

Life After *The Bench*



HON. DANIEL J. BUCKLEY (RET.)

Los Angeles

A trial attorney for 22 years and a judge for 20 more, including as Presiding Judge of the largest trial court in the country, Judge Buckley brings a rare breadth of experience to the mediation table, having seen complex disputes from every vantage point the legal system offers. That perspective shapes a practice defined by deep preparation, genuine engagement with the parties themselves, and a conviction that every case deserves a fresh approach and never a formula.

There is a particular kind of judge who never really leaves the courtroom — not in the way that matters. Hon. Daniel J. Buckley (Ret.) spent 22 years as a litigator and 20 years on the bench, the last of which placed him at the top of the largest trial court in the country. When he finally walked out, it wasn't with fanfare. It was a quiet decision, made at the right time, for the right reasons. What he found on the other side pleasantly surprised him.

You finished your tenure as Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court and then stayed on for another three and a half years in Complex Civil. When did you know it was time?

There was no specific revelation. I was getting to my 20th year on the bench and I was past 65 which is where you need to be to receive the full retirement benefits. I just figured it was time to try something new. I spent 22 years as a lawyer and 20 years as a judge, and it seemed the right moment to move on to something different. Something that would stretch me a little farther.

I loved being a judge. If I had stayed forever, I would have been very happy. But it seemed a good time to go.

Was mediation always the direction

you saw yourself heading?

It was a natural progression — there would have been nothing else that could have pulled me away from the bench. I had no interest in an appellate assignment. That's simply not in my skill set.

The irony is that earlier in my career, handling civil cases, I wasn't enthralled with settlement conferences. But then, during my time in Complex Civil, I had a series of high-profile settlement conferences — including the USC Tyndall case and the UCLA Heaps case, both involving abuse. I realized I was good at it. That became a real factor in understanding that it might be time to move on, and that mediation was where I should go.

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When you handed down a ruling from the bench, that was often the end of your connection to those people. Did that ever weigh on you?

Honestly, it did not. You are so focused on what is in front of you that you simply don't have time to follow up to see what happens to the individuals afterward. You hope you made the right decision — and then you move on.

But that is something genuinely different about mediation, and something very positive. You are engaging the litigants directly. Not just the lawyers — the plaintiff, the defendant, the people whose lives are affected. You are seeing the result firsthand, especially when a case settles. Your focus is entirely different than it was as a judge

What gave you pause before making the move?

The pause was real. It came from the fact that I loved being a judge — I felt it was in my DNA. I had deep satisfaction from doing it. The unknown was whether I would come anywhere close to finding that same enjoyment and satisfaction in the private sector. That was, by far, my number one concern.

Like anything in life, the bird in the hand is something you value. So I did my homework and spoke with colleagues who had made the transition. I ultimately believed it was the right decision. And it was. It has turned out beautifully.

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When you were evaluating where to land, what were you actually looking for — and what made Signature the answer?

I don't know if this is the right analogy, but I've used it more than once. When you take your children to visit colleges, you watch them walk across campus — and they just know which is the right school for them. That is exactly what it was for me with Signature. It wasn't any single factor. When I met with the leadership, I simply knew it was the right place. It was difficult to articulate then, and it still is. The perspective was right. The chemistry was right.

I want to be clear: I sat down seriously with three other providers. Each of them would have been an exceptional home. But Signature was different for me.

I'll tell you something that struck me. During the month when people in the legal community knew I was leaving but didn't yet know where I was going — every attorney I spoke with said, “Well, of course, you're going to Signature.” And after the announcement, every one of them said, “Well, I knew it would be Signature.” People observe that Signature has a knack for attracting the right people. They may have made a mistake with me — but I knew immediately that it was the right place for me.

Now that I'm here, that chemistry permeates the entire firm. The staff is exceptional. There is a genuine camaraderie, even in what has become largely a Zoom world. And there is a remarkable depth of talent to consult when you need it.

Walk us through what a mediation day actually feels like — not a specific case, but the rhythm of it.

The contrast with the bench is immediate and profound. As a judge handling a settlement conference, you have ten things in the air at once. Your calendar starts at 8:30. There may be a trial beginning at 10. You are squeezing the settlement conference into whatever gap you can find, constantly watching the clock — asking why these lawyers aren't moving, because I must get to the next matter.

In the private sector, I have one thing to do that day. I am completely focused on it. I have prepared for it in advance. There may be a call here or there regarding another case, but there is one matter commanding my full attention. That is a profound advantage — not just professionally, but personally. You can do it the right way.

And the engagement is entirely different. As a judge, you maintain necessary separation from the parties — your role is to make decisions based on law and facts. Mediation is something else. It is an exploration of where the right compromise lives. You are deeply engaged with the lawyers and with the clients themselves. That engagement creates a different kind of challenge, and a different kind of reward.

What does that reward actually look like?

When there is a result, the satisfaction is something a judge rarely experiences because the judge does not interact with the parties in the same way a mediator can. As a judge, you make the decision and you move on. In mediation, you are working toward closure for everyone in that room — and when you reach it, you feel it. Particularly in the abuse cases I handle, when someone who has been carrying a devastating burden for years finally reaches some resolution — that is something different. That stays with you.

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What drives you most in the work — is there a particular kind of moment that keeps you engaged?

What gives me the greatest drive is the constant need to think outside the box. I am a firm believer that there is no cookie-cutter approach to mediation. It may be the tenth wage and hour class action you have seen in recent weeks, or another personal injury matter — but every case, based on the lawyers, the parties, the facts, the specific law involved, presents a different approach.

The greatest satisfaction comes when I have identified something unique to a particular case — a way to move both sides toward resolution that is specific to this case and these parties. And the real art of it is working in such a way that when that resolution comes, both sides feel it was their idea. That is when the work is most alive for me. When a different approach, crafted for this situation and no other, succeeds.

Was there anything about the transition that genuinely surprised you?

One thing that surprised me is somewhat mundane — the follow-up work. A high percentage of my cases settle, but many of them do not settle on day one. The follow-up required is something I hadn't fully anticipated. My standing joke to the parties and the lawyers is this: if it doesn't settle on day one, you're stuck with me. I will follow up, and follow up, until we get there.

The other surprise — a more personal one — is how much I miss being a judge. Don't get me wrong, I am very happy

with my decision. But there is something about the bench, about the constant decision-making and the weight of that role, that I did not expect to miss as much as I do. What has surprised me equally, though, is that notwithstanding that feeling, I am genuinely content. An arbitration here and there satisfies that part of me that still wants to decide. And the mediation work has given me something I didn't know I was looking for.

I was also warned before I left — watch out, because in the private sector they don't see the robe. You may encounter disrespect. I am glad to say that has rarely been my experience. The relationships I continue to have with lawyers and their clients have been one of the genuine pleasures of this chapter of my legal career.

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If you could say one thing directly to a sitting judge who is reading this — someone quietly wondering if this might be the right move — what would you want them to know?

I would not oversell it. I don't think anything can fully match the professional satisfaction of being a judge. That identity, that role — it is something you carry for a reason.

But I would reassure anyone considering the move that there is a real and meaningful level of satisfaction in being a mediator. In allowing the litigants to find closure, finality, certainty. In being the person in the room who makes that possible. It is not a consolation for leaving the bench. It is something positive in its own right.

If I am being completely honest — I have been surprised by how good it has been. More surprised than I expected to be.

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Judge Buckley is a mediator and arbitrator at Signature Resolution. He served as Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court and spent more than two decades handling complex civil litigation at the highest levels of the California court system.
