



To set a case with
Hon. Mary Anne Mason (Ret.),
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Why did you choose to join JAMS after stepping down from the bench?

I loved my time on the bench, but even the most diligent judge has trouble moving literally hundreds of cases toward resolution. By its nature, our justice system proceeds “with all deliberate speed.” Alternative dispute resolution offers parties the opportunity to streamline the process and craft solutions to their problems that litigation does not afford, and JAMS’ associates and its facilities create the perfect in-person or virtual environment for the process to be successful.

What was the most interesting case you were involved in, either as a practicing attorney, judge or neutral?

I represented several plaintiffs—two of them prominent attorneys—in a six-week jury trial in which we claimed that several banks had breached an oral contract regarding the purchase of assets from a bankruptcy estate. Deadly dull stuff. But the jury was so engaged that by week four of the trial, they all, including the alternates, started showing up each day wearing the same color. We knew that they had made up their minds and, as it turned out, their unanimity worked in our favor.

What practice areas are you most interested in developing at JAMS?

I find so many areas of the law interesting that it’s hard to narrow it down. As an attorney and on the bench, one of my favorite areas was insurance disputes. I have handled cases in so many contexts—toxic tort, construction, shareholder derivative, errors and omissions, to name a few—and I find the process of parsing the policy language to fit the limitless and often unpredictable risks that life poses to be intellectually rewarding.

What are your most successful traits as a mediator/arbitrator?

I am always trying to think of creative—not necessarily law-based—ways to satisfy parties’ needs. Often a good mediator can suggest non-monetary components of a settlement that get the parties to the finish line. I don’t care whether a party is a sole proprietor or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company; litigation is a negative emotional, financial and energy drain. Creative solutions that allow parties to redirect their talents and resources to more productive pursuits always have a chance of success.

Tell us about your settlement style.

I am an extremely attentive listener. I enjoy getting to know the clients participating in mediation. I recently had a mediation with a very successful self-made businessman. Although the matter did not settle, he told me at the end of the day that he had participated in many mediations and that this was the best mediation he had ever attended. I like people to leave a mediation session—whether or not it results in a settlement—with the feeling that the investment of their time was worthwhile.

How has the field of law changed for women over the years?

When I was interviewing for a job after law school, the firm partner I was speaking with told me, “Of course, our firm is too small for a woman.” I eventually went to work for the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Northern District of Illinois where women and men were treated and compensated equally. Now women make up 50% of most law school classes. I don’t think that the field of law has necessarily changed for women; rather, I believe women have changed the field of law for the better.

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Fun Facts about Judge Mason

What is your favorite place you've been?

My husband and I have been fortunate to travel quite a bit, and each time we return home, we have a new favorite. But my fondest memories are of summer visits to a small town in northern Michigan near the Sleeping Bear Dunes. Our kids were small, and long walks on the beach, “adventure” hikes in the woods and early-evening deer-spotting contests are times we all treasure.

What is your favorite hobby?

Playing piano. I've played all my life, I play only for myself and one of these years, I'm going to get these pieces right.

If you could spend an hour with anyone in history, living or not, who would that be and why?

President Abraham Lincoln. During his presidency, our country was fractured, and democracy was on the verge of collapse. I would be comforted by his views on how to bring people together.

What is the best piece of advice you have received?

It's not a piece of advice, per se, but an example. The late Esther Rothstein, past president of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois and a contemporary and friend of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, taught me, through her example, the importance of getting involved. Esther and her cadre of pioneering women lawyers worked tirelessly to pave the way for more women to succeed in our profession, and their legacy remains strong today.

Tell us one thing on your bucket list?

Istanbul and Ephesus. We've made concrete plans to go twice, and each time we were derailed, first by terrorist threats and now by the coronavirus.

Who was your role model growing up?

I had six of them: my older brothers. All of my brothers have unique talents and distinctive personalities that have shaped my worldview. They run the gamut—advertising agency executives, a banker, a geologist and master bagpiper, an artist, and “St. Francis,” my truck-driving brother, whom children and animals love—each has been a tremendous influence on my life. I would list my sisters as role models, but after six boys, my mother decided one girl was enough.

What lesson have you learned from the coronavirus pandemic?

That freshness dates on your pantry staples mean nothing and that cake flour with an expiration date of November 2018 still works fine in pizza dough.