

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Building Trust

Los Angeles mediator Lesley Green's bench experience credited with putting parties at ease.

By Meghann M. Cuniff
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LOS ANGELES — Lesley C. Green's 11 years as a Los Angeles County judge taught her the ins and outs of the probate cases, trust disputes and conservatorships that comprise the bulk of her practice as a neutral. But it didn't prepare her for something she never experienced on the bench — the hugs.

"I was surprised at first how many people, often both sides, will hug me at the end of the day, just because they're so finally relieved to have this done," Green said. "To be able to help people get to that result is really gratifying."

Green joined Signature Resolution LLC, formerly Benchmark Resolution, after retiring from the court in early 2018, where she handled probate cases at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse. She was interested in more flexibility and freedom, and mediation offered the chance for both while still allowing her to work with the people who helped make her career so interesting.

"A lot of mediation is the lawyers," Green said. "It's so fun to see the lawyers you used to work with, either on the bench or when you were a lawyer, and to meet new lawyers."

Lawyers who've hired Green as a mediator or arbitrator said her warm personality, detailed knowledge of the law and exhaustive approach to preparation stand out.

"Judge Green possesses a temperament that is very well suited to the kind of work that she is doing," said Jim Hasenfus, a sole practitioner in Glendale. "She is hardworking. She is committed to get the case resolved. She is respectful of the litigant. She is respectful of the counsel. She's the kind of person you would want to work with to get a dispute resolved."

Marlene S. Seltzer of Gold Law APC said Green's demeanor is "very soft and gentle."

"But she's a real professional," Seltzer said. "She does her homework. She helps you look at it from both points of view, which is really nice."

Green sees building trust as a key part of her job.

"So often the reason a mediator's a good mediator is because the parties, for whatever reason, decide they can trust them, and they can't trust each other," she said during an interview at Signature's headquarters in Los Angeles. "I think



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that's sort of the bottom line of why a case settles here but can't outside of these walls."

In addition to probate, Green handles general business disputes, including commercial and employment. She also works with American Arbitration Association through her role at Signature, and she said she enjoys being back in private practice.

"There's an energy about being in the private sector and about dealing with people on a different level," Green said. "Who could not love being a judge, but I love being back in the private sector. It's where I started out."

Green married at 16 and had three children early. When her husband left them, she began working as a secretary at the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory. She earned a legal secretary certificate then joined her former junior high school teacher, Cree Kofford, at what was then Munns, Kofford Hoffman, Hunt & Throckmorton in Pasadena. She earned an associates degree from Pasadena City College then joined Adams, Duque & Hazeltine as a probate assistant. She essentially was a paralegal, and she soon decided not to stop there. She spent a year in night classes at Southwestern University School of Law before

Lesley C. Green

Signature Resolution
Los Angeles

Areas of Specialty: probate, trusts, conservatorship, general business and commercial, labor and employment

moving to USC Gould School of Law. She graduated in 1983 with a job already secured: an associateship at Adams, Duque & Hazeltine, where she'd worked since 1979.

"The only thing I didn't do was work in the copy room," Green said. "It's not like they took me as a lawyer because I was a good secretary. Every step along the way you had to prove yourself, and every step was interesting and challenging."

She became a partner at Adams Duque in 1991, then co-founded Bannan, Green, Frank & Terzian in 1995. Her husband, Terry A. Green, was appointed to the Los Angeles County Superior Court the same year. He eventually persuaded her to apply, too, and she joined in 2007, ready for a fresh challenge in public service. She got it

right off the bat, handling misdemeanor criminal cases after 24 years of only civil cases.

She switched to the probate department in 2013, where she stayed until retiring in February 2018. She was interested in a more flexible and less voluminous schedule after years of daily calendars with 50 or more cases. She also admired Signature Resolution's founders, retired Los Angeles County Superior Court judges Louis M. Meisinger and James A. Steele. And she "knew if they were in charge of this new organization, everything would be well done. And that's turned out to be the case," Green said.

Green now prides herself on preparation, and attorneys said they saw it at work in their mediations.

"The tougher the case, the more she digs in to do her homework," Seltzer said.

Green mediated a difficult will contest in which Seltzer's client lived in Georgia. Green talked to the client through a video conference, not in the midst of negotiations to emphasize a point, but in the beginning to introduce herself.

"She wanted her to know who she was and what she was trying to do. I've never seen that done before," Seltzer said.

Also, Seltzer said, "she read the papers, and not while we were sitting there."

Green said she always requests pre-mediation briefs, and she spends as much time as possible researching the issue, including combing through documents in underlying Los Angeles County Superior Court cases. It helps ensure mediations are effective as possible, and it sets people at ease when they realize she knows their case, she said.

"It's very important for me to be as prepared as I possibly can, so I don't waste time asking them what I should already know," she said. "I feel more comfortable at a mediation if I have absolutely as much background as I can. Then when I start talking to people, I can dive right in."

W. Todd Stevenson, founding partner of Stevenson Law Office in Sherman Oaks, said Green is "really good with the economics of the whole thing, and getting things settled without the parties incurring more attorney fees."

Stevenson said he's mediated five probate cases with Green, and her calm demeanor helps defuse difficult emotions.

"She's good at separating the emotions from the business decisions that have to be made," Stevenson said. Hasenfus said Green "appears also to place a premium on candor and honesty, which I think is quite refreshing."

She's also not a clockwatcher, Hasenfus said, recalling a mediation that took 12 hours but

settled in one day.

"The result was a win-win simply because we settled the case," he said. "She's the kind of person you would want to work with to get a dispute resolved."

People usually see her bench experience as a big asset, so she often tells them how she'd see their case as a judge. She also tries to break through emotion and focus on facts by working to dispel claims the other side is lying, while presenting cold truths as need be.

"Sometimes to get them to ultimately where they decide they want to go there's some bad news that comes with that," Green said.

Seltzer recalled an example of Green spelling out how she'd rule as a judge in her case, and Seltzer was struck by her fairness.

"We walked in, we weren't going to settle. They walked in, they weren't going to settle," Seltzer said. "We settled, and you have to give her credit for that."

Here are some attorneys who've used Green's services: W. Todd Stevenson, Stevenson Law Office; Jacob R. Gould, Barrington Legal Inc.; Blake A. Rummel, Weinstock Manion; Gregory M. Bordo, Blank Rome LLP; Jim Hasenfus, sole practitioner; Marlene S. Seltzer, Gold Law APC.