

# VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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## A 360-degree view

*Neutral Charlotte Woolard applies a holistic approach to family disputes, attorneys say.*

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Retired judge Charlotte W. Woolard has been mediating cases with ADR Services Inc. for nearly a decade, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

"One of the things that I wonder now being older is: 'What the heck would I be doing if I weren't doing this?'" Woolard said with a chuckle. "And I can't think of anything. It keeps me engaged, and I really enjoy the people."

A 1979 Santa Clara University School of Law graduate, Woolard started her legal career as a research attorney for the San Francisco Superior Court and then spent six years as an assistant district attorney for the City and County of San Francisco.

"I was doing a little bit of everything," Woolard said of her time at the DA's office. "I spent some time in special prosecution, rape and child abuse - general crimes. By the time I left, I was starting to get a homicide here or there, but I decided that I wanted to see what else was out there."

Woolard became a civil litigator in 1986 at what was then Wilson, Elser, Moskowitz, Edelman & Dicker LLP, focusing on insurance defense.

"I was doing what I call the blood and guts part," she said. "Motorcycle accidents, bus accidents, product liability, things getting cut off by chainsaws - that kind of stuff."

Gov. Pete Wilson appointed Woolard to the San Francisco Municipal Court in 1993 and elevated her in 1995 to the Superior Court, where she tackled criminal, civil, law and motion, appellate and family law assignments until her retirement in 2015.



Gary Wagner/Special to the Daily Journal

"I just really like making decisions as opposed to arguing for them," Woolard said of what initially appealed to her about being a judge. "And I've handled pretty much everything on the bench - at least had a taste of it - but family law really was what spoke to me."

Woolard spent nine years overseeing a family law calendar on the bench, and said about 95% of her caseload as a neutral involves family law matters.

"I found that as I worked through the cases, the clients - the parties - they really needed help at this time in their lives because things were so disruptive," Woolard said. "They're emotionally and financially hurting, and it just really was satisfying to help them come

to resolution. So, I really enjoyed the practice of being a family law judge."

Woolard noted that though much of her work on family law cases is as a private judge, she prefers working with counsel and their clients to resolve the disputes before motions are filed.

"Since they're going through this really horrible - difficult financially and emotionally - situation, what I try to do is work with them, so that counsel and the parties can resolve the issues and settle the case," Woolard said. "It's terrific if they can make the decision. I really encourage that. But if they can't make the decision, then somebody has to decide, and I'm the one that will decide."

### Hon. Charlotte Woolard (Ret.)

ADR Services, Inc.  
San Francisco

#### Areas of Specialty:

Family Law  
Personal Injury  
Landlord Tenant  
Employment  
Medical Malpractice  
Insurance

Family law attorney Amy N. Paul described Woolard as a terrific listener who is very fair.

"I think from the client's experience, they feel like they've been heard," Paul explained, "that she genuinely understands what's important to them, she understands what the issues are, and she helps you get to a resolution."

Paul added that Woolard's understanding of the law "provided efficiency for our clients because we didn't have to educate her on what the legal issues were. And she never lost sight of the fact that - although this is our work and our job - these are people's lives. So, she had an interest in moving it along ... getting this matter done, so these people can get back to their lives."

Woolard said she does occasionally work as a mediator and arbitrator on cases from other practice areas, including personal injury, employment, medical malpractice and landlord-tenant disputes. She

said that her approach as a mediator in those matters usually begins with a great deal of listening.

"Mediators - we all have our own styles, and I'm the type that's soft in the beginning, and we have a discussion," Woolard explained.

"Then as things go on, I will insert myself more as to what could happen if you do not settle this case and it went to court. Some mediators will start hammering the parties right away. I don't. I really want to listen first and then move into what they call a more directive [approach] maybe towards the middle of the mediation."

Family law attorney Don B. Emley used Woolard as a discovery referee on a case that lasted several years before it wrapped up in 2022.

"She was very good at wrangling difficult attorneys - and I might have been one of those in this case," Emley said with a chuckle. "She also has a really deep understanding of the law - and not just family law. She prac-

ticed in civil litigation, and she was at the courthouse in lots of different roles for a long time. So, she's got a good grasp of the Code of Civil Procedure, the Evidence Code. ... Her understanding of the law is quite impressive."

Emley said he also valued Woolard's judicial demeanor.

"She's highly professional," he said. "And she's kind, but that doesn't mean she's not able to make difficult decisions, which she does without hesitation when the time comes."

Paul agreed that Woolard is empathetic, but also doesn't put up with nonsense.

"She doesn't tolerate the gamesmanship, and she doesn't have patience for people who are posturing," Paul explained. "We're there to get a job done, so that's not going to get you any traction with her."

Family law attorney Andrea L. Palash has used Woolard as a private judge on two difficult child custody cases and described her as kind and even-tempered.

"She's also got a ton of common sense, which I very much appreciate," Palash said. "And there is definitely no tomfoolery going on in her cases."

Palash appeared several times before Woolard when she was on the bench and said she still has a holistic understanding of family law.

"She's able to see family law matters from both the perspective of figuring out what the legal issues are and how they can be resolved," Palash said. "But also, how to manage the emotions, the personalities, the dynamics. She gets the 360-degree view, and that is rare in family law."

*Here are some attorneys who have used Woolard's services:* Amy N. Paul, Sound Law Group LLP; Andrea L. Palash, Coats Palash LLP; Don B. Emley, Emley Law Office LLP; Gretchen B. Rubel, Hersh FamilyLaw Practice PC; Kelly J. Robbins, Robbins Family Law.

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