

Q and A with Derrick Wilson

IN THE SPOTLIGHT



Derrick Wilson is an attorney and mediator from New Albany, Indiana, directly across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. A Kentucky native discusses his background and what brought him to mediation.

IAM: Where did you grow up, Derrick?

DW: I grew up on a twenty-acre farm in Bullitt County, Kentucky.

IAM: What was that experience like?

DW: It was much like Old McDonald's farm with many animals! My dad built the farmhouse I grew up in directly next to the original farmhouse that had been on the property for over a hundred years.

IAM: What was high school like for you?

DW: I graduated with 400 kids in high school. You have to understand that at that time, Bullitt County was so rural that there were only 2 high schools. I was on the debate and speech team, where I learned how to overcome my fear of public speaking. I started to hang out with theater types which helped me experience more outgoing personalities as I was more of an introvert. My debate and speech teacher was my first mentor. She showed tough love and was a taskmaster, but she always praised my accomplishments.

IAM: After high school, where did you go to college?

DW: I went to Murray State for one year, majoring in Engineering. Calculus kind of did me in, and after a year, I knew engineering wasn't for me, so I transferred to the University of Louisville to be closer to my then-girlfriend, who is now my wife. At Louisville, I wasn't sure what I wanted to major in, but after taking a political science class, my professor said, "You seem like you have a lot of interest in polo-sci; I think this would be a good fit for you!", and the rest was history. I was the first person in my family ever to graduate college!

IAM: What did you do after undergrad?

DW: I was accepted into law school at the University of Cincinnati, where I attended for one year before transferring to law school at the University of Louisville.

After graduation, the market was tough for lawyers, and I couldn't find a job. Eventually, I had two offers, one from a small law firm in New Albany called Mattox and Mattox and a larger firm in Indianapolis. I had the choice to be a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond, so I chose to be a big fish.

IAM: What was it like being a big fish at a small firm?

DW: I was known as a "door lawyer" if they walked in my door, no matter the reason, I was their lawyer. I did all sorts of cases. Another one of my mentors, the older Mattox, told me I needed to work on my fighting skills and be more aggressive as I tended to always want to settle or find a resolution. That was more my nature. Ironically, I never left the firm that I first started with, and now the firm is known as Mattox and Wilson.

IAM: Is that the reason you became interested in mediation?

DW: That was part of the reason, but I was always more interested in a process that empowered the parties to seek their own resolutions. I am a planner by nature, so it was a natural fit for me with mediation to help plan out topics and areas of discussion to let parties try and resolve things on their own. I am also a bit of a "devil's advocate," so to speak, with my clients, so being able to reality test options that parties came up with was a natural fit for me.

IAM: How much of your practice is mediation versus litigation?

DW: Most of my practice is still litigation, but I do some GAL work and mediation. On top of that, my training as a mediator has helped me be a better attorney for my clients going through mediation, as I have a different perspective now. I know most of the attorneys and mediators here, and most of them know me, so I feel we all have a good professional working relationship, depending on our role.

IAM: What would you say to a newer mediator is the most important thing in mediation?

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DW: Preparation and empathy are probably the two most important things in mediation. Preparation shows you are a competent mediator and helps build rapport with the attorneys and clients you work with. I also think leading with empathy never hurts anyone, which sometimes would cause my mentors to bristle, but I always recognized these are humans going through a difficult time.

IAM: You mentioned mentors a lot. How were your mentors important to you?

DW: They would often encourage me to think outside the box and pushed me in ways I needed to be pushed.

IAM: What are some challenges you have faced when mediating?

DW: The biggest challenge I have faced in mediation has been when lawyers get in the way. Sometimes lawyers want to guard their potential litigation strategy and don't want their clients to be forthright or completely willing to commit to the mediation process. There have been cringy moments when lawyers have challenged me and my role in mediation. Sadly, lawyers can sometimes be the problem when it comes to mediation. They have their own interests, and it is important to figure out what those may be in mediation.

IAM: Where do you see mediation 50 years from now?

DW: The sci-fi nerd in me thinks mediation may be all virtual with VR glasses over a Zoom-like platform fifty years from now. The mediator will be able to host a virtual mediation in a virtual room that can bring clients from anywhere together in a virtual setting. I think mediation will be used almost as a default to resolve conflict before seeking the court's intervention.

IAM: Speaking of Sci-Fi, Star Trek, or Star Wars?

DW: Star Trek, for sure, but I also like Star Wars.

IAM: Outside of Mediation, what do you enjoy?

DW: I love wine, and my wife and I have become wine snobs or wine "connoisseurs" over the years. We love going to local festivals, and I volunteer with our Main Street organization,

which promotes music and festivals. I also enjoy kayaking and have recently gotten into indoor rock climbing.

IAM: As a member of IAM, what do you enjoy the most about being a member?

DW: I love the new reflective group calls. It is great to get people's perspectives about some of my difficult cases and to hear about other people's cases and experiences. The more we share as mediators, the better practitioners we become!

