

Frank-Talking Mediator Aims for Transformation



By Anne Marie Ruff
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - Christine Masters, who once worked as a truck-stop waitress, owns an art gallery/bookstore on a British Columbia island, likes to take risks and is not afraid to talk about sex. As a neutral, Masters works exclusively in the area of employment law. Sex comes up a lot.

"It's just amazing to me what people do when they are going to work," she said.

Masters, 56, began moving from a litigator to a neutral in the mid-1990s when a defense attorney asked her to look into a complaint of female-on-female sexual harassment and a hostile work environment.

"I was intrigued by that," she said.

But Masters is not surprised at how people bring their personal lives into their work.

"I think that, after one's personal relationship, your work is the most important thing in your life," she said. "Even jobs that we may think of as 'not important' are very important to the people who work in them."

Masters started working at 13, at the concession stand in Big Corona State Beach in Corona Del Mar. After working various waitress jobs to finance her undergraduate studies and get through law school - she was the first in her family to finish college - she began her employment career at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as an investigator and senior trial attorney.

She joined Allred, Maroko, Goldberg & Ribakoff in 1979, where she gained private litigation experience and met Alan Ribakoff, who later became her husband and her partner at Masters & Ribakoff.

Her personal and professional lives intersected at the firm when she started dating Ribakoff in 1984. Ribakoff was older than Masters, and he was a name partner, while she was an associate - some of the hallmarks of a potential

sexual-harassment case. But she said the romance was all "very aboveboard."

"The whole firm was invited to our wedding," she said, "and I think it helps me understand what is appropriate in the workplace."

The two started their own firm in 1993 when a colleague offered them office space that overlooked the ocean.

"We kind of looked at each other and said, 'Hey! It's a weekend, and we're not doing anything. Let's start a law firm.'"

The firm went "gangbusters," she said, and within a year Masters found herself doing more employment litigation than she had ever intended to do. She began moving to mediation in 1995, and by 2004 she was a full-time neutral. Sort of.

"Now," she said, "I work in between my vacations. And I take a lot of vacations."

Master's mediation work is through Alternative Resolution Centers, and she estimates that 15 per cent of her work is arbitration through American Arbitration Association panels.

Masters mediates only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"I put my soul in it," she said, "so I need the next day to balance and debrief."

Cynthia E. Gitt, an employment defense attorney with the Brown Gitt Law Group in Pasadena, underscored the lengths Masters will go to in a mediation.

Gitt described a case in which a woman with bipolar disorder claimed disability discrimination for her termination from her executive secretary position. Once they got into the conference room, the woman ducked under the table because she was so upset.

"Christine went right down under the table as well to be able to talk to her," Gitt said.

In another of Gitt's disputes, crashing sounds came from down the hall where a plaintiff was in a separate room throwing Masters' potted plants against the wall.

"It takes a special kind of person to be able to diffuse that tension and not take it on herself," Gitt said. "She is one of the best mediators in L.A., if not the best."

Stephen J. Reiss seconded the opinion.

"Everything about her is excellent," Reiss said. "She knows her subject, how to convey her thoughts and how to move people."

"There's always a lot of ego in these cases," said Reiss, a Calabasas plaintiffs' attorney. "She's able to avoid that ego and get to the heart of the matter."

Masters described her approach to the energy that ego can generate.

"Rather than taking it full on in the chest," she said, "you can redirect it toward settlement. It's kind of tai chi."

She said mediation can be transformative for the parties, and practices like tai chi, feng shui, and zen meditation, which she has learned during travels to Asia, inform her approach. She meditates before each session to set the opportunity for that transformation.

Debra L. Bray, a public-sector employment defense lawyer, called Masters

"highly credible" as well as "very calm, very polite and not too excitable."

"So maybe [the meditation] is what helps her," said Bray of Liebert Cassidy Whitmore in Century City.

Masters does not keep statistics on her settlement rate but said it is very high. She describes herself as a very evaluative mediator, and the lawyers she has worked with say she is not afraid to express her opinion.

She also is not afraid to get the lawyers "out of the way" and let the parties talk to each other, "especially where there is a chance of a continuing relationship" through reinstatement or other settlement options.

That kind of direct discussion took place in a case Masters mediated when a woman had sued for sexual harassment. By the time her employer investigated and found there had been harassment, she had left her job. She agreed to return to her job and testify on behalf of her company against her immediate boss, who had been fired for the harassment and had turned around and sued the company for wrongful termination.

"If I can get people reinstated, I think I am doing a real service for people," Masters said.

But she thinks many workplace problems could be solved long before mediation or reinstatement becomes an issue.

"I think if more people talked about sex - appropriately - we'd probably have less sexual harassment in the workplace," Masters said.

Here are some of the lawyers who have used Masters' services: Leslie H. Helmer, Bryan Cave, Santa Monica; Laura W. Shelby, Seyfarth Shaw, Century City; Elisabeth B. Lilly, Northrop Grumman Corp., Century City; Veronica M. Gray, Nassaman Guthner Knox & Elliott, Irvine; Cynthia E. Gitt, Brown Gitt Law Group, Pasadena; Debra L Bray, Liebert Cassidy Whitmore, Century City; Josh M. Sable, Foley & Lardner, Century City; R. Corey Hayden, K & R Law Group, Los Angeles; Michael G. McGuinness, O'Melveny & Myers, Los Angeles; Andrew H. Friedman, Helmer & Friedman, Venice; Toni J. Jaramilla, Los Angeles; Michael Maroko, Allred Maroko & Goldberg, Los Angeles; Arash Hamampour, Hamampour & Associates, Beverly Hills; Stephen J. Reiss, Calabasas; Dan L. Stormer, Hadsell & Stormer, Pasadena; Laurie S. Gorsline, Ganz & Gorsline, Los Angeles; Lisa L. Maki, Los Angeles; Lauren J. Abrams, San Diego; Nancy Bornn, Bornn & Surls, Manhattan Beach.

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