When it came time for retired Orange County Superior Court Judge Stephen Sundvold to transition to full-time mediation, it was a virtually seamless move.

The biggest difference between the bench and JAMS, he found, was not having to don a robe. Near the end of his 20-year judicial career, Sundvold served on the court’s complex civil panel and tried only a handful of cases over the course of eight years because he managed to settle most of them before trial.

“It’s the same thing in a different place,” Sundvold said of his work at JAMS, which he joined in February.

Lawyers say he hasn’t shed the even-handed demeanor that earned him the reputation as one of the region’s top settlement judges.

“He treats everyone who comes before him with respect, even if he disagrees with their position, and lets them know they’ve had a fair hearing,” said Ken Kasdan, a partner at Kasdan Simonds Riley & Vaughan who has brought multi-party construction defect cases before Sundvold.

Sundvold is particularly patient in explaining to the parties how mediation works, Kasdan said.

“He takes the time to explain the issues to the parties, whether it be a board of directors or individuals, so they understand the mediation process and the alternative [to] litigation,” he said. “He’s patient in going through that type of explanation instead of presuming everyone understands how the legal system works.”

To promote the benefits of mediation to parties, he uses one analogy: You may not hit a home run, but you’re not going to strike out.

“If you try a case, there are no sure things,” he said. “But in settlement, you have a sure thing. You control the outcome. Conveying that to a litigant is the key.”

Sundvold’s current caseload runs the gamut from lawsuits stemming from last year’s Yorba Linda fire cases to complex insurance litigation. Though his style varies from case to case, he said his go-to approach is always to be honest, sincere and straightforward.

“I let people talk, listen, share with them my experience and insight without telling them I’m God,” he said.

Rich Bridgford, a partner at Bridgford & Gleason, praised Sundvold for his no-nonsense, practical mediation style.

“He’s a quick study, very courteous to the parties and has a refreshing sense of humor,” Bridgford said. “The thing I liked best about him is he’s excellent in getting down to the essential issues and getting the case settled, as opposed to all of the BS. He’s very practical.”

Bridgford has known Sundvold for more than 10 years, and he has mediated several construction defect cases with him.

“He was the same guy when he was a judge as he is at JAMS,” Bridgford said. “He was just as courteous on the bench and just as effective when he settled my case on the bench as he was when he worked on the case being paid by the parties. That’s important.”

Born in Los Angeles, Sundvold spent his early years in Orange County, graduating from Sunny Hills High School.
Smooth Transition From Judge to Neutral

in Fullerton and later Cal State Fullerton. Early exposure to the profession came from a lawyer who helped his mother and father - a blueprint supervisor for North American Aviation and an airplane assembler for Northrup Grummon Corp., respectively - with a legal dispute. Sundvold credits that experience with inspiring him to think about law for his own future.

He earned his J.D. from the University of San Diego in 1971 and moved to Washington, D.C., for a job at the U.S. Department of Justice.

Upon his return to California two years later, he worked briefly at a defense firm in Long Beach before becoming in-house counsel and managing attorney for insurer Safeco, where he stayed for 15 years.

The former Eagle Scout and longtime Civil War history buff is married with two children and four grandchildren. He jokes that on certain cases he’d rather mediate than take them to Disneyland.

Here are some attorneys who have used Sundvold’s mediation or arbitration services:

Kenneth Kasdan, Kasdan Simonds Riley & Vaughan, Irvine; Robert Gil-liland, Guralnick & Gilliland, Palm Desert; Robert Clausen, Law Offices of Robert Clausen, Newport Beach; Richard Buck, Cooksey Toolen Gage Duffy & Woog, Costa Mesa; Joseph Ferrentino, Newmeyer & Dillion, Newport Beach; Richard Bridgford, Bridgford & Gleason, Aliso Viejo; Bruce Lorber, Lorber Greenfield & Polito, Poway.