



# Profile: Kristine Meredith

*She not only loves researching the facts, but knows how to make them understandable to a jury*

By **STEPHEN ELLISON**

A funny thing happened to Kristine Meredith on her way to becoming a schoolteacher. She earned a law degree and used her dream of being a teacher to develop a thriving career as a plaintiff's trial attorney.

A self-proclaimed lover of research, writing and education, Meredith never quite made it to the head of the classroom per se, but she still views herself as an educator – with the courtroom as her venue. “What I’ve found is that as a trial attorney, I am kind of a teacher,” said the partner at Danko Meredith in Redwood Shores. “I present facts and sometimes extremely complicated information to judges and juries, and I’m trying to educate them and persuade them at the same time. ... For me, it worked out great.”

As with any career or life journey, however, there were a few hurdles to overcome. Though she had envisioned working in some sort of public interest capacity, Meredith's first foray into law was on the defense side, representing manufacturers of medical devices and defending hospitals and doctors in medical malpractice cases.

Several years into her defense career, while she was nearly nine months pregnant with her third child, Meredith decided to rethink her future, inspired by a casual comment from opposing counsel, prominent plaintiff's attorney Tom Brandi.

“It was a big case for him, a birth injury, and I think it was after mediation – he looked me in the eye and said, ‘What are you doing? I think you’re a plaintiff’s attorney at heart. Have you considered doing plaintiff’s work?’ And I *actually* hadn’t,” she said. “At the time, I had two



Meredith

other school-children, and I had to juggle working as an associate part-time.

“But the timing was actually pretty fortunate because then, while I was on maternity leave, I had a few months to think

about what I wanted to do when I got back. So when I returned to my job, it still kind of played in my mind. I reached out to a few other attorneys who had done defense and switched to plaintiff's work and asked them about how that went. And one of them offered me a job.”

Since that fateful day, Meredith has grown from part-time researcher-writer to senior associate to full-fledged partner with Mike Danko. Today, she is one of the most skillful plaintiff's trial lawyers in Northern California, specializing in products liability, business litigation and aviation, as well as general personal injury cases.

## The value of a network

She's also deeply involved with professional organizations, serving on the board for American Association for Justice, on the American Bar Association's product liability committee, and as the chair of the women's caucus for Consumer Attorneys of California, among other roles. It's a rewarding part of her profession, she said, because she not only gets to spend time with people she likes and learn from them, but she also enjoys the value of the network she's developed.

“I think a lot of attorneys see it as a means for referring cases to you, and that does happen,” Meredith explained. “But it's also a network that helps in case management, whether it's someone who's more knowledgeable in an area of law or someone who knows a judge in a certain area of the country. I've heard other attorneys refer to these organizations as the corporate structure that plaintiff's attorneys don't have, and it's true. These organizations provide us with that type of structure and camaraderie.

“Some people are perfectly satisfied relying on themselves,” she added. “I find it incredibly helpful to reach out to others for input.”

## Research and writing led to law school

Meredith grew up in San Ramon in a household where education was always a priority. Her father was the first in his family to graduate from college, and he encouraged young Kristine to continue with school even after she graduated from UC Davis with honors – a sideways hint perhaps that she should pursue law. “I loved college. I loved studying, research and writing, so he always said if you don't like it, you can go be a teacher,” Meredith recalled. “But he said you really should give it a try.”

With that, Meredith got a scholarship to Brigham Young University's J. Reuben Clark Law School, where she was honored with the Distinguished Student Service Award and spent a semester at Howard University Law School in Washington, D.C., as a member of the faculty-student diversity exchange.

When she graduated from law school, there were loans to pay off, Meredith said, so she set out in search of her first job, landing at Craddick, Candland & Conti, a



defense firm based in San Ramon, where she spent the first four years of her career. The defense work not only paid the bills but also gave her extensive trial experience – though the approach was a far cry from how she operates today.

She said that, as a plaintiff’s lawyer, she draws on personal knowledge that defense attorneys have many more constraints such as accountability for billable hours and more of a reactive than proactive method. “Also they’re expected more to handle things in a formulaic manner; they receive a motion that they probably have a template for in response,” she explained. “With a plaintiff’s practice, it’s much more creative and strategic and innovative, and I really enjoy that. You’re kind of the captain of the ship, and you set the course of the lawsuit, and that’s very exciting and more enjoyable for me than on the defense side, where you’re just kind of reacting, and you have to run everything by certain people before you can decide the course you want to take.”

That initial invitation to cross over to the plaintiff’s side from the firm then known as O’Reilly & Danko put Meredith in a position to steer her own career. In the beginning, she filled a need doing research and writing and maintained a part-time status because she was determined to stay flexible for her family, she said. She was working quite a bit with Danko, who had a busy trial practice, and as other associates kept coming and going, Meredith remained. Before she knew it, she was trying cases with him.

“He would put me exclusively on a case he knew would go to trial and he wanted me to completely focus on,” she said. “I started on the early stages of the case, working 15-20 hours a week. Then as the case proceeded, my time invested would increase. When we would go try the case in, say Hawaii, I would be completely engrossed in the case. After the trial, I would take a month off.”

