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JUDGE JUDITH NELSON "I LOVE HELPING PEOPLE."

It was while she was in college, studying sociology and psychology and seeing if they were a proper fit, that the idea of the law took hold for Judge Judith Nelson.

"I went to law school without really knowing what I wanted to do, [but] I became interested in how law develops. Laws should reflect what the community feels is right and what is wrong. That's why laws change over time, because people change their attitudes...that's what fascinated me about law—the social aspect of it."

Nelson is the only one in her family to go into law. While practicing as a lawyer, it became imperative to her to combine her love of law with her sense of fair play in a different fashion. She was appointed a Judge of Compensation Claims, a position she held for 15 years.

"As a judge, I saw my role as a teacher, as a judge. Not to just make decisions. I thought it important that the people in front of me understood why I was ruling as I did. I make people understand the reason behind my ruling, so they can change their behavior."

Even then, she found some limitations in her work. Judges are to rule, not negotiate a settlement. People would sometimes leave angry. And that, to Nelson, was unsettling. She preferred that grey area where people can be accommodated. She went into mediation.

"Now, as a mediator, I feel I'm having a more significant impact on people's lives...I love being able to explain to people and to open up people's eyes to the other side. I love helping people resolve their issues and move forward."

It's not just litigants who are being helped by her. Nelson is a co-founder of The Victory School, an organization that teaches children with autism and behavioral problems. The school opened in 2000 with four kids and four teachers. Now there are 25 children, including her own son, Jesse. The school is renowned for its successful techniques and progressive training.

"My plan is to keep working on The Victory School. I really think in many ways we have set the standard." ■