

At CDRC, It All Begins with Mediators
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By Judy Saul

At the Community Dispute Resolution Center, talk works. How? With the help of our mediators! CDRC mediators are people from our community who are professionally trained to aid those of us who face difficult situations. Contentious family decisions, debates among neighbors, disagreements between landlords and renters - there is no end to the kinds of challenging predicaments where a mediator's assistance helps people caught in conflict figure out what to do.

Mediators begin their training by participating in a week-long intensive training course. There, they learn a set of skills that will eventually serve the parties involved in future mediations to get clearer about their situation and its goals, as well as begin to help them consider the perspective of others. The training builds new understanding about the very nature of conflict and its effects. It is also experiential, providing many opportunities for trainees to practice what they're learning through role playing. An apprenticeship phase follows the initial training, with mediators first observing and then mediating at the side of veteran mediators during actual cases.

All this takes a lot of time and commitment. Is it worth it? Our mediators think so, and so do the parties we help who might otherwise end up in court or engaged in disagreements that drag on at great emotional and sometimes financial cost. According to some of our current volunteers, through learning to mediate, they not only learn valuable communication skills, but they also learn a lot about themselves. Melody Johnson, a Tompkins County mediator, noted: "I became a lot more aware of how I, personally, communicate." Some mediators over the years have noted that training forces them to face their own discomfort with anger, accept it, and move beyond it.

Other mediators find the experience useful in unexpected ways. Adrienne Russell, a Schuyler County mediator, found that "the mentoring I received as a volunteer allowed me to do things that I didn't think I could, specifically to complete my degree." Mike Wald appreciates the lessons he's learned about others: "Mediating is always interesting and ... rewarding. But beyond that, it's broadened my understanding of people in general ... and their approaches to dealing with problems."

As often as people say there are personal benefits to becoming a mediator, most are attracted because of the opportunity to assist others in conflict. Amalia Weinburg said that mediation "allows people to talk to each other - that's fundamental. [Some people] wouldn't have that possibility without mediation." She has also said that "mediation enables [people] to hear the other side, often for the first time." A mediator for more than two decades described the experience as bringing "a kind of compassion to the situation. My task has virtually nothing to do with problem solving. It has to do with creating a space that lets people find their feelings and use what they [already] know." Russell, who has worked with many families as a mediator, commented that "one of the unique values of mediation is that it allows families to learn new ways to communicate within the family unit. Often older generations are patterned to communicate in one way. Through mediation, they see that there are different ways to communicate."

Our mediators share CDRC's mission of fostering constructive responses to conflict. Weinburg made the connection between this very personal, grass-roots work and her larger goals: "This is one thing I can do for peace on the personal, community and world level." Brian Williams

appreciates volunteering because "by mediating I keep the fabric of our community from becoming too frayed."

If you or someone you know is interested in learning more about how to become a mediator, CDRC welcomes your questions and participation. We train volunteers on an as-needed basis, and, currently, mediators are especially needed in Schuyler and Chemung counties, though inquiries about the next Tompkins training are invited, too. To learn more, contact CDRC at 273-9347 or go to www.cdrc.org and become a part of making talk work in your community!

Editor's note: Community Dispute Resolution Center's monthly column will appear on the last Friday of each month in 2008. To suggest a column topic, contact Judy Saul (contact information below) or Andrew Tutino, The Journal's opinion page editor, at atutino@ithacajournal.com or 274-9213.

Judy Saul is a co-founder and executive director of the Community Dispute Resolution Center. For information on the agency or events, visit www.cdrc.org, e-mail cdrc@cdrc.org or call 273-9347.