement during. The follow-up after. The cases that don't close on day one and need continued attention. People sometimes imagine they'll be done when the session ends. You're not. You're in it — and that's exactly what the parties are paying for. They want you to stay involved, to keep pushing, to not give up.

And if you're coming from a litigation practice rather than the bench, be prepared to market. Be prepared to reintroduce yourself. You may have practiced for thirty years and everyone in your city knows your name — but they know it in one context. Now you're asking them to see you in a completely different one. That takes humility. It takes showing up. Coffee meetings, bar events, conversations where you're not pitching but genuinely connecting. The relationships I've built with attorneys on both sides of these cases — that has been one of the most genuinely nourishing parts of this chapter. You get to know people in a way that litigation almost never allows.

Don't wait for the perfect moment. It doesn't exist. Bet on yourself — and then do the work.

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## JONATHAN ANDREWS

*San Diego*

*Jonathan Andrews is a trial attorney and mediator in Signature Resolution's San Diego office. He spent twenty-four years in employment litigation as founding partner of his own firm, trying cases to verdict in state and federal court before turning his focus to resolution.*

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