

An Idea – One Year Later

By [Charles M. McDaniel, Jr.](#)

Since November 4, 1988, my professional life has been rooted in litigation, representing parties in personal injury and insurance coverage disputes. For decades, I embraced the courtroom—advocating, strategizing, persuading. But as the world emerged from the isolation of the pandemic and courts reopened, I found that my passion for the adversarial nature of litigation had begun to wane. I wasn't finished working—but I no longer wanted to fight. What I did want was to help. Not only to resolve conflict, but to help others build something meaningful.

I had already begun mediating—gradually and cautiously—while still fully managing a litigation practice. That dual life continued for several years until I made the difficult but necessary decision to leave the firm and devote myself fully to mediation. But leaving litigation didn't mean I suddenly had a thriving mediation practice. Despite decades of legal experience, industry relationships, and professional recognition, I was starting over. The question became: *How do I build something new?*

The transition from litigation to mediation represents more than just a career change—it requires a fundamental shift in mindset, approach, and professional identity. Additionally, the mediation community, while supportive, can feel isolating at the outset of a solo practice. As I wrestled with that challenge, and

searching for direction, I attended the 2024 Practice Building Workshop offered through the ABA Dispute Resolution Section.

As I sat in the audience listening to keynote speaker Susan Guthrie passionately discuss essential components of launching a mediation business—including creating a business plan and leveraging AI in its development—I found myself furiously taking notes. My notebook quickly filled with ideas, action steps, and questions. That evening, as I tried to make sense of it all and envision how to build not just a mediation practice but a broader dispute resolution business, an idea emerged.

The next afternoon, I shared that idea with Susan. “Would you consider creating a program—not just a workshop or seminar—but a yearlong initiative in which a small group of aspiring mediators could work closely with you, using the workshop principles to develop their practices and then present the results at next year’s ABA Dispute Resolution Section Conference?”

Susan not only embraced the idea—she refined it and brought it to life.

I had the privilege of being one of six diverse professionals, each with different backgrounds and goals, that Susan assembled for our cohort in the inaugural Mediation Practice-Building Incubator Program. Over the course of a year, we explored every facet of developing a sustainable and meaningful practice: branding, business planning and strategy, networking, pricing, purpose, and

personal growth. We held each other accountable, shared resources, and celebrated breakthroughs. Through that collaborative journey, the early sense of isolation gave way to community, connection, and clarity.

The lessons from this experience, however, extend far beyond business development tactics. Two truths have emerged with particular clarity: First, for anyone considering a similar transition into mediation—or seeking to grow their practice—know this: you are not alone. There are resources, mentors, and colleagues ready to support you. Reach out. Invest in yourself and your development.

And second—just as importantly—understand that building a mediation practice, even after a successful legal career, means beginning again. It is humbling. But it is also energizing. If you're willing to embrace the learning curve, stay open, and commit to the process, the reward is not just a new practice—but a renewed sense of purpose.

This paper is not simply about an idea. It's about what happens when an idea becomes a community—and that community becomes a catalyst for personal and professional growth. One year later, I am proud to say: the idea worked. And I believe it will again.