SACRAMENTO — Frank C. Damrell Jr. oversaw high-profile cases during 14 years as a federal judge, met three presidents, and has served on more than 20 boards and commissions, including a current seat on the Delta Stewardship Council.

He was also Gov. Jerry Brown’s college roommate — twice.

Growing up in Modesto, Damrell knew Brown through debate tournaments where the future governor was part of a powerhouse team from St. Ignatius High School in San Francisco. During their freshman year at Santa Clara University, they “hit it off,” became good friends and decided to room together.

“He’s part philosopher, part polemicist,” said Damrell, who is three months younger than the governor. “He’s got a very good mind and a sharp sense of humor. We would talk and talk, just like kids do in college.”

Both attended Sacred Heart Novitiate Jesuit seminary in Santa Clara, but left before being ordained. They roomed together again for a year at UC Berkeley, where both got undergraduate degrees in 1961 before each headed off to Yale Law School. They still keep in touch.

After Yale, Damrell moved back to his hometown of Modesto, where his father, Frank Damrell Sr., was a longtime Stanislaus County judge. He spent two years as a deputy district attorney in Stanislaus County before going into private practice.

The firm where he worked from 1968 to 1997, Damrell, Nelson, Schrimp, Pallios, Pacher & Silva PC, still bears his name. It takes business cases as one of the tenants of the Damrell Building, a five-story office building in downtown Modesto named after the elder Damrell that opened in 1994.

Damrell and his wife raised their four children, now between 41 and 51 years old, in Modesto.

President Bill Clinton named Damrell to the federal bench in 1997.

Major cases soon followed. These included a challenge by the state of California against a power company after the 2001 energy crisis and an attempt by atheist plaintiff Michael Newdow to have the words “In God We Trust” removed from U.S. currency.

After stepping down from the bench in 2011, Damrell headed up the Sacramento office of Cotchett, Pitts & McCarthy LLP working on business litigation and whistleblower cases.

He joined JAMS in October last year. Damrell said he spends 80 percent of his time as a mediator, and the rest as an arbitrator, with a major focus on employment and catastrophic injury cases. He said the mediator role suits him particularly well, in part due to years doing settlement conferences as a federal judge with a crowded docket. “I’m a pretty easy guy to get along with,” Damrell said. “I just want to be a good reader of human beings.”

When cases are difficult to settle, he said, it’s almost never a matter of numbers but instead one of personalities. This is particularly true in cases pitting two businesses — or two partners in the same business — against each other.

“What happens often in any dispute is the positions harden,” Damrell said. “It becomes incredibly difficult to move people off of their position. You want to create a fluid situation where parties are constantly reevaluating their own case.”

Part of his style is to focus on meeting with the parties separately in order to get them to “lay their cards on the table,” he said, in part because good attorneys “don’t put everything in an opening brief.”

“The skill required, as I see it, is an ability to draw people out and figure out what is really important to them, what are the values they really feel are significant?” Damrell said. “That takes time.”

“There is room for a sense of humanity in this process that is sometimes missing from a court of law,” he added.

Steve C. Ruehmann, managing attorney with Borton Petrini LLP in Rancho Cordova, said he has used Damrell at least three times — most recently in a multimillion dollar mediation over products that were damaged by water during shipping.

The case involved international companies and contradictory testimony from more than 20 experts.

“It was a complex issue,” Ruehmann said. “He drilled down the fact that was most material to deciding where the settlement should end up.”

Joshua E. Kirsch, a partner with Gibson Robb & Lindh LLP in San Francisco, argued a weeklong bench trial in Damrell’s courtroom in 2007. Kirsch said many plaintiffs’ attorneys try to avoid a bench trial when seeking damages, but that he didn’t have qualms about arguing in front of Damrell.

“He has a good judicial temperament,” said Kirsch. He added, “Some judges are results-oriented. You give them two lines about your case and they know who they’re sympathetic with.”

More recently, Kirsch said he had a successful mediation with Damrell after an earlier attempt with a different mediator had stalled.

“He’s well respected throughout the legal community,” said Lisa M. Estabrook, a partner with Archer Norris PLC in Sacramento. “He is relatively new to the mediation industry and he is so far doing quite well.”

Estabrook said her firm has used his services twice while defending clients, most recently in a catastrophic industry claim. She said Damrell is adept at making a plaintiff feel like he or she has been heard. She also worked for Damrell’s firm from 1993 to 1999, when she was fresh out of law school, and counts herself among the many young attorneys and law clerks Damrell has mentored over the years. Mentoring and education have been the other great passions of his life, Damrell said.

“While he was still on the federal bench, he worked with U.S. District Judge Kimberly J. Mueller to convert the building’s law library into a learning center with a large classroom — an idea inspired by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, a Sacramento native.

“We have these libraries in all the district courthouses in the country,” Damrell said. “People don’t use law books anymore. So they’re basically vacant except for these rows and rows of books. He said we should convert it to some kind of use.”

The Justice Anthony Kennedy Library and Learning Center opened in 2013, with Kennedy in attendance. It now offers programs to California teachers on how to teach civics. Damrell served on the center’s board for two years.

In 2002, Damrell founded Operation Protect & Defend, a civics education program for high school students in the Sacramento area that seeks to supplement the one semester of civics education he said most students receive before graduating high school and becoming voters.

He’s visited numerous high schools over the years, and sponsors one of several annual essay contests, with $1,000 college scholarships going to two winners.

“Democracy’s greatest threat is indifference and ignorance,” Damrell said. “I wish I could devote my life to that. I can’t. I don’t have the time.”

Here are some attorneys who have used Damrell’s services: Michael S. Ahmad, Law Offices of Mary-Alice Coleman; Sharon C. Collier and Lisa M. Estabrook, Archer Norris PLC; Jennifer E. Duggan, Duggan Law Corporation; Tony E. Grif- fin, Hunt Jeppson & Griffin LLP; Treaver K. Hodson, Palmer Kazanjian Wohl Hodson LLP; Josh E. Kirsch, Gibson Robb & Lindh LLP; Howard A. Matz, Bird Marella Boxer Wolpert Nessini Dricks Lincenberg & Rhow PC; Stephen C. Ruehmann, Borton Petrini LLP; Michael J. Thomas, Downey Brand LLP.