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WENDI SORENSEN

The Creative Mediation Practice

WRITTEN BY SUSAN CUSHING
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDREW PAUL

Wendi Sorensen, a partner with Burch & Cracchiolo P.A., appears to be an anomaly in the field of mediation, because of her unwillingness to compromise. Both a prolific attorney and a gifted artist, she exhibits the same zeal and focus at her potter’s wheel as she does in any negotiation.

“There is something to be says for refusing to conform to anyone’s expectations,” she says. “I embrace the balance that comes from having the heart of a litigator and the eye of an artist. I see things differently because of it.”

Her method is working.

She has extensive experience in both state and federal court and is recognized among Arizona’s Finest Lawyers. Certified by the Arizona Bar in personal injury and wrongful death law, her practice focuses on aggravated

liability and damages matters, including Federal Motor Carrier cases, vehicular products liability matters, construction site injury and death matters, and premises liability cases. Currently, she is serving as a member of the Board of Legal Specialization, and the Arizona State Bar committee responsible for standards relating to specialization certification.

Sorensen has now augmented her burgeoning practice to encompass mediation and other alternative dispute resolution work.

“My brain is wired to see both sides,” she says. “And I find this work compelling. It can change lives. I love that, and I equally love digging into the technical aspects of each file – the legal and the scientific. That undoubtedly helps in mediation.”

Her professional development has followed a path illustrative of her ability to apply an ever-broadening and multifarious skill set. After spending time with Sorensen, it is no surprise that her home office is filled with sketchbooks, watercolors and a portfolio of projects. She smiles as she flips through them, talking about the techniques she learned along the way.

She deftly displays that capability as she studies situations and people from virtually every aspect. This enhances her capacity to connect profoundly with both her clients and participants in mediations.

“The first step is getting the person through the emotional quagmire inherent in being a party to a suit,” she explains. “It’s human nature to experience strong feelings of being ‘wronged’ and thinking no one understands or is really *listening*. Those feelings must be addressed before you can move forward. You can’t do that without real empathy, coupled with a strong understanding of the case.”

“You have to be able to both hear and respond to their points -- not argumentatively, but in a way that shows them you understand their position and that you’ve studied all the facts,” she continues. “And only then will they be open enough to hear the weaknesses of their positions, or how a jury might react to a certain piece of testimony. There are no shortcuts, you have to truly be all-in.”

Sorensen’s approach is further enhanced with an inherent talent for deciphering complex, even convoluted circumstances, then, driving her case home with a fearlessly dynamic courtroom presence.

In her 30-plus year legal career, Sorensen has collected accomplishments and accolades, many of which were especially meaningful to her because they are determined by her peers. In addition to being included among the Best Lawyers in America, 2017-2019 and Most Influential Women in Business in Arizona, Arizona Business Magazine 2015, Sorensen also enjoys the distinction of inclusion in the Top 25 Women Attorneys in Arizona, Southwest Super Lawyers, Arizona’s Finest Lawyers and Arizona Business Magazine Top Lawyers.

Aside from publicly acknowledging her hard-won status within the legal community, these honors also served as an impetus for Sorensen to delve into another area of the law that she has always found intriguing. “I’ve always been very interested in the mechanics of mediation and found the mediators themselves -- and the processes they employ -- fascinating,” Sorensen says. “As I started receiving these accolades, I saw them as an indication of the

community’s view of my skills and experience, and in turn an indication that I may be viewed as sufficiently experienced to become a mediator myself.”

“I quickly realized how truly fulfilling the work is,” she adds. “I get to talk to people, get to really know and understand them and see how their lives could be

significantly changed by large quantities of money.”

Sorensen confided that before she pursued law school, she seriously contemplated becoming a psychologist. “Mediation is a little bit like that,” she says. “Listening and empathizing with people, while connecting their situations to the technical legal aspects and potential challenges in their cases, empowers them to make more informed choices.”

“In a way, it’s a service to their lawyers as well,” says Sorensen. “Any attorney would prefer an acceptable resolution now to a bad verdict eight or nine months down the road especially given all of the costs typically expended in the ramp-up to trial. And of course, no lawyer wants an unhappy client. I’ve found that once I’ve listened empathetically to what parties have to say, they are much more receptive to what I have to say. It builds trust and shows a level of individual investment that can sometimes get overlooked in the process.”

FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

As with anything, instincts and natural talent can only go so far. There is no substitute for hard work and dedication. For Sorensen, this translates into preparation and lots of it.

“I want to fully digest the materials being considered. I’ve been in the legal field for more than three decades, but I refuse to approach anything with the attitude of ‘Oh, I’ve seen this before,’ because there is so much variety in people’s lives and experiences. That translates to differences in how to best conduct the mediation. How can I earnestly relate to the clients and ask truly pertinent questions unless I know all there is to know?”

Sorensen has dived into mediation practice with deep sense of energy and enthusiasm. “The best mediations are works of both art and science.” She added, “there is a precise way to approach each case. And when you find that approach, the rewards clearly reflect the efforts and commitment made.”

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