



# Profile: Andje Medina

## “You have to have faith and follow your heart” – and become fully invested in your clients

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

For Andje Medina, the human connection may be the most meaningful part of being a plaintiff’s trial lawyer. Her devotion to clients knows no bounds, and she believes that fundamental bond provides her with an edge among her peers.

The key, Medina said, is spending “a ton of time” with clients, as well as witnesses, so she is better able to empathize with them and become a better storyteller. It’s about being invested in their story and their lives, she said.

“It also puts me into the story, so when I get up during opening statements, and I’m talking about my client and my witnesses ... I feel like I’m talking about a friend,” she said. “Because I get so close to them and care about them, it makes three hours of sleep at night manageable, and I wake up with fire. ... I’m going to do whatever it takes to be prepared for the next day.”

“A lot of people disconnect from their cases, and I don’t really fault them,” Medina continued. “I think there’s two approaches: You can either be somebody with these really intense cases, and sometimes you just have to shut that off and go home, so that doesn’t pour over into your life at home. I respect people who can do that. I can’t do that. I carry my clients with me everywhere. As hard as that is, I feel like it gives me an edge because I’m so invested in them.”

Medina recently made such an investment not long after starting her own firm, Altair Law. It paid off to the tune of a \$3 million verdict in a wrongful death case in May. The trial, which lasted about three weeks, involved a woman whose estranged mother died after complications from smoke inhalation following an



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electrical fire in her apartment. The mother had displayed hoarding tendencies and had a full apartment at the time of the fire, Medina said, so naturally the defense jumped on that aspect and argued that the clutter in the unit likely contributed to the cause of the fire or to preventing the victim from a timely escape.

“The last offer before trial was \$150,000, and the jury returned a verdict of \$3 million, with no comparative fault on the decedent,” Medina said. “Pretty intense to open a new firm and then start a three-week jury trial within the first 30 days. Very deserving client who stood up and demanded justice for her mom. We refused to allow the defendant to undervalue the life of the decedent. Truth and justice prevailed.”

### An advocate at heart

Such passion and compassion for plaintiffs wrongfully harmed are not traits Medina just recently developed. Even while she worked as an insurance defense attorney early in her career, she found it difficult to conceal her empathy for the opposing party. The partner who hired her at the defense firm and eventually departed to start his own plaintiffs’ law practice told her she was destined for a plaintiffs’ law career.

“He used to tease me because I’d be absolutely moved by the plaintiff’s story,” she recalled. “Not that I wasn’t a strong

advocate for my client at the time... So, I got a call from him one day asking me, ‘Are you happy?’ I said yes. He said, ‘Well I think you could be happier doing something that’s more rewarding.’”

He gave Medina the contact information for a plaintiffs’ firm that was hiring, and soon thereafter, she interviewed with the Veen firm.

“I took a leap of faith, and a pay cut, and moved to the other side,” she said. “That was about eight years ago, and I have not been happier. I’ve never looked back. I joke that I was running from the billable hour, but I work way more than I did when I was on the defense side.”

With the Veen firm, Medina quickly worked her way up to trial team leader, taking on large entities in catastrophic personal injury and wrongful death cases. Plaintiffs’ law indeed was in her wheelhouse, and though the challenges proved to be greater than those posed in the insurance defense arena, she showed she was up to the task.

When asked about the biggest difference between the plaintiffs’ and defense sides, Medina spoke of the inimitable client connection that came naturally to her.

“From the analytical perspective, there’s not too much of a difference. It’s more challenging on the plaintiffs’ side because you have burden of proof, you have to create everything, and on the defense side it’s more reactionary,” she said. “Emotionally and personally, the plaintiffs’ side is a lot more challenging. It’s harder to leave at the end of the day and turn the case off. I’m always thinking, always strategizing, always worried about my client. A lot of the times they’re out of work, and I worry about them financially. Just more of a personal connection to the casework that just makes your mind race a little more.”



## Born communicator

Medina was born and raised in Bakersfield, California, where her only exposure to the law was through her high school government class. Her teacher got her interested in advocacy and debate, she said, and her affinity for speaking, analyzing and connecting with people made law a natural choice.

“When I went to college, I started as a communications major, but I was drawn to all the law and political science courses,” she said. “I liked to debate and challenge and the investigation of disputes and getting to the bottom of what happens. I don’t know that I set out on this path, really; I just kind of evolved into it throughout college.”

After graduating from UC Santa Barbara, Medina went to the Bay Area for law school at Golden Gate University. There, it was all litigation right out of the gate. She started doing clinics right away and taking all the trial law courses, she said.

When Medina got out of law school in 2007, the job market was down, she had a mound of student loan debt and she took the offer from the insurance defense firm because it paid better. She stayed with it for three years before her jump to the Veen firm, which lasted about eight years. Earlier this year, she and two others from Veen launched Altair Law.

“I absolutely loved the Veen firm and have nothing but the highest respect for everyone there, but I was just ready to do my own thing and chart my own course,” she said. “I felt confident enough and ready, and it was kind of now or never. I wanted a new professional challenge.”

The transition was made easier by an amicable split with the Veen firm, which agreed to let Medina and her new partners take their caseloads with them. The new practice also was solidified by a good balance among the partners, wherein financial concerns come secondary to doing what’s right in the name of the client and the law.

“There’s three of us, and we’re all very like-minded,” Medina said, describing what it was like to break away on her own. “We’re supportive of each other. We have different personalities, so it’s a really good balance. ... It’s nice to know I’m in a partnership that supports that mentality (of client first). We really are all about the fight, and we’re not going to let financial constraints be a factor in our cases. If the case needs to be tried, we’re going to put someone on it.”

## Reaping the rewards

Medina over the years has received several honors from local bar associations, chief among them being the Distinguished Public Service Award from the Bar Association of San Francisco’s Lawyer Referral & Information Services in 2012, and as a finalist for the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association Trial Lawyer of the Year Award in 2017. She is an active governing board member with Consumer Attorneys of California and the SFTLA, a part of the job she said is “massively important to anyone who is serious about making sure we’re putting in the time and resources to keep the courts open.”

When she’s not working, and trying not to think about her cases, Medina loves to travel. As busy as she gets, especially when in trial, she makes a point of

blocking out time each year for a trip. In May, she had just finished the big wrongful death trial and was looking forward to getting away in June.

“Travel is most important to me (away from work),” she said. “I take a big trip every year, put it on the calendar about 12 months in advance. I plan my cases and my trials around it and make sure I carve out time to travel with my husband every year. We’re headed to Greece and Amsterdam. ... In the fall, Hong Kong, Philippines and Bali. Work hard and travel hard.”

Medina’s advice for young and aspiring lawyers is to not let their financial situation and potential earning power dictate their career, particularly if the work is not inspiring.

“Follow your heart, not the money,” she said. “The hard thing about plaintiffs’ work is it’s really low paying in the beginning. Plaintiffs’ firms just don’t have the resources. So, if you’re coming right out of law school, you’re not going to get the six-figure job that you would get on the defense side.

“It just breaks my heart because a lot of people get sucked into that path just because of the financial necessities,” she continued. “I feel partly that’s what happened to me. And once you get down that path, it’s hard to get off it because you’re used to that income. But there’s so much more personal reward on this side, and the money will come eventually. You have to have faith and follow your heart.”

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