

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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Speaking from Experience

Veteran trial attorney Lars Johnson draws on his background to settle cases.

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LOS ANGELES — His contemporaries were a bit perplexed when former Grassini Wrinkle & Johnson partner Lars Johnson left litigation for mediation at the top of his game.

Now several of them say they are overjoyed to know someone with his abilities is available to settle disputes.

“I know it’s pretty unconventional but I really don’t care. It’s an adventure and it’s a challenge and it makes me feel alive,” Johnson said about his move to mediation in an interview at the Signature Resolution offices in Los Angeles.

Only 45, Johnson breaks the mold of the typical, old guard arbitrator and mediator.

With three nominations to the Consumer Association Attorneys of Los Angeles trial lawyer awards, and an excellent trial record, Johnson is closely listened to when he makes his case valuations and analyses.

“Lars has been on the top of his game and is still on the top of his game and

continues to be a phenomenal trial lawyer,” Michael Alder of Alder Law PC said in a phone interview. “Because I know he knows how to argue a case, when he says, ‘Mike, this is what I think,’ I listen.”

After using Johnson in a complicated dispute arising from a catastrophic burn injury, Steven Glickman of Glickman & Glickman said Johnson is “a wonderful addition to the pool of great mediators in Los Angeles.”

“Lars, because of his experience as a trial lawyer, was able to really talk to the lawyers about the pros and cons of the case from a liability perspective,” Glickman said. “He’s been there, and can talk the talk because he has walked the walk.”

Johnson seems to have always been a trailblazer. He made the unexpected move of joining the U.S. Navy Judge Advocate General Corps in 1999 after graduating from Loyola Law School.

“People said, ‘Are you nuts?’” Johnson recalled. He told a story of a scared kid from the San Fernando Valley joining the entirely



Emilio Aldea / Daily Journal

foreign world of the Marine Corps.

Stationed in Norfolk, Virginia at the biggest naval station in the world, a hungry 26-year-old Johnson would either sink or swim when he was thrown into a fierce trial setting to defend court-martialed sailors.

“I knew I’d get trials at the Marine Corps ... and I did,” Johnson said.

After leaving the Navy and briefly going into private practice in New York, Johnson joined Grassini & Wrinkle as an associate in 2007. Only five years later, he became a name partner.

“What I learned at that firm is what I rely on to be an effective mediator,”

Lars Johnson

Signature Resolution
Los Angeles

Areas of Specialty:

personal injury,
insurance bad faith,
business disputes

Johnson said. “Born out of my experience so far is the feeling that the skills you develop as a trial lawyer are essentially the same skills you use as a mediator. Specifically, that includes understanding the way people think.”

During his time as a personal injury and bad

faith insurance attorney and since entering the world of mediation, Johnson said he learned there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to making a mediator's proposal.

While he prefers to facilitate an environment in which parties are able to make their own deals — only offering a proposal in 25% percent of mediations — he has never made a proposal both parties did not accept, he said.

Confident in his ability to assess a case, Johnson once made a mediator's proposal unsolicited.

In a contentious personal injury case, Johnson said the plaintiff had argued their allegedly open insurance policy should allow them to recover more than the policy limit.

However, the insurance company was allegedly unwilling to budge past the policy limits, leaving the two parties completely deadlocked, Johnson said. After a lengthy litigation and two failed mediations before reaching him, Johnson stepped in and made the unsolicited proposal.

"It was one of those rare occasions I said, 'You know

what? This is the right move to make.'"

Both parties accepted the proposal and the case settled the next day.

The biggest mistake attorneys can make, Johnson said, is not exchanging briefs with the other side out of some perceived attempt at strategic advantage.

"By far the biggest mistake is failing to share information far in advance to utilize that information at mediation," Johnson said. "In my world, the personal injury liability world, the defense is much less nimble than the plaintiff. Usually you're dealing with the insurance companies and claims have to be vetted and there's a lot of feedback in that process."

"The reality is, as a plaintiff lawyer representing a plaintiff, I can change course quickly in a mediation in one day pretty radically, but for the most part, the defense cannot do that. ... When I was a plaintiff lawyer, I would always share my brief with the defense," Johnson continued. "What I see now in my practice as a mediator is that's the exception. Most people do not actually share their briefs, so people get

surprised and it's too late to do anything about it."

Once a formidable adversary, Harry Safarian of Safarian & Baroian LLP, who faced Johnson more than a decade ago in a case that reached the state Supreme Court, is now a happy client of his. Safarian said he has used Johnson as a mediator at least six times since 2018.

"He brings the same level of seriousness and diligence to mediation as he brought to litigation," Safarian said. "I think he's younger than most, but I also think he has accomplished as much as anyone can accomplish. His track record as a plaintiff attorney is virtually unsurpassed."

Safarian also said Johnson is "relentless" in following up with a case after a mediation session has ended.

"The outcome is as important to him as it is to everyone else," Safarian said.

In addition, attorneys say Johnson is exceptionally talented at putting clients at ease and being able to make them feel included in the process.

Robert T. Simon of the Simon Law Group, who said

Johnson is on his short list of neutrals for product liability and open policy disputes, used Johnson to mediate an eight-figure motorcycle bad faith insurance dispute. While Simon described Johnson as a prolific trial lawyer, but as a mediator he is "very non-adversarial, even keeled and speaks intelligently in the case."

Unlike some neutrals who will "split the baby" and simply suggest a middle figure between the two offers, Johnson will give a his true and honest valuation of the case, even if it requires more time and effort, Simon said.

"He mediates off of the true value of what he thinks the case is worth," he added.

While focused on mediation, Johnson is also available for arbitration.

Here are some attorneys who have used Johnson's mediation services: Aroutun Harry Safarian, The Safarian Firm APC; Michael Alder, Alder Law PC; Robert T. Simon, Sevy W. Fisher, Simon Law Group; Robert Glassman, Panish Shea & Boyle LLP; Megan C. Winter, Procter Shyer & Winter LLP.