

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2023

Empathy is Her Strength *Mediator Lori Dobrin says positivity helps her disarm angry people.*

By Don DeBenedictis

Special to the Daily Journal

Lori Dobrin believes her greatest strength as a mediator is her emotional intelligence.

“I feel like I probably have the highest EQ in the room most of the time,” she said.

Dobrin said she strives to be kind and empathetic with clients, and be herself.

“I try to be very positive with people. I think that has served me well in mediation to kind of disarm people sometimes when they might be feeling stressed or anxious or angry,” she said. “I feel like I have a demeanor about me that puts them more at ease and makes them feel like they’re in a safe space.”

Randolph W. Andell, who has represented landlords in a half dozen mediations with Dobrin, said she copes well when clients become emotional. “She has a very calming manner. She seems to set people at ease,” he said. “She’s very easy to talk to for tenants and landlords. ... I’ve never seen her close to losing her temper.”

Dobrin is “really good at talking to the clients” on both sides of a case, as well as their attorneys, according to Jeffrey J. Stinnett, who represented the defendant in the mediation of a high-dollar, real estate, breach of contract case. When the discussions grew contentious, “she was really good at just listening to people,” he added. “Using that as a starting point, ... she came up with what I thought were creative approaches.”

An important technique she uses when talking with parties is



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to mirror what they say back to them. “It’s really about listening and kind of reframing what they might be saying,” Dobrin said. “Because then they know that I’ve been listening.”

That approach helped her settle a catastrophic injury case involving a tractor-trailer that struck a pedestrian. “She took a direct and empathetic approach,” said the defense attorney, Jeffrey Y. Choi of Snyder Burnett Egerer LLP in Santa Barbara. “She was proactive and not just a human telephone.”

The case settled “well within the [policy] limits,” Dobrin said. “I feel like everybody was satisfied with the outcome, but I thought it was going to be a real challenge.”

While she is empathetic, she does explain the value of settlement to the parties. To resolve a contract case between a Chinese company and a Chinese American business owner, “she was very clear about the consequences of what the chances of winning were,” said the defense attorney, Frank Alvarado of Temple City. “She would acknowledge our arguments, but at the same time tell us why it may not have gone our way. ... She was practical.”

Dobrin also pushes back empathetically. When she has to tell one side that its position is weak, she doesn’t simply say, “You’re going to lose.” Instead, she says, “I’m concerned that [your position] might

Lori M. Dobrin

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not be accepted the way you think it will be.”

“I try to do it in a way that is not injecting my opinion, but that I’m concerned for them. And I think that seems to resonate,” she explained.

Dobrin developed her approach by acting as an intermediary between her parents during a difficult divorce and then later between her father and his second wife.

“I was kind of the one who had to be the liaison,” she said. She would translate what one spouse said into “words that would resonate” with the other. “I knew how to deal with each of them differently because I knew what their personalities were and what things they would respond to. ... I guess I had an ability to navigate that and get them talking and to communicate each position.”

Dealing with those sensitive family dynamics “probably shaped some of my own perspective about things,” including becoming a lawyer and then a mediator, she said.

Dobrin grew up on Long Island, where her chemical engineer father worked for Grumman, including on the early Apollo Lunar Excursion Module. She attended SUNY Albany for two years and then transferred to the University of Florida near where her father had moved after the divorce.

One required class for her major in advertising was mass communi-

cations law. “It was all about U.S. Supreme Court cases about libel and slander and the FCC’s seven words you couldn’t say on television,” she said. “And I was just fascinated.” She did so well she became the professor’s teaching assistant during her senior year, she said.

She went on to Emory University’s law school, in part for its strong litigation program. She was able to work as a student assistant district attorney and to take the state’s bar exam in her third year. After graduating in 1985, she worked for several Florida firms as a litigation associate. She handled “pretty much everything” from personal injury to criminal, including a few jury trials and appeals.

At the end of 1989, she moved to Los Angeles, where her now husband lived, and joined a Century City litigation firm. “I got some good experience. I had a few jury trials,” she said.

But she quit in 1994 when she had her first daughter. She went inactive in 1996 when a second daughter arrived.

Then in 2000, Dobrin decided to return to practicing law. Wondering where she might work, she discovered a law firm that supplied lawyers to make court appearances for other lawyers. The firm hired her on the spot to handle assignments primarily in the Ventura courthouse. Over the next 20 years, she built a thriving practice as a

contract appearance attorney working with up to a dozen appearance firms. “My appearance work grew to the point that ... I would have anywhere from two to 30 cases a day,” she said.

She also began handling court trials and unlawful detainer matters. “I was doing those weekly ... and sometimes I would have a dozen of those trials at once,” Dobrin said.

While most of the individual matters were not too difficult, that high volume required “being organized and efficient and having a pleasant rapport and [being] respectful with all of the staff.” She also got to know the Ventura judges very well.

“I felt like I did do a good job for [the attorneys she appeared for] because I knew the judges I was dealing with and what they needed to know.”

Dobrin knew the civil system so well that the court occasionally asked her to fill in as the bench officer in the courtroom that managed the civil caseload – including one seven-month stretch as a temporary judge.

But in 2020, many courts shut down during the pandemic and her appearance practice with them. “I was really at a crossroads. What was I going to do?”

The answer came from Ventura’s presiding judge. Once the court began to reopen, he asked her to train to handle settlement con-

ferences. Following training over Zoom, she settled a few cases, and decided to become a mediator.

Next, she took the mediation course from Pepperdine’s Straus Institute. On the advice of a retired judge, she joined Alternative Resolution Centers in April last year.

As she is building up her mediation practice, she has also signed on with the volunteer settlement panels at several courts, including the federal court and the L.A. Superior Court’s Resolve Law LA program for personal injury cases.

By now, Dobrin has mediated more than a few cases for ARC clients, including real estate disputes, breach of contract matters, personal injury cases, unlawful detainers and some medical malpractice and ADA cases. “I’m happy with whatever they send me,” Dobrin said. “I’m willing to take cases that even are a little outside my usual area of expertise. I’ve enjoyed that.”

Here are some attorneys who have used Dobrin’s services: Frank J. Alvarado, Alvarado Law Group; Randolph W. Andell, Andell Law Group; Jeffrey Y. Choi, Snyder Burnett Egerer LLP; Russ W. Ercolani, Westlake Injury Law Group; Sultana S. Kelantan, LibraLawFirm; Jeffrey J. Stinnett, Stinnett Law Firm; Sasha Tymkowicz, Law Office of Sasha Tymkowicz; Stacey L. Walker, Snyder Burnett Egerer LLP; Yu-Hao (Mickey) Yao, Glacier Law LLP.