Mediator Lynn Duryee has settled into the third act of her legal career

By Phil Johnson
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Lynn Duryee is in the third act of her legal career. After 13 years as a civil litigation attorney and 21 years on the bench in Marin County Superior Court, Duryee left her judicial career behind a little over a year ago.

The identity transformation from esteemed judge — “It becomes part of who you are, you know, don’t jaywalk” — to a highly sought after mediator with a laidback approach — “Please, call me Lynn. I start all my mediations like that” — wasn’t easy at first.

“It took about a year to adjust,” Duryee said. “I had thoughts like, ‘Oh, I should be working, or promoting my business.’ It was harder to see the intrinsic value of things like hiking with my dog.”

She and her schedule can breathe now. Gone are the four settlement conferences on Mondays and 20 law and motion hearings on Tuesdays, occasionally replaced with quiet celebrations in bed with a cup of coffee and a good book.

Duryee recognizes the ability to focus on a single dispute as her favorite part of her new gig. JAMS’ espresso machine is a close second.

“It’s such a luxury to have days to do what I love most: settle cases,” Duryee said. “I can have conversations with the clients and develop a sense of nuance and intimate understanding. After 21 years in Marin County, I had done everything. It became somewhat routine. This has been an amazing change.”

Duryee settled thousands of civil cases during her judiciary, and eliminated the court’s backlog when she established settlement programs aided by volunteers.

She spends most of her time leading mediation while handling a little arbitration. She occasionally works on discovery and private trials. An battalion combination of optimism and confidence abound when Duryee discusses dispute resolution.

“The tension and frustration brought on by the dispute unleashed emotions from years before, when the woman said she was a victim of domestic violence.

“We walked around for 20 minutes,” Duryee said. “She did not want to be victimized again. I thought, ‘Don’t freak. I’m a person and I can be here for her.’ We walked back in and worked things out. That is the essence of dispute resolution.”

Duryee traces her interest in resolution to her birth as the middle child between her older brother Don, a retired contractor, and younger sister Sue, a retired kindergarten teacher. She describes her two years with a family law calendar in Marin County as the best training for dispute resolution.

“Every case is like a mystery novel,” said Duryee, who wrote a novel, “Hooked on Drug Court” that was published in 2010. “You have to figure out what is important to others.”

Marc Lewis of Lewis & Llewellyn LLP said Duryee possesses the rare combination of deep legal perspective and the ability to empathize with clients.

“She mediated a particularly difficult complex civil litigation case,” Lewis said. “She was very diligent in bringing the parties together, but mediation ended without a settlement. She continued communicating with the parties and ultimately brought the matter to a close. I told her she is on my short list for future mediators.”

Duryee turned 60 recently, a birthday she described as “shocking.” She takes joy in seeing her two daughters, Katie Moran, 27, and Sarah Moran, 24, follow her into the legal field; Katie is in her second year at University of San Francisco School of Law, Sarah will enroll in UC Hastings College of the Law this fall.

“They are both very independent and chose to enroll in law school themselves,” Duryee said. “It was really nice, they said they didn’t know anyone happier than me.”

Duryee focuses on satisfactions simple and grand — she smiles widely when discussing her morning ferry commute across the San Francisco Bay.

“I don’t see the sun setting anytime soon,” Duryee said.

Here are some attorneys who have used Duryee’s alternative dispute resolution services: Ron P. Goldman, The Goldman Law Firm, Tiburon; Cameron C. Ward, Dannis Woliver Kelley, San Francisco; Stephen P. McGee, Fairfax; James E.Sell, Parton Sell Rhodes Law Firm, Larkspur; Arlo Uriarte, Liberation Law Group P C, San Francisco; Barbara L. Miller, Haapala, Thompson & Abern, Irvine; Sasha M. Cummings, Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith LLP, San Francisco; Jack Weaver, Welty Welty P C, Healdsburg; Robert F. Epstein, Epstein Law Firm, San Francisco; Marc Lewis, Lewis & Llewellyn LLP, San Francisco.