

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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A Life in Balance

A former corporate lawyer and judge, Judith M. Ryan says switching to ADR has given her quality time with her family.

SUSAN McRAE / Daily Journal

By Susan McRae
Daily Journal Staff Writer

ORANGE — Judith M. Ryan loved practicing law, and she loved being a judge. But she found the ideal work/life balance when she became a private ADR neutral.

“I had a young daughter in school, and I wanted to maximize that family time,” Ryan said. “I wouldn’t have missed all those years sitting on a dirty ballfield and watching her play.”

So, after a career as a corporate lawyer, followed by eight years on the Orange County Municipal and Superior court, Ryan took early retirement in 1989 and joined JAMS. The move allowed her to use her experience and skills, but with the luxury of having a more flexible work schedule.

And her youngest daughter? She just graduated from Loyola Law School, Ryan’s alma mater.

Ryan, 65, didn’t start out to be a lawyer.

In fact, she said, growing up in Zearing, Iowa — population 617 in 2000 — the usual options for a young woman were nursing or teaching. She wasn’t interested in either.

Her high school typing teacher, knowing she loved to write, suggested journalism.

So Ryan enrolled as a journalism major at the University of Iowa. There she met a friend whose father was a lawyer and still practicing at 92.

“He had a rolltop desk and wore shirts with a removable collar,” she said. “All he did was talk about the law, and I was fascinated.”

Her parents wouldn’t hear of her going to law school. But Ryan had a widowed grandmother who was very progressive. She lived in California and as a young girl had disguised herself as a man to drive in stock car races. The grandmother told Ryan if she wanted to go to law school she would help.

In her junior year, Ryan visited her grandmother in California. While there, she also met her first husband.

With a double motivation, Ryan transferred from Iowa to USC and switched majors from journalism to political science. After graduating and giving birth to her first son, she enrolled in Loyola Law School at night, where she received her law degree in 1970.

Her first job out of law school was as a research attorney for the Los Angeles County Superior Court appellate department. From there, she spent two years in private practice in Torrance and Redondo Beach.

In 1974, Ryan became corporate counsel at Hunt Wesson Foods Inc. in Fullerton. She was put in charge of employment work and handled one of the company’s first sexual harassment cases, two years before the offense was defined by federal law in Title VII. To educate herself in this new field, she took a course at USC under Paul Grossman, a partner at Paul Hastings and one of the nation’s leading experts in employment discrimination.

During her time at Hunt, Ryan, who by then was divorced, also met her future second husband, Patrick Ryan, the company’s general counsel. While company policy allowed for relatives to work together, it prohibited two people who were closely related from working in the same department, in which one person reported to the other. So Judith Ryan decided to leave.

Former Lawyer and Judge Finds Work-Life Balance in ADR World

At her going-away party, Patrick Ryan, because he was her boss, was expected to give a speech. Only Judith Ryan's secretary knew at the time that the two had been dating and had become engaged.

"So he got up and said that probably a lot of people wondered why I was leaving because I was very well-liked and had done a good job," she said. "Then, he said, 'I could not afford to have someone working for me who had the poor judgment to marry me.'"

"And the whole place went silent. Then everybody started to cheer."

Three decades later, Ryan still tears up as she recalls the moment.

Patrick Ryan, now retired from Hunt, and Judith Ryan have six children between them, including five from their respective previous marriages and a daughter they had together.

After leaving Hunt in 1977, Judith Ryan went to work for the Santa Ana Police Department, writing ordinances and representing the department in civil lawsuits, all in employment-related matters.

She stayed there until 1981, when Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, appointed Ryan, in one of only two Republican bench appointments he made, to Orange Municipal Court. A year later, he elevated her to Orange County Superior Court.

Ryan got the call about her appointment on April Fool's Day, she said. She had just hung up from a prank call from her brother, Irvine litigator Kenny Steelman. When the phone rang again, she answered, "All right, which one of my crazy brother's friends is this?" and didn't believe the caller when he said Jerry Brown was calling.

