SAN FRANCISCO — Like the well-worn dirt road that neutral Ronald Sabraw takes to get home to his retreat in the hills, his path into law only seems natural.

At the end of a day of mediation and arbitration in downtown San Francisco, he returns to the oak-shaded countryside along Mill Creek Road and into a quieter life. Five miles from home, he drives through the town of Fremont, where his father, retired state appellate court justice M.O. Sabraw, once made his livelihood and became a bit of a local celebrity in the community.

“He was held in great reverence,” Sabraw said, reflecting on trips to the hardware shop or grocery store where everyone seemed to know his father’s name.

And what a name it was: “M” standing for the French term for modest, “Modeste,” and “O” standing for his father’s name, “Orton.”

If names truly bear insight into one’s character, Sabraw takes after his father in the modesty department, feeling more comfortable speaking about anything but himself: his extensive family, home improvement projects or the judicial process that has fascinated him since his youth.

Born in Oakland and raised in the East Bay, Sabraw fell into his father’s legal footsteps by serving as an attorney, then moving on to a governor-appointed judgeship.

Sabraw said that, when he was a young man, his father would “speak in glowing terms” of his experience on the bench. He was particularly proud of his father’s work in finding Kenneth Parnell in 1972. The child, Steven Parnell, was kept from his family for seven years; his story was later turned into a made-for-TV movie.

But it is his rapport and respect for litigants that seems to strike his colleagues the most. Terry Gross, partner at Gross, Belsky & Alonso in San Francisco, believes that it was Sabraw’s “personal style” that brought about a fair settlement in the 2001 takeover case targeting KPFA, a public radio station in Berkeley.

Gross was appointed by the California attorney general to represent listeners who had been stripped of their roles to elect board members. Listeners, local station advisory boards and disinterested Pacifica board members had joined and filed four lawsuits against the board before Sabraw ended the dispute.

The settlement required a structural shift in the way board members were chosen. People of the State of California v. Pacifica Foundation, 814461-0.

“It was a hard-fought trial, with emotions running high on both sides,” Gross said. “We had a settlement conference, and he went above and beyond the call of duty to act as a mediator, becoming involved in the detailed issues of how to run these stations. He was never asked to do any of that, but it made all the difference.”

Sabraw said he finds the mediation and arbitration business gratifying and interpersonal and enjoys the creativity involved in resolving a case.

Working out of a cubicile in a high-rise office building in San Francisco’s financial district, Sabraw speaks fondly of his more low-key status. He said he enjoys the open atmosphere, where he is able to exchange ideas with his colleagues.

“In mediation, the opportunity for revealed humanity is very interesting to me,” he said. “As a judge, you wouldn’t be able to see the full spectrum of human foibles and frustrations.”

Reflecting, Sabraw said he doesn’t think he had enough life experience to become a judge at 37. He said that his familial ties helped him to get to the Superior Court.

“As I got near the end of my career, I had a moment to reflect, and I think I was too young to assume those responsibilities,” he said. “Decision making was just about calling the shots, and as I got older, I found decision making more difficult.”

Needham, as well as some of the attorneys who have worked with him, don’t seem to take issue with the fact that he was once a young judge.

“It’s not often I get a chance to say great things about someone I truly admire,” Needham said.

He noted that Sabraw’s commitment to listening and learning in decision making went above and beyond the call of duty.

“In regard to his experience, I think all you need is hard work and dedication to mature you,” Needham said.

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