

# Life After *The Bench*



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## HON. ANNE-CHRISTINE MASSULLO (RET.)

*San Francisco*

Presiding Judge of the San Francisco Superior Court and a federal prosecutor for 17 years before that, Judge Massullo brings a breadth of legal experience that few neutrals can match. Her career spans criminal and civil litigation at the federal and state level, complex case management, family law, and discovery — and she carries every dimension of it into the mediation room, where thorough preparation, genuine engagement with parties, and a commitment to creative resolution define her practice.

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Hon. Anne-Christine Massullo (Ret.) spent nearly her entire legal career in one city, in service to one community. Seventeen years as a federal prosecutor. Eighteen years on the San Francisco Superior Court, where she rose to Presiding Judge. When she finally stepped away, it wasn't because the work had run out — it was because she had identified something she could offer the people she'd spent a career serving, and a platform that would let her do it without constraint. She has not slowed down since.

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**You spent 18 years on the San Francisco Superior Court — nearly your entire judicial career in one court, one community. What made it feel like the right time to make this transition?**

Two things converged at once. There was a practical element — a change in the law that allowed judges to retire without the previous 20-year threshold, which opened the door earlier than it might otherwise have. But the more significant factor was having completed what I set out to do as Presiding Judge. I had goals for the court and the community, and I had met them. I knew that returning to Complex Civil, which I genuinely loved, would require a commitment of three to five years — and in fairness to the litigants

in those cases, they deserve a judge who can see them through. I knew I was going to retire at 20 years, and it didn't feel right to step into an assignment I couldn't fully honor. The timing aligned. I knew it was time.

**When you pictured life after the bench, what were you hoping to find that you hadn't experienced before?**

The ability to really get to know the people. As a prosecutor, you maintain distance — the role requires it. As a judge, even more so. The neutrality the bench demands means you never fully know the attorneys you work with, and certainly not the clients. What drew me to this work was the opportunity to genuinely engage — to understand what matters to the parties, to drill down into a situation in a way that simply isn't possible when you are the one rendering judgment. That has turned out to be one of the genuine rewards of this chapter. And something that might sound small but means a great deal to me: I can ask people's permission to call them by their first name. You could not do that as a judge. That shift in relationship is something I find meaningful.

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**You didn't just join Signature — you were brought in to lead the launch of the San Francisco office. What did that conversation look like, and what convinced you this was the right platform?**

The conversation began a year and a half, maybe two years, before I actually retired — so it was a progression, not a single moment. What distinguished Signature was the structure of the organization and its genuine dedication to its neutrals. I had experienced a sense of family in my work as a federal prosecutor, and again on the court — and that matters to me deeply. Signature offered that, along with something I found equally compelling: a real openness to creativity and new ideas. Private dispute resolution allows

you to design solutions with a flexibility and responsiveness that serves parties at every stage — multi-neutral panels for complex gatekeeping issues, discovery processes that can be resolved on short notice, on a weekend if necessary, the ability to follow through after mediation closes to make sure agreements hold. Signature was genuinely receptive to all of that. Their entrepreneurial spirit matched what I was looking for. And the opportunity to build something from the ground up in a city I have spent my entire career in — that ticked every box.

**What did those early months at Signature actually feel like — stepping into a new role in a community that had always known you in a different one?**

It is not for the faint of heart — but I was not doing it alone. Signature came in with real infrastructure behind me: the outreach, the letters, the marketing support that helped the legal community understand I had made this transition. I had spent my entire career in public service, and stepping into a space where you are building something new is a different posture entirely. But the platform was there. And once you move past the initial adjustment, you realize that what you are doing is genuinely adding value to the legal community — helping people resolve things that would otherwise take years and cost a great deal — and it becomes something you want to share. I feel much more comfortable now reaching out, proposing new ideas, developing new approaches. The foundation has been built. Now it is about building on it.

**You have handled family law, federal fraud, complex civil, water law, death penalty matters. Is there a type of case or a type of moment in your work now where everything you have done converges?**

The discovery work, honestly. And the complex cases — antitrust matters in particular, which I genuinely enjoy. As a discovery referee, because I have had real exposure to so many different

types of litigation, I can get into a room and quickly help people understand the difference between what they need and what they want. I can help them design a discovery plan that is actually efficient, that moves the case forward rather than consuming it. The ability to respond to a discovery dispute the same day — on a weekend, at night if necessary — and resolve it informally before it becomes something larger: that is where I feel the full weight of my experience come to bear. The little nuances that come from having been in the juvenile space, the family space — you'd be surprised how often those pieces connect to something in a matter that looks entirely different on its surface.

**What has genuinely surprised you about this work — something you didn't anticipate from the bench?**

The depth of the relationships. As a judge, you know the attorneys — but in a bounded way, defined entirely by the role. Here, I can genuinely get to know both counsel and their clients. I can work with both sides through something difficult, understand what they are each carrying, and help them find a way through it. That quality of engagement — the ability to really be present with people — has been an unexpected gift. I did not fully anticipate how much that would matter to me, or how much it would enrich the work.

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**If you could say one thing directly to a sitting judge who is reading this and quietly wondering whether this transition might be right for them — what would you want them to know?**

A few things. First — you have to be

genuinely ready to step away from being the one who has the final word. The role of a neutral is fundamentally different from the role of a judge, and if you are not truly prepared to make that shift, you will feel it. It is not a diminishment — it is a different kind of authority, one that comes from trust and skill rather than position. But you have to want it for the right reasons.

Second — be prepared to work. The idea that private dispute resolution is a quieter, lighter version of what you have been doing is not accurate. Lawyers and their clients expect a high level of dedication. I work weekends. I work evenings. When a case needs follow-through, I follow through — because the people who bring their most difficult disputes to me deserve that commitment. If you approach it that way, the work is deeply rewarding. If you approach it looking for ease, it will fall short of what you hoped.

And finally — be honest with the organizations you are speaking with, and ask them to be honest with you. Find out what they expect, what they offer, and whether that matches where you want to be. The fit matters. The right home will make all the difference.

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*Judge Massullo leads Signature Resolution's San Francisco office. She served as Presiding Judge of the San Francisco Superior Court and spent 17 years as an Assistant United States Attorney for the Northern District of California before joining the bench.*

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