LOS ANGELES — Barbara Reeves Neal has worn many hats in her legal career: law clerk, associate general counsel, partner in private practice and federal antitrust prosecutor.

So the JAMS mediator and arbitrator prides herself on being able to see conflicts from all points of view.

“I’ve seen all sides,” she said. “I feel like I can sit in any chair — plaintiffs, defense, law clerk, judge.”

Lawyers who have mediated with her agree.

“The breadth of her experience prior to becoming a mediator gives her a sense of how clients react to things,” said attorney Andre Cronthall, a partner at Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton in Los Angeles who has mediated bad-faith insurance cases with Reeves Neal. “That well-roundedness helps her. She can talk to people and say, ‘Yes, I’ve been there and done that, and here’s my experience.’”

Reeves Neal, 60, said she never gave much thought to becoming a lawyer. But the Buffalo, N.Y.-raised daughter of a chemical-engineer father and secretary mother liked to argue — a lot. So after finishing undergraduate studies in economics and math, she took the law boards on a whim, aced them and landed a spot at Harvard Law School. There, she was among 8 percent of women in the graduating class of 1973.

“It was scary not having lawyers in my background,” she said. “It was also tough because, as a woman, you got singled out and called on. ... I had a professor who did ‘Ladies Day’ and only called on women that day.”

Since law school, Reeves Neal has worked in nearly all sectors of the law, starting as a clerk with Judge Alfred T. Goodwin in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, followed by seven years in the antitrust division of the Department of Justice.

In 1981, she joined Morrison & Foerster as a partner and stayed for 13 years before becoming a partner at Fried Frank in 1994. She later moved to Paul Hastings, where she was a partner for two years.

After 18 years in private practice, Reeves Neal joined the in-house team at Southern California Edison as associate general counsel and vice president.

It was her time at the utilities giant that nudged her toward full-time mediation, Reeves Neal said. During the California energy crisis, Southern California Edison — which was bleeding money from paying more for electricity than the price at which it was allowed to sell it because of a price freeze was hit with a wave of lawsuits, mostly from vendors seeking to recover unpaid bills.

In fact, during one conference call with bondholders and creditors about how many lawsuits Edison was facing, Reeves Neal answered by telling the story of when her Labrador retriever gave birth to 13 puppies.

“The vet did an ultrasound, sent it back and said, ‘The dog is healthy. Number of puppies: TMTC.’”

“Too Many to Count.

“I definitely came to the conclusion that litigation was not the best way to solve really important disputes like that,” she said.

In 2006, she went full-time at JAMS, where her workload is roughly 60 percent mediation and 40 percent arbitration. Her husband, Richard Neal, a retired appellate justice, is also a JAMS mediator and arbitrator.

Reeves Neal describes her mediation style as evaluative, persistent and insightful.

“I’ll discuss the law with the parties and tell them how a judge or jury would view their case,” she said. “And I don’t want them to walk away not having gotten everything I can give them.”
Lawyers say she commits to every case that comes before her. “You walk in and right away, you know she’s ready to roll up her sleeves and get into a case with you,” said attorney Gerald Kroll, who has worked with Reeves Neal twice in mediation.

Kroll, of Kroll Law Corp. in Santa Barbara, praised Reeves Neal on her ability to quickly synthesize and analyze both sides of a complicated insurance case involving policy interpretation and contract issues.

“She understood what we were talking about,” he said. “That was a godsend because it’s very difficult when you’re struggling to understand what the various issues are. She understood and tackled them quickly. She was very efficient.”

Kroll was also impressed with Reeves Neal’s temperament, which he said “is like killing you with kindness.”

“She’s going to tell you the good, the bad and the ugly but in a way that’s professional, respectful and engaging,” he said.

But, he added, “You’re not going pull anything over on Barbara. She’s that smart.”

Despite having lawyers for parents, Reeves Neal’s three sons and two stepsons have ventured far from the legal field. Tim Neal, 23, is in graduate school for political science; Bob Neal, 19, wants to be an oceanographer; Ricky Neal, 17, travels the country competing in equestrian shows. Her stepson Tom Neal, 33, is earning his Ph.D. in Spanish and comparative languages at Indiana University. Andrew Neal, 30, is teaching English in Poland and studying for certification to teach English in schools abroad.

Here are some lawyers who have used Reeves Neal’s mediation and arbitration services:


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