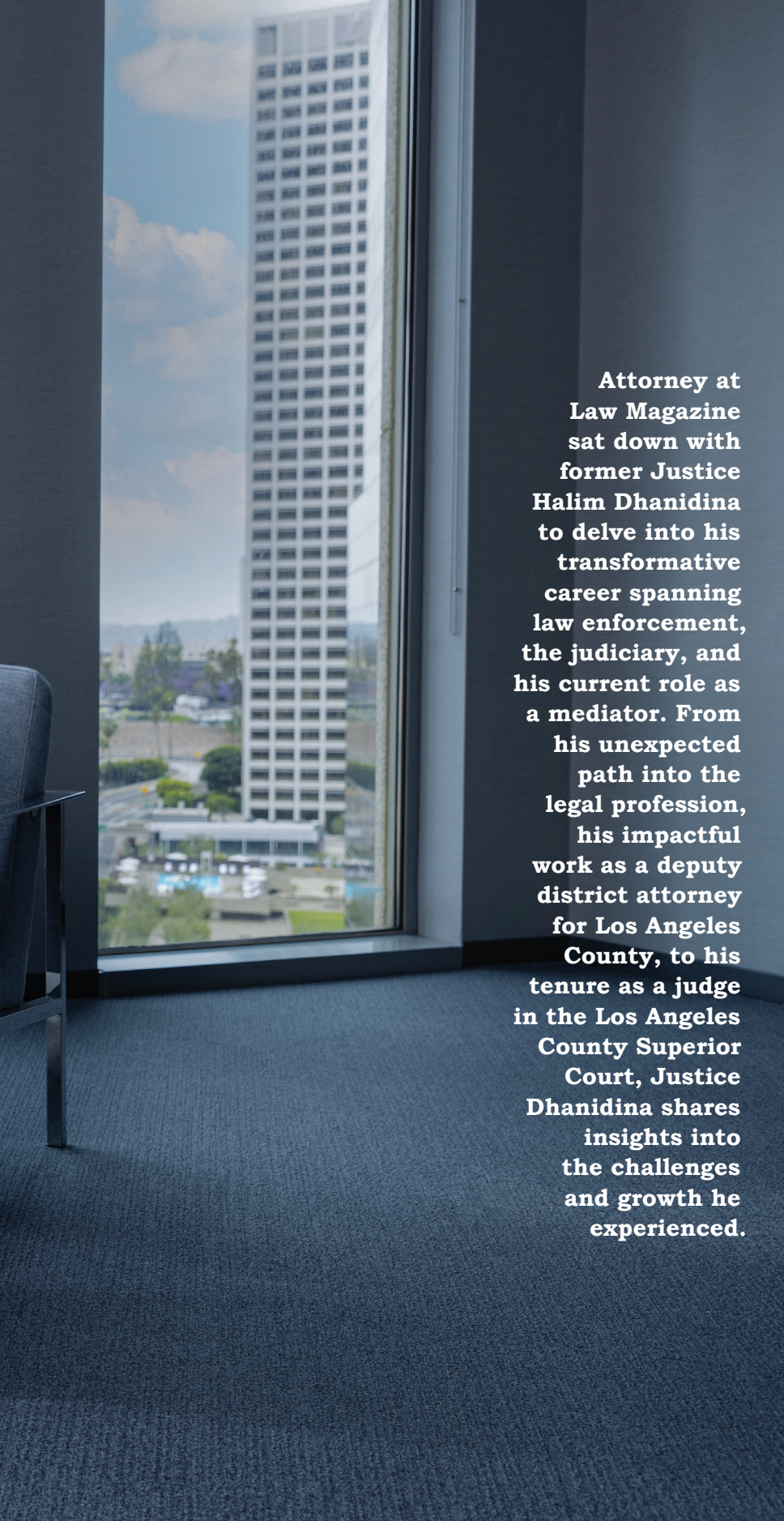


# HALIM DHANIDINA

**A Journey  
Through Law,  
Justice and  
Mediation**

A tall, modern skyscraper with a grid of windows is visible through a large window in a modern office. The office has a blue carpet and a grey chair is partially visible on the left. The sky is blue with some clouds.

**Attorney at Law Magazine sat down with former Justice Halim Dhanidina to delve into his transformative career spanning law enforcement, the judiciary, and his current role as a mediator. From his unexpected path into the legal profession, his impactful work as a deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County, to his tenure as a judge in the Los Angeles County Superior Court, Justice Dhanidina shares insights into the challenges and growth he experienced.**

**AALM:** What motivated you to embark on a career in law, and what were the initial steps that led you into this field?

**HD:** Both of my parents went into the education field when they immigrated to the United States from Tanzania. In fact, there were no lawyers in the family when I was growing up. Nevertheless, I distinctly remember my family members all agreeing that I should pursue a career in law, though I suspect it had something to do with my reputation as the most argumentative child in the family. I never questioned this opinion, and went to college assuming that I would eventually go to law school.

After experimenting with five different academic majors, I graduated with a degree in international relations from Pomona College, with the goal of focusing on public international law at the University of California, Los Angeles. My hope was to one day work for the U.S. Department of State or United Nations, where I would have the opportunity to help broker peace agreements between conflicting parties.

As fate would have it, I instead became a trial attorney, first in criminal court before my judicial career, then in civil litigation after leaving the bench. It seems somewhat poetic that, after all these years and roles I've had within the legal system, I am now positioned to broker agreements between parties mired in conflict.

**AALM:** Could you share some highlights from your time as a deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County?