"And then he came on the



Judith M. Ryan

Age: 65

Affiliation: JAMS

Location: Orange County

Areas of Specialty:

Arbitration and mediation in commercial and employment law disputes

Rates: \$5,500 per day;
\$600 per hour

line, and he had this distinctive voice," Ryan said. "All I said was, 'It's you.'"

Ryan spent eight years on the bench. She started out in small claims court, where she learned some of the people skills that came in handy when she later went into mediation. In Superior Court, she did a lot of civil law and motion work.

She joined JAMS in 1989, handling a wide variety of civil cases, both in arbitration and mediation.

In 1992, Ryan was approached by community groups looking for a more moderate voice for the Republican Party. They persuaded her to run for Congress against Bob Dornan, who they felt was too far to the right. She lost, but got close enough to pose a serious threat. Ryan called it a great family experience and one she is considering writing a book about.

Ryan left JAMS in 1996, along with a number of other neutrals, during a time when the company was going through a management upheaval. She signed on with the American Arbitration Association. She returned to JAMS in 2003, after a group of neutrals took over ownership, and became one of its shareholders.

While Ryan tends to focus on labor and employment and contract disputes, her work encompasses a wide range of business fields, from NASA's construction of a large-screen program at its space center (that's the first time she had heard the word "pixel"), to highway construction, to sewer contamination to insurance bad faith and medical product development.

One construction case had her spending weeks with opposing parties, with the lawyers — and Ryan — literally on their hands and knees looking at a floor to determine whether the composition was bird's eye maple.

Another arbitration case involved the total rewiring of a building. Because Ryan's father had been an electrician, the terminology was familiar to her.

"In one hearing her notes were almost like a public record," recalled William D. Claster, a partner in Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher's Orange County office, referring to the level of detail she included. "It was quite impressive. It contributes to her ability to gain the confidence of the parties."

"She's one of our most successful mediators and arbitrators in Orange County," said Thomas R. Malcom, a partner in Jones Day's Irvine office and past president of the Orange County Bar Association. "She's extremely popular. What

stands out is her ability to be fair to both sides and extremely pleasant. She's highly sought after and at the top of her game in evaluating business disputes."

Ryan spends about 50 percent of her time in arbitrations, 40 percent in mediations and the remainder in discovery and other matters.

She said she enjoys arbitration because she likes watching good lawyers do what they are trained to do best. Mediation, she said, presents more of a challenge and can be frustrating when cases don't settle.

"You feel good when you finally resolve it, knowing in the throes of it, everybody is looking at you like you've lost your mind. Everybody's unhappy," she said. "Then, when they finally are done, you feel good."

Here are some lawyers who have used Ryan's arbitration or mediation services: James B. Ewbank II, Ewbank & Byrom, Austin, Texas; James Ferruzzo, Ferruzzo & Ferruzzo, Newport Beach; Cynthia Filla, Jackson Lewis, Los Angeles; Thomas G. Foley Jr., Foley, Bezek, Behl & Curtis, Santa Barbara; Paul Gale, Troutman Sanders, Irvine; Karl Gerber, Sherman Oaks; Patricia Glaser, Glaser, Weil, Fink, Jacobs, Howard & Shapiro, Los Angeles; Ann Kotlarski, Seyfarth Shaw, Los Angeles; Heidi Stilb Lewis, Good, Wildman, Hegness & Walley, Newport Beach; Michael Lieb, Willenken Wilson Loh & Lieb, Los Angeles, Fermin H. Llaguno, Littler Mendelson, Irvine; Rogert Mangels, Jeffer Mangels Butler & Marmaro, Los Angeles; Marshall Mintz, Mintz & Billie, Los Angeles; George B. Newhouse Jr., Brown, White & Newhouse, Los Angeles; Richard S. Price II,