SAN FRANCISCO — When things got particularly heated during a recent, long-running arbitration involving a business dispute, neutral W. Scott Snowden cooled things down with some Bob Dylan lyrics.

Snowden’s tactic should not surprise those who know him. The retired Napa County Superior Court judge is a Dylan freak, who first saw the music icon as a college student in 1965. The concert was mere months after Dylan shocked fans at the Newport Folk Festival by going electric, and Snowden has seen him numerous times since.

“I do believe that he’s a Michelangelo-level creative force,” he said.

Snowden admits he quite frequently quotes Dylan during the course of mediations and arbitrations. The line, “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose,” from “Like a Rolling Stone,” works well for trying to get one side to visualize why the other may or may not settle, Snowden said. When both sides in a mediation get past the posturing and down to the question of whether a case with settle or not, Snowden is likely to quote from a more modern Dylan song, “Mississippi”:

“Stick with me baby, stick with me anyhow
Things should start to get interestin’ right about now.”

While Snowden likes Dylan so much he can recite his lyrics of the top of his head, he’s also quite enamored with his work as a mediator and arbitrator with JAMS.

Now in his fifth year with the company, Snowden happily logs long hours at his job, coupled with two-hour commutes both ways between San Francisco and the Napa Valley, where his family runs a successful winery.

Snowden admits he wasn’t quite sure what he was in for when he left the Napa County bench after 25 years. He figured if he didn’t like alternative dispute resolution, at least he could do something off the job that interested him, like reading a biography about one of California’s early chief justices.

“It’s not because he always goes my way,” Balter said. “It’s because he gets the job done.”

Balter said Snowden also has a “good B.S. detector,” for knowing what arguments are going to fly and what arguments won’t, and really listens.

“Some people are a little tone deaf in that area,” he said.

Batler, who practices a lot of wine law, said the fact that Snowden has a vineyard and produces wine, also makes him “particularly good in those cases.”

What’s more, Snowden’s involvement in making wine and growing grapes is hardly a recent business venture.

When he was a child, Snowden’s parents purchased the 160-acre vineyard between St. Helena and Rutherford, christening it Snowden Vineyards. His family spent weekends and summers there. When his father died in 1977, Snowden and his
brother, Randy, took over the business. Within a few years, they decided to focus on growing better grapes and planted new Cabernet Sauvignon vines. By 1993, the Snowdens were making their own wine.

Snowden and his brother still run the vineyard, Snowden’s wife Joann Ortega designed the label and one of couple’s two daughters, Diana Snowden Seysses, makes the wine.

As much as he loves the wine business, Snowden said, he remains dedicated to and intrigued by his work in the law.

On any given day, Snowden might be mediating a case between a winemaker and a grape grower squabbling over the price of grapes, or helping to settle a dispute where one party is accusing the other of mismanaging a vineyard. At other times, he’s settled cases where parties were seeking damages for forest fires or floods.

Attorney Richard Idell, who has had several mediations before Snowden and an arbitration — the recent business dispute where Snowden made use of the Dylan lyrics — said Snowden is very good at taking control of the situation.

“He’s very attentive,” he said. “He wants to understand the facts.”

But those aren’t the only benefits of bringing a dispute him, Idell said.

“At the end, when all is said and done, everybody gets some great wine.”

Here are some of the lawyers who have used Snowden’s mediation and arbitration services: James Rose, St. Helena; Robert Arns, the Arns Law Firm, San Francisco; Randy Gimple, Carlson, Calladine & Peterson, San Francisco; Paul Carey, Napa; David Balter, Dickenson, Peatman & Fogerty, Napa; Herbert Rowland, Ragghianti Freitas, San Rafael; Dawn M. Ross and Philip Terry, Carle, Mackie, Power & Ross, Santa Rosa; Richard Idell, Idell & Seitell, San Francisco; Richard Van Duzer, Farella Braun & Martel, San Francisco; Delphine Adams, Dickenson, Peatman & Fogarty, Santa Rosa.