**HD:** Once it became clear to me that I would become a trial attorney in criminal court, I initially hoped to be a public defender. It was only when the Los Angeles County Public Defender's office did not offer me a job that I interviewed with and was ultimately hired by the district attorney, a job which I loved more than I expected to.



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My ability to see cases from both sides helped me evaluate cases in a fair and dispassionate way. Working in the hardcore gang and major crimes divisions was simultaneously rewarding and, at times, overwhelmingly sad. Tragedy abounded as I learned how to interact with people who have suffered more than anyone should have to, often due to the untimely loss of a loved one. It was a tremendous responsibility to both seek justice on behalf of crime victims and wield the enormous power of the state against defendants who frequently came from significant hardship themselves.

**AALM:** What were the most significant challenges you faced during your tenure as a judge on the Los Angeles County Superior Court, and how did you handle them?

**HD:** The transition from advocate to judge presented a significant internal challenge for me in learning not to be invested in the outcome of the cases before me. All good trial attorneys devote so much of themselves to their cases and clients, working on them at all hours and thinking about them the rest of the time. It’s an impossible job to do without passion. However, judges are measured by their ability to check their passion at the door, and over time I learned to redirect mine onto the process rather than the product.

**AALM:** As a devoted teacher and mentor, which aspect of your role as an adjunct professor at various law schools do you find most fulfilling, and why?

**HD:** I have loved teaching at local law schools for over 10 years. My love for education was inherited from my parents, and I’ve even expanded my teaching to include the high school level as I am a coach for the mock trial team at Orange County School of the Arts—the reigning county champion. I

find it immeasurably gratifying to help students discover new aspects about law and themselves while mastering trial advocacy skills. The most fulfilling aspect of teaching has been the occasional encounters I have had with my former students where they have shared how my class has helped them in their own careers, legal and otherwise. I feel lucky to have played a role in the success of others. There is really no better feeling.

**AALM:** While on the court of appeal, you reviewed over 1,000 writs and appeals. Could you share a particularly memorable or impactful appeal case that left a lasting impression on you?

**HD:** The cases I heard were all impactful to the parties for whom the court of appeal represented as the last stop on a long and momentous journey. One case that comes to mind was one of the rare situations when I wrote a dissenting opinion. The case dealt with the extent to which an arbitrator should have disclosed information from his personal life that may have related to the case before him. My position was in favor of a higher degree of disclosure than what was ultimately determined by the majority, making my opinion one of the least significant of my tenure on the court, to a certain extent. Despite this, I believe I articulated a high ethical standard that I endeavor to follow in this next phase of my career at Signature Resolution.

**AALM:** Can you tell us about your involvement on the boards of Asian Americans Advancing Justice, the Asian Pacific American Bar Association, and Muslim-Jewish NewGround? How do you contribute to these organizations' missions?

**HD:** My work with Advancing Justice and the Asian Pacific American Bar Association has involved serving traditionally underserved communities as they participate in

and interact with the legal system. The goal for me has been to promote equality within the system in order to protect both the rights of individuals and the integrity of the system.

Additionally, my work with NewGround has been more challenging and perhaps more relevant to what I hope to accomplish as a mediator. The premise that informs NewGround's work is that while disagreement is a natural part of the human experience, conflict is a choice. The first step to solving seemingly intractable problems is to recognize that we all have the power to achieve a resolution where it may not be initially apparent, though it takes hard work as well as the ability and desire to see a problem from different angles. I find these organizations to be inspiring work both personally and professionally.

**AALM:** What are some of the most important lessons you have learned throughout your career in law and the judiciary, and how do they inform your decisions and approach to justice?

**HD:** I am constantly reminded of the ways in which our reality in the justice system falls short of our ideals. This leads to catastrophic consequences for individuals and erodes public confidence at a time when faith in the system seems to be hanging by a thread. In so many ways, our justice system is like a child. It deserves our love and admiration—that's the easy part. However, if you only love and admire your child, he or she may not survive. That's why it's important to also devote the work, sacrifice, and time it takes to keep our justice system thriving, and each of us can play a part in that.

**AALM:** How do you see the legal profession evolving in the coming years, and what trends or developments do you think will have the biggest impact?

**HD:** Providing access to justice is a real challenge. Increasing numbers do not have equal access to the justice system due to lack of time and resources. Democracy cannot be sustained in this way. We need to continue to find ways people can resolve disputes outside of the traditional machinations of the courts, which have become increasingly unable to provide the type of due process that serves as our democracy's foundation. I expect that self-help and alternative dispute resolution methods will continue to pick up the slack and make mediation accessible to more people.

**AALM:** What advice would you give to someone who is considering a career in law, or who is just starting out in the field?

**HD:** I would advise a newcomer to the legal profession to be introspective. They should constantly consider the extent to which their work compromises or threatens their own values or mental health. At the end of the day, it is still a job. I also think it's important for new or aspiring lawyers to be open-minded about their career paths. It is okay for a career to take unanticipated twists and turns depending on changing circumstances, and I'm living proof of that.

**AALM:** Tell us a little about your life outside the office.

**HD:** I am passionate about the arts and arts education, as I believe it has a way of enriching our lives and promoting what is best in all of us. That is why I fully support my children's pursuit of careers in the performing arts and why I am so involved in their school.

#### **SIGNATURE RESOLUTION**

633 W 5th St, Suite 1000

Los Angeles, CA 90071

213-622-1002

[signatureresolution.com](http://signatureresolution.com)