

Lifetime Achievement: Retired Judge Mercedes Armas Bach

BY Katie Hall

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Mercedes Armas Bach is a former judge in Miami-Dade County in the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court of Florida.

Objectively, what key moments or accomplishments have defined your career?

While the ADR industry is thriving in Florida today, in the early 1990s, it was far from the legal mainstream. Court-ordered mediation was still years away. Judges and lawyers in the state were either unfamiliar or skeptical of it.

But I believed it was the way of the future. After litigating for more than a decade, I became one of the first mediators in the state. I saw ADR as offering cheaper and more efficient ways to resolve disputes. As one of the few proponents of ADR—and a Hispanic woman—I was a lonely voice arguing that ADR could give power to litigants and parties rather than having them cede it to the judiciary as the ultimate decision-makers. I sought to convince judges in the state to mandate mediation. I spoke with them in one-on-one meetings as well as at various functions. I told the judges, “Give it a try. You have nothing to lose.”



Courtesy photo

Mercedes Armas Bach, retired Judge, 11th Judicial Circuit, Florida.

It started to pay off when Miami-Dade courts began to mandate mediation. Another turning point came when the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida set up in-house mediation services for family, juvenile dependency and county court cases. Today, I’m proud to say that ADR is thriving in Florida. Miami in particular is a hotspot for international arbitration.

I was appointed to the board of JAMS Foundation after joining JAMS. We worked to fund grants that promote and innovate conflict resolution initiatives worldwide including our local communities. We funded a law enforcement

community relations grant that provided training/tools for de-escalating conflict.

Subjectively, what are your proudest or most personally satisfying achievements?

I'm proud of the impact I've had on people close to me. My son is a judge in Miami-Dade County in the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. It fills me with pride that, after growing up around judges, he saw the importance of serving in the judiciary. I'm equally proud of my daughter, my daughter-in-law (who both were past presidents of the Florida Association of Women Lawyers), and my son-in-law and their accomplishments.

Professional mentorship has always been a passion. The Florida Supreme Court appointed me as a mentor/mentor trainer as part of a judicial mentoring program. Many of my mentees have gone on to successful careers, including Judge Darrin Gayles and Judge Rodney Smith both of the Southern District of Florida. I can't take credit for their success, but I'm honored to have been part of their career journeys.

How are the business and profession of law changing, and are Florida lawyers well positioned for the future?

Since the pandemic, we have witnessed a rapid transition from in-person court hearings and mediation to virtual proceedings. From a technological point of view, Florida lawyers were positioned for that change, especially those in the Eleventh Judicial Circuit, which has always been at the forefront of technology. As chair of the technology committee of 11th Judicial Circuit Division, I helped spearhead the transition from paper files to electronic records – a seminal

technology change for that time. I have no doubt that it will also be ready for the changes that AI will bring. We need to make sure that technology does not impede human connection and growth opportunities.

What advice would you give to someone contemplating a career in law, or someone whose career in law has not been satisfying so far?

Reach out to a mentor. I cannot stress enough how important it is to get perspective from someone with more experience who is familiar with the challenges another lawyer is facing. Mentors love to share their advice. They want to be a resource for their mentees. But you have to ask for advice; you have to show initiative. Attend bar functions, volunteer in your community and surround yourself with people who can help you. You can't navigate your career alone. You do not have to—reach out to mentors, they are here help you.

Mercedes Armas Bach, *Retired Judge, 11th Judicial Circuit, Florida, has extensive experience mediating complex civil disputes and is well regarded for her fairness, diligence, and efficiency in handling a wide variety of matters including business/commercial, construction, employment, family law, insurance, intellectual property, personal injury, professional liability, and real property actions.*

