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## For San Diego mediator, the law is in his DNA

*Steven R. Denton isn't afraid to get hands-on in pursuit of a resolution*



By Deirdre Newman

Judge Steven R. Denton came to the law circuitously. But he's embraced it so wholly that he continues to live and breathe the practice of law in his 60s, most recently as a mediator, arbitrator and private judge for Judicate West.

"It's always been a real joy to me to be involved in the legal community," Denton said. "You hear about burned out lawyers. I'm not one of them."

### Steven R. Denton

Judicate West  
San Diego

**Areas of specialty:** Catastrophic personal injury, medical and professional malpractice, employment, product liability, business/commercial, insurance bad faith, real estate

Growing up in marine-rich locales like Hawaii and Wake Island - he spent most of his early years barefoot - his childhood dream was to be a marine biologist. He got a degree in environmental biology from University of California, Santa Barbara.

But the social upheaval in the early 1970s coupled with a friend's encouragement spurred him to go to law school. He's never looked back.

"In 1972 in Santa Barbara, there was a lot going on; the Vietnam War was at its peak; President Johnson had come and gone and we were into the Nixon years," Denton said. "It was a major time of social change so I wanted to be involved in that process. Law school seemed like an attractive way."

After law school at University of San Diego, he worked for Ludecke and Andreos - which later evolved into Ludecke, Denton & Bunn and then dissolved when Denton was appointed to the bench - for close to 30 years, becoming a partner in 1978.

The plaintiffs' firm mainly represented clients who were injured on the job. Coincidentally, his studies in biology came in handy while handling personal injury cases in terms of knowing about anatomy, biomechanics and other scientific issues.

Denton was appointed to the bench in 2001 by former Gov. Gray Davis and was ultimately assigned to a civil independent calendar department, receiving newly-filed cases and shepherding them through to settlement or trial. He juggled approximately 550 cases early on to more than 1,000 cases as a civil independent calendar judge.

"It was a huge management issue in terms of providing access to all those people for having their motions heard, and at the same time being available to accomplish the trials on those cases," he said.

When he was ready to retire from the bench in July 2013, he couldn't imagine doing anything else, so he went directly to Judicate West.

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"My whole life has been litigation," he said. "My wife [Cynthia R. Chihak] is a litigator and I would say litigation is in my DNA. When I'm not at work talking about cases with litigants, I'm at home talking about litigation."

Now he handles four or more cases a week and has to be 100 percent ready to discuss the merits of each case with the involved parties and their attorneys. His biggest asset that he brings as a mediator or arbitrator is his people skills, he said.

"I have always been at heart a people person and so I am able to easily discuss very difficult legal concepts and personal issues with parties to make them comfortable with making a decision on their case," Denton said.

He describes his style of mediation as more confrontational than some might expect.

"It's just my DNA. I'm not touchy-feely," he said. "I'm prone to get my hands dirty and get involved in the details of the evidence and the law on any particular case."

This no-nonsense approach is appreciated by attorneys like Clark R. Hudson, who has had several cases resolved by Denton as a mediator.

"His focus from beginning to end is on the merits of the claims and defenses involved in the case, and how to approach the case to resolve the dispute," Hudson said. "Just as when he was a sitting judge, he has no problem telling either side their position is untenable or unlikely to be accepted should the case proceed to trial."

Another attorney who holds Denton in very high esteem is Stephen K. Brunk, who has used Denton for a handful of mediations, some of them especially difficult. He said Denton managed to get all of his cases resolved except one, which Brunk said was a case that just couldn't be settled.

"I hold him in the highest regard," Brunk said.

Denton said he enjoys the challenges of mediating medical malpractice cases because they involve highly technical standard-of-care issues and great lawyers on both sides. It's also gratifying to get a case resolved for both the physician and a terminal patient in a disputed liability case, as occurred recently in one of his mediations.

Attorney Charles R. Grebing, who has used Denton for a few mediations, commends the judge for his strong grasp of legal malpractice issues.

"He's insightful, he's able to sort out the legal issues and strengths and weaknesses of the parties' positions and bring both parties to a conclusion, even in one case making a mediator's recommendation that was then accepted by the parties," Grebing said.

*Here are some attorneys who have used Frank's alternative dispute resolution services:* Stephen K. Brunk; Clark R. Hudson, Neil Dymott Frank McFall & Trexler APLC; Charles R. Grebing, Wingert Grebing Brubaker & Juskie LLP;

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