

Breaking Through

Neutral Judith Ryan's knack for the law and for reading people helps solve disputes.

By Meghann M. Cuniff
Daily Journal Staff Writer

ORANGE — When Judith M. Ryan secured a place at JAMS through her friend H. Warren Knight, the alternative dispute resolution provider was in its infancy, and Ryan was eager for more time with her family.

“I didn’t know if I’d ever work another case again,” she said.

Nearly three decades later, Ryan remains at the forefront of an industry that has matured into an essential part of California’s judicial system.

She’s built a reputation as one of the state’s top arbitrators while working thousands of cases in a post-bench career that attorneys say showcases her knack for people as well as her dedication to upholding the law, down to the letter.

“She’s very even-tempered and very judicial,” said Stuart M. Richter, a partner with Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP in Century City. “She gets complex business cases.”

Outgoing and personable, Ryan’s eight years as an Orange County Superior Court judge helped solidify characteristics that attorneys say make her ideal for complex, contentious cases that could require her to conduct long examinations.

Those who know her say she’s studious, straightforward and well-rounded in the law while also friendly and relaxed.

Her work as a neutral — she estimates about 70 percent of her work is arbitration and 30 percent is mediation — draws on what first attracted her to the law as a University of Iowa journalism student: She was dating a law student whose father was a lawyer, and she was struck by their conversations.

“All they did was talk about law, and I just thought it was just fascinating,” Ryan said. “And he said, ‘Well, you should apply; you should go to law school.’”

Ryan earned her law degree from Loyola Law School in 1970, attending night classes while raising her first child. She remains dedicated to the school. She serves on the board of directors and she established a scholarship for night students in her grandmother’s name to honor a woman she describes as ahead of her time.

Ryan followed her pioneering footsteps, first working as a research attorney for Los Angeles County Superior Court’s appellate department, then in private practice for two years. She joined Wesson Foods Inc. in Fullerton as corporate counsel in 1974, then the Santa Ana Police Department as a lawyer in 1977.

There, she made a connection that was instrumental to her appointment to the bench: Chief Ray Davis, who developed a relationship with Gov. Jerry Brown after Brown visited Santa Ana.

Davis wrote Ryan a letter of recommendation, and Ryan was appointed on April 1, 1981. She’s the first to note that is April Fool’s Day, but the job was no joke.

She expected to begin her first assignment — municipal court — observing. But instead she was given a contempt case against prominent Deputy Public Defender Lawrence Buckley. It was trial by fire, and she never looked back.

“I love watching good lawyers do what they’re trained to do and being in that kind of environment,” Ryan said.

Attorneys say Ryan is friendly and has a good sense of humor. Peter Hering, an associate with Rutan & Tucker LLP in Costa Mesa, noted her enthusiasm and said she “related well to my client.”

“I’ve been in other mediations where people created more separations, or have a confrontational style,” Hering said. “She was very relatable.”

Her outgoing demeanor and sharp sense of humor earned her a rare op-



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Judith M. Ryan

JAMS
Orange

Areas of specialty: business/
commercial, construction, employ-
ment, insurance, real property

portunity before she joined JAMS; she auditioned for a court-themed TV show in Hollywood in which she would play herself as a judge. A producer told her she’d be great, Ryan recalled, except for one fact she couldn’t escape: Her gender.

“He said, ‘We just don’t think the public would be ready for a woman in that role,’” Ryan said.

It worked out in the end. Just as she loved being on the bench, Ryan loves working as a neutral.

She enjoys complex cases involving interesting legal issues “that make you really get involved,” and she feels fortunate to have had “the kinds of cases with the kinds of lawyers who are really working at a really high level.”

Ryan said she tries to give attorneys “a lot of flexibility” when managing their discovery and presenting cases. She tries to stay friendly, but she knows she’s there to decide sometimes contentious issues, and she’s ready to take the heat.

“I always tell people at the end of the case, ‘Your lawyers have done a great job, so you can’t criticize your lawyers,’” Ryan said. “But the facts are the facts.”

Ryan’s reputation as a fact-finder is well earned, said Jonathan B. Cole of Nemecek & Cole in Sherman Oaks. He worked with her in a two-to-three-week arbitration that settled before she had a chance to make a decision, and he saw her consider all evidence and make well-reasoned rulings throughout.

“It was a contentious proceeding and with that in mind, she maintained

her cool and kept everybody under control,” Cole said. “But it was not some loosey goosey free for all.”

Joel Zeldin, a partner with Shartsis Friese LLP in San Francisco, conducted an arbitration before Ryan in which he enlisted a firm partner well versed in the case law to explain complicated issues involving “long contradictory cases over about 100 years.”

“It became so quickly evident that she had mastered these cases,” Zeldin said. “She didn’t need my expert to explain them.”

Here are some attorneys who have used Ryan’s services: Aryeh M. Hersher, Seyfarth Shaw LLP; James L. Goldman, Miller Barondess LLP; Patricia L. Glaser, Glaser Weil Fink Jacobs Howard Avchen & Shapiro LLP; Heidi S. Lewis, Sullivan Krieger Truong Spagnola & Klausner LLP; Robert L. Green, Green & Hall LLP; Stanley Feldsott, Feldsott & Lee; Robert S. Lawrence, Callahan & Blaine; Catherine J. Weinberg, Buckner, Robinson & Mirkovich; Reed T. Aljian, Daily Aljian, LLP; Stephen C. Kimball, Sessions & Kimball LLP; Marilyn S. Klinger, Sedgwick LLP.