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Neutral Vedica Puri says she's part of younger generation who pursue mediation differently

Vedica S. Puri conducts extensive pre-mediation work and moves discussions quickly toward final numbers.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

After six years on the San Francisco Superior Court, Judge Vedica S. Puri decided it was time for a career change, a professional pivot she says was motivated by the terrific fulfillment she discovered in mandatory settlement conference work.

"I loved it... and it was so rewarding," Puri said. "There was no hesitation that I should stay longer on the bench."

Puri retired early in 2025 and joined the ADR Services, Inc. roster of private neutrals last spring. She's since been tackling insurance, personal injury and probate disputes as a mediator, arbitrator, and discovery referee.

The retired judge said she sees herself as part of a new wave of mediators, who approach dispute resolution a little differently than private neutrals of the past.

"When I started out as a trial lawyer, mediators would come in, and you'd wait until maybe two, three, four o'clock before numbers were discussed," Puri said. "That's just not how I see it or how I do it."

Extensive preparation prior to mediation is critical to her process, she said.

"I'm talking to the lawyers, I'm talking to the decision makers before they get into the room - well before, maybe weeks before," she said.



Gary Wagner / Special to the Daily Journal

"That way when we are together... it's forward progress from the moment we sit down. I'd like to think I bring an energy and an intensity to the process that I really wish mediators would have brought to me back in the day when I was a trial lawyer."

A 1994 Santa Clara University School of Law graduate, Puri spent more than two decades as a litigator and trial attorney, often tackling insurance disputes. In 2019, Gov. Jerry Brown appointed Puri to the San Francisco Superior Court, where she handled criminal, civil,

law and motion and probate assignments along with mandatory settlement conferences.

Born and raised in the Bay Area, Puri completed her undergraduate degree at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India, where she lived with her maternal grandparents for three years while pursuing her studies. The retired judge said that time abroad still influences her work.

"It was a whole new experience that really opened my eyes to inequity and how the world works in a different country in a different way,"

Hon. Vedica S. Puri (Ret.)

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Puri recalled. "It really made me think much more broadly and outside myself and ... to see there is something else going on elsewhere in the world, and yet we're all connected."

Puri said her career as a litigator and trial attorney - combined with her time on the bench handling criminal and civil calendars - amplified that sense of connectedness she began to better understand in India.

"My well of empathy is very, very deep," she said. "There are some exceptions, but by and large, everybody's just doing the best they can."

Santa Rosa litigator Sarah B. Kaplan used Puri recently to settle a disability dispute, and she described the judge as efficient and kind.

"The clients that I represented had been through a lot, so there was an emotional component for them," Kaplan said. "She was very supportive of hearing their story, and you can tell she has a lot of compassion in life with the way she works."

San Francisco plaintiffs' attorney Kimberly E. Levy used Puri recently to settle a complicated insurance dispute featuring multiple defendants, and she agreed that the neutral oper-

ated with a great deal of compassion.

"My clients liked her. They thought she was very knowledgeable, and she was kind to them," Levy said. "So she was definitely empathetic with my clients, but she gets right down to business ... and was very informative about, 'Here are the issues that I see.' So it was empathy mixed with business."

Levy also described Puri as "nonsense."

"She is honest, and she is very thoughtful, but she will push both sides a lot," Levy said. "She's tough. She's going to push both sides to get real and get down to the real issues, and she's not letting anyone off easy."

Puri noted, meanwhile, that she tries to apply a receptive approach as an arbitrator.

"When you have somebody who is coming to the process with an open mind and fairness and understands the law, I think it makes a big difference to getting the best decision possible," she explained. "I'm not going to say I'm always right, but [I'm working toward] the best decision possible."

The retired judge said the many

layers of her legal background really do provide a range of valuable tools in her work these days as an arbitrator and mediator.

"I've sat in all the seats, so I can appreciate everybody's position. ... I was a defense lawyer and then I was a plaintiffs' lawyer in the civil world before I was on the bench," Puri explained. "There is a lot of value to understanding where everyone is coming from before they've even gotten to the room and being able to speak their language and translate that into something tangible as we move through the day."

San Jose litigator Christian E. Picone used Puri recently to settle a difficult trust dispute featuring a range of real estate issues, and he also described the retired judge as no nonsense.

"I like a mediator who is willing to tell you unpleasant things, things you might not want to hear," Picone said. "But she did it in a respectful, convincing way."

Picone added that it ultimately took two separate sessions with Puri to resolve the case.

"I noticed the second time wasn't a rehash of the first time. She clearly

learned from everyone on the first day and spent a great deal of time focused on what was important," he said. "I thought she had good control and didn't let the clients - from both sides - find poison pills to railroad settlement."

Kaplan was also impressed by the retired judge's persistence, and she described Puri as "strong and driven."

"Sometimes mediators just want to get an outcome because then they can say they settled the case. And you can sense when a mediator has that perspective, and it's off-putting," Kaplan said. "Not once did it feel like she was there just to get an outcome. She was there to help us walk away feeling successful about the whole process, and she really did that. Our clients were really happy."

Here are some attorneys who have used Puri's services: Kimberly E. Levy, Dolan Law Firm PC; Sarah B. Kaplan, Baxter Law Offices APC; Christian E. Picone, Berliner Cohen LLP; Sean M. SeLegue, Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer LLP; Angela H. Shaw, Berliner Cohen LLP

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