

# Forthright and Forthcoming

**Ronald Sabraw's mediation practice draws upon a wide range of influences.**

By Phil Johnson  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

If Ronald M. Sabraw could go back in time, he would return to his days at the University of the Pacific. This is not to say the learned ex-judge did not take school seriously, but for a political science major coming of age in Stockton in the early '70s, there was a lot going down.

"I'd read all the materials this time," Sabraw, 65, said. "And actually pay attention."

Those are unsurprising words from a polymath who spends most of his worktime in mediations after 30 years as a litigator and Alameda County Superior Court judge. Since becoming a neutral in 2007, Sabraw has enjoyed his newfound free time, which he fills with agricultural endeavors, books and conversations with his wife and high school sweetheart, Cheri Block Sabraw.

Five years ago, Sabraw planted four types of varietal olive trees, 56 in all, on his hilly property in Fremont. His eyes glimmer while recalling the 1,500 feet of trenches he dug on his John Deere 3520 tractor with backhoe attachment.

After significant annual attacks by fruit flies undeterred by organic pesticides, he recently underwent the state's licensing and certification program for pesticide application. This fall will mark the first full harvest.

"Sometimes, I think 300 years from now someone will tend to that orchard and think of who dug the holes, and who dug the trenches," Sabraw said. "Or maybe it'll all be gone and they'll grow something else."

But while he contemplates his legacy, Sabraw's peers say it is already well-established.

"I wish every judge was like him," Don Dowling, a partner at Ross, Hackett, Dowling, Valencia & Walti, said. Dowling served on the team of attorneys who represented survivors of the Pacific Gas & Electric natural gas explosion that killed eight people during

2010 in San Mateo. Sabraw worked as a special master during contentious discovery.

"There were a lot of accomplished, strong-minded attorneys in the room," Dowling said. "I thought it was an impossible situation for him to steer the discussion. He never lost his cool, but everyone else did. I would have told some of those people to get out, but he earned everyone's respect without being heavy-handed."

Cheri Block Sabraw taught English at Mission San Jose High School before starting an after-school academy she still operates.

While many of his colleagues married partners within the legal field, the retired judge said his wife's outside view of his work adds value and makes for eclectic dinner conversation. Without her, he said, he would not have read Shakespeare, Kafka or Nietzsche.

The McGeorge School of Law graduate is constantly retooling his legal acumen. His clients say he is a quick learner and he is proud of the wide spectrum of legal matters he has heard — everything from product liability to landlord disputes.

Sabraw's father, M.O. Sabraw, also worked as an attorney before donning the robe and eventually became a justice on the 1st District Court of Appeal. He said his father's apparent satisfaction with a legal career inspired him to pursue one of his own.

"He was the principle motivating factor for me attending law school," Sabraw said, adding that his 20 years as a judge were the most satisfying of his career.

Ralph Lombardi, a litigation partner at Lombardi, Loper & Conant LLP, was introduced to Sabraw while trying a case before his father in the '70s.

"He's an absolute straight shooter who I hold in the highest regard," said Lombardi, who has used Sabraw's mediation services. "He's a classy fellow who conveys an aura of being interested in helping everyone. He is very good at defusing tense situations. He never raises his voice and remains low-key."

One of his wife's reading assignments stands out to Sabraw: "On the



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Genealogy of Morality" by Friedrich Nietzsche. The classic work's discussion on the inversion of values captured him, and influenced his work.

"So much is driven by money, but often what settles a case involves ego, honor, saving face," Sabraw said. He animates his speech with hand gestures when discussing how helpful it is to "unshackle yourself from your own biases to see what impacts the other side."

As a young attorney, Sabraw said he began to appreciate his clients' problems as his own. As such, it was particularly frustrating when he could not explain a result to a client due to a judge's lack of articulation.

On the bench and in his current role, he identified providing a clear explanation of his ruling as his central function.

Sabraw does not pull punches when discussing the status of the state's judicial system.

"We have a two-tier system with overburdened and underfunded courts," Sabraw said. "If you can't afford a mediator, you take a number in the court system and wait your turn. We have a governor and Legislature palpably hostile to the judiciary and dismantling the system that gives voice to the rule of law."

The judiciary needs to own up to its mistakes, too, Sabraw said, calling it an overly bureaucratized system falling short of its goal of delivering justice to the people.

To Joel Zeldin, a partner with Shartsis Friese LLP, it is Sabraw's

## Ronald M. Sabraw

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willingness to speak his mind that makes him stand out.

"I had a claim for \$3.1 million, and the other side would not go beyond \$75,000," Zeldin said. "[Sabraw] told the other side they would lose in court eight out of 10 times. After asking a few questions about my case, he told me I should walk. Few mediators would do that."

Zeldin is glad he listened to Sabraw; he would have come down in mediation, but in court he won \$5.5 million for his client.

*Here are some attorneys who have used Sabraw's alternative dispute resolution services:*

Stephen M. Hayes, Hayes Scott Bonino Ellingson & McLay LLP, Redwood City; Joel Zeldin, Shartsis Friese LLP, San Francisco; Robert H. Bunzel, Bartko Zankel Bunzel, San Francisco; Ralph Lombardi, Lombardi, Loper & Conant LLP, Oakland; Stan Kasperson, Kasperson & Bitner PLLC, Seattle; Michael A. Geibelson, Robins Kaplan LLP, Los Angeles; Walter J.R. Traver, Musick, Peeler & Garrett LLP, San Francisco; Robert D. Phillips, Jr., Reed Smith, San Francisco; John P. Christian, Weintraub Tobin, San Francisco; Marshall C. Wallace, Allen Matkins, San Francisco.