### Just the facts, please

Because she handles a variety of cases, Meredith’s approach to each one

varies, she said. One of the constants, however, is focusing on the wrongdoing, whether it’s a product defect, a safety violation or a public company fudging on performance tests. She and her colleagues then gather facts that support the wrongdoing, including any applicable industry rules or regulations involved, such as those outlined in the defendant’s own product manuals, as well as federal guidelines set by the agencies like the FDA, SEC or OSHA.

Such facts are the guideposts for developing the case, and the next steps consist of getting witnesses or corporate employees to acknowledge that those standards apply to their industry or their workplace and then highlighting the violations. Those key personalities, Meredith said, whether internal or in the surrounding community, can help tell the story about the wrongdoing.

All the preparation in the world means little, however, if a trial lawyer is unable to connect with the jury, Meredith professed. “It’s definitely critical,” she said. “I think most trial attorneys would agree being authentic, being comfortable with (the jurors) and letting them know you’re comfortable with the facts of your case are all very important. So, the way you communicate with them is based upon who you are and how you’ll handle the facts.”

“And we always look at the potential bad facts of the case,” she added, “and be sure we know the best way to communicate those rather than be afraid of them.”

### Unfavorable facts in Hawaii

One of Meredith’s first trials as a plaintiff’s attorney, in fact, contained such unfavorable facts (*Dunn v. State of Hawaii*). It involved a family friend who suffered a traumatic brain injury in a bicycle crash in Hawaii. He had been riding at night, and he didn’t have a very good light on his bike; when he crashed into a row of white, pylon hazard markers on the shoulder of the road, he landed on his head. The hitch was one of the markers was missing, and that was the spot where he hit.

Meredith sued the state of Hawaii based on the design of the road and the poor maintenance; sued the helmet manufacturer; and sued the guideposts manufacturer. The latter two parties settled out of court, but the claim against the state proceeded.

“One of the main reasons I was involved is I’m half Hawaiian,” Meredith said. “They reached out to me because they knew I would have connections as well as knowing the community. It was hard for them to find an attorney because of the bad facts. It was a hard case, but we ended up getting a verdict in our favor (\$2.2 million); it was a good outcome, and the family was pleased.

Because it involved a close family friend, Meredith at times found it challenging: “Dealing with a friend and his wife and knowing how bad the outcomes are for the brain injured; there were times when it was so overwhelming to try to balance the emotions and the professional challenges of litigation. Being able to handle that, I think, increased my compassion for our clients overall and emphasized for me what a difference we make in the lives of our clients.”

Meredith also was a member of the trial team representing 59 victims of the PG&E natural gas explosion in San Bruno.

### Referrals from other firms

Danko Meredith takes many cases via referral from other firms or lawyers, and Meredith finds that aspect interesting and exciting. Some of the cases have toiled in the legal process for up to 10 years, and if Meredith believes she and her colleagues can add value to the case, they’ll jump on board. This process provides variety and boosts the firm’s reputation as a go-to plaintiff’s team. Plus it increases her chances for learning and teaching.

She recently handled a business practice case against Intel in which she took a “deep dive” into the area of processors – their speed and power and how they perform on tests, how they’re evaluated by the industry and how that



affects the market. She described working with other attorneys who had been on the case for years. They help get her up to speed, and she helps get a more favorable award.

“On one of the cases, we tripled the value (of the award),” Meredith said. “With our 10 months of work, they got a substantially higher number from the defendant than what they had before we were involved. They were thrilled, and we were happy to help them.

How did they triple the value of the case? “It’s hard to describe – a lot of it has to do with the perspective of the defense, to be able to make them feel the risk of proceeding with the case,” she added. “The facts are the same; it’s just us coming in and knowing how to use those facts; the big companies or banks [need to] feel the heat of trial before they’re

willing to pay what they should – or closer to what the case is worth.”

### **Beyond the office**

While most of Meredith’s leisure time is spent with her family and traveling for professional organizations, she also likes to keep herself fit by running and cycling.

Indeed, a balanced life has always been a priority for her. When she was first starting out, however, she lacked the confidence to ask about such things as professional development and making time for her family. When she finally did work up the courage to ask – about five to seven years into her career – she almost always got a positive response.

“The advice I often give is I didn’t realize my value to my firm until I started asking, and once I did, I understood I’m really in control of my career,” Meredith

said. “If I wanted to make things happen, all I really needed to do was ask, and most of the time, I got what I wanted. But if I didn’t, at least the people I was working with knew what I wanted, and they would help me make it happen.

“Now, as a senior attorney and partner, I want to know what the people I’m working with want,” she continued. “And when they don’t ask, I start to worry; I start to think maybe they don’t care about their future. So I encourage younger attorneys to just ask – and do it much earlier in their careers.”

*Stephen Ellison is a freelance writer based in San Jose. He has written profiles for Plaintiff for the past eight years. Contact him at [ssjellison@aol.com](mailto:ssjellison@aol.com).*

