

RETIRED JUDGE MICHELE LOWRANCE

Attorney at Law Magazine Publisher Chris Haigh had the pleasure of interviewing retired Judge Michele Lowrance, who was selected by the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers as the 2015 recipient of the prestigious Samuel S. Berger Award. According to the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, the award recognizes attorneys and judges who exemplify the highest standards of integrity, courtesy, knowledge of family law and the extraordinary ability to solve human problems.

Judge Lowrance is also the author of the best-selling book, “The Good Karma Divorce: Avoid Litigation, Turn Negative Emotions into Positive Actions, and Get On with the Rest of Your Life.”

Haigh: What court did you preside over and how long did you hold that position?

Lowrance: I presided in the Circuit Court of Cook County – domestic relations division for 19 years. Prior to that, I was an attorney for 20 years, practicing mostly family law.

Haigh: Why did you leave the bench to mediate?

Lowrance: As both an attorney and as a judge, I was always in love with trials. I enjoyed the action and the unraveling of the facts to see what was really happening. However, I believe it is usually better for the family if it can reach a settlement without going to trial. I felt more divorcing people not only needed to settle their



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cases but not feel frightened into it. People in court are terrified and the judge has a lot of leverage in settling cases. I wanted to do more than just settle cases. I needed to get closer to the situation. The bench tends to create a lot of distance. Mediation is full of hope and optimism; it helps people let go of a potentially traumatic situation. Just because the ink is dry on their divorce decree doesn't mean they're letting go.

I also believe mediation is compatible with how the brain actually works under stress. It forces people to use the problem-solving part of their brain. Mediation helps break stalemates. Too often in court, repetitive arguments are like pouring hot water on an old tea bag. I also felt like I could do

more for children. Many times in court I would witness children being taken as prisoners of war without ever having committed a crime.

Haigh: What is different about your job as a mediator?

Lowrance: As a judge, one of my most-used phrases was, “I've heard enough.” As a mediator I now say, “Tell me more.” Also, as a mediator, one weighs the temperature in the room to find out what is going right, what is going wrong, who is getting angry, and who is tempted by the deal presently offered. It almost feels like acting as a mental air traffic controller.

Haigh: What do you find most challenging about your profession?

Lowrance: As a mediator, you are sometimes with the parties for 8-10 hours, absorbing and managing all of the roller-coaster emotions. This is to be expected, of course, because this is likely one of the most emotional experiences in their lives. The challenge is to keep your clarity and guide them out of the chaos. When you have to relay sometimes ungenerous offers from one side to another it can be tense. I've learned it is best to reframe the difficult information.

Haigh: What do you miss about being a lawyer?

Lowrance: Nothing. When I retired from the bench, I received several offers to practice law. Despite the fact that I do love strategizing cases, I was not tempted to practice again. I like a more holistic approach to solving problems; although, at times, I automatically think like a lawyer.

Haigh: What do you believe is the biggest difference between practicing law and presiding as a judge or mediator?

Lowrance: When you are an advocate for a single party, you know your job description. You present all thoughts and events to coordinate with your theory of the case. When you are a judge or mediator, it is the opposite. You take a little wisdom from each side, hoping that your wisdom will be in alignment with the law. As a lawyer, you can use all the emotions you want including righteous indignation; yet as a judge or

mediator, you need to be part poker player and part Sherlock Holmes.

Haigh: What do you do in your spare time? What are your hobbies?

Lowrance: I love writing books, sci-fi, poetry and I blog for the Huffington Post. Recently, I co-wrote the Cook County Focus on Children Film that is coming out May 2015. I also make time to practice yoga and dance, and to read as many books as possible that focus on the philosophy of relationships and personalities.

Haigh: How are you involved with the local community?

Lowrance: I hold a mentoring program for women who have been practicing family law for less than 10 years. My co-chair is Megan McAlister, who happens to be one of those women. I've also been involved with mediation training through Harvard Law School and continue to train through Harvard Advanced Negotiation Training. I created a protocol for military mental health professionals to minimize the trauma of the divorcing process. I also created a program called Good Karma Lawyering Skills, which teaches lawyers advanced communication, negotiation and mediation skills. This program has been taught locally and internationally to both bar associations and law firms.

Haigh: How did you have the chance to do so much with television?

Lowrance: The divorce experience can be baffling and devastating and is always

interesting to people for that reason. I was the mediator on "Chained to My Ex," a three-part documentary series on MSNBC in which I mediated in front of cameras for 8-10 hours at a time. When I went on book tour for The Good Karma Divorce, I was on the "Today Show," "Good Morning America," and a number of other television shows. What struck me was that no matter where I went, people were desperate to ask me questions and tell me about their experiences with the divorce process.

Haigh: Do you have any mentors? What are some of the most important lessons they taught you?

Lowrance: One of my best mentors was Judge Carole Bellows, who taught me to never let my ego get in the way of maintaining equanimity and fairness.

Haigh: Tell us a funny story from your days on the bench.

Lowrance: I once presided over a divorce case in which the wife somehow forgot to mention that she had recently won an \$8 million lottery. When the husband found out, he brought an action to vacate the judgment. The wife testified that her boyfriend won the lottery – not her. On cross-examination, the husband's lawyer pulled out a picture of the wife in the Chicago Tribune, in which she held a "Winner of the Lottery" sign.

Haigh: Are there any changes in the future that you're looking forward to?

Lowrance: Yes. I'm currently writing my next book, but I don't talk about these things until they are done. It changes the writing experience for me, as I become obligated to conform to my original idea.

Judge Lowrance currently serves as a mediator at JAMS.



CO-AUTHORS OF "THE NEW LOVE DEAL" GEMMA ALLEN, MICHELE LOWRANCE & TERRY SAVAGE



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