

The Conflict Resolution Report

Newsletter of the Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County

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March 2009

Interview with Donnie Meurer Mediation Manager

Liz Phillips



Q. Donnie, you came into CRCMC like a whirlwind. What, of all that you've done during your short tenure here, are you most proud of?

A. It has to be the new intake system. The old system was hard to work with: no checks and balances; single-page intake forms with notations written everywhere and other notes (that sometimes got lost) stapled to them. There was no processing protocol. It was hard for volunteers to come in and get right to work. You had to go through piles to find out what needed doing. Having worked in a more developed case management system, it was easier for me to make adjustments to CRCMC's system to make it more functional. The process has improved in three main ways: there is a clear idea of the tasks to be done every day; a more efficient casework flow; and, a more organized filing system. I'm proud of this system because volunteers and intake staff now feel a sense of accomplishment in their work. This also makes our communication with volunteers go smoother.
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WHAT'S NEW at CRCMC:

Wolfgang Mergner

The Office: CRCMC operates out of 2 Wheaton offices: the Administrative Office on Reddie Drive and the Service and Outreach Office at MontgomeryWorks in Westfield Shopping Center.

Mediation Requests for mediation continue to increase at CRCMC and among those, specialized mediations such as parenting plans are most in demand. Day of Trial mediation in the District Courts remains an important service of CRCMC.

Training in Conflict Management. CRCMC recently adopted a three-module Conflict Management Training program for unemployed workers seeking employment assistance through the county's MontgomeryWorks Program. The 3 modules are: Introduction to Conflict Management, Communication Skills, and Creative-Problem-Solving. Typically, 12 to 15 individuals attend each of the training session held twice a month. Individuals completing all three training modules receive a certificate.

Facilitation: CRCMC recently conducted two major facilitations: for the Wheaton Urban Development Action Group (WUDAG); and, for re-location of the Wheaton Public Library. These facilitations supported strategic planning processes and assisted in the development of plans for improved organizational communication. Follow-up evaluations revealed a high level of satisfaction with facilitated outcomes.

Latino Outreach The Latino Outreach program continues to expand as a result of CRCMC's outreach to organizations serving Hispanic residents of Montgomery County and of our reconnecting with past partners, such as CASA de Maryland. In April CRCMC will participate in the county's 3rd Annual Latino Outreach Event. Through workshops at that event, CRCMC will explain mediation and provide introductory training to a wider audience.

Pre-Release Mediation Following two months of planning with the Montgomery County Pre-release and Re-entry Detention Center (PRC) and after a five hour Re-entry Mediation training for 20 CRCMC mediators, CRCMC initiated a new mediation program for PRC residents, their families and friends. Twice monthly, CRCMC volunteers visit the PRC to provide information on Re-entry Mediation. They answer questions about mediation and how it can help individuals and families manage the transition from prison to home. In the future, CRCMC will also present these information sessions to the facility's Family Group Meetings.

New Initiative in Schools: CRCMC's youth program continues to generate new practice options within the Montgomery County Public School System. The newest has been the introduction of "Dialogue Circles" which allow at-risk students to address conflicts before they erupt into violence or punitive action by school officials. By participating in Dialogue Circles students can engage in resolving their own conflicts while at the same time promoting habits of respect, responsibility and accountability. The Circle format is four one-hour sessions with groups of six to eight students. Where Dialogue Circles have been implemented, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. As of January 2009, nineteen Dialogue Circles had been conducted at six different public schools. This program has enhanced CRCMC's exposure to and interaction with school administrators and, as a result, referrals to Community Conferencing (a restorative justice forum for youthful offenders) from the school system increased a remarkable 95 % in 2008.

Senior Mediation: CRCMC's Senior Mediation Program has entered its second development phase. During phase one, 17 mediators were trained in Senior Mediation. Phase two has two components: outreach to the Montgomery County Agency on Aging and other potential partners; and, grant applications for small pilot grants to test our approach on a limited population. (We have received a grant of this type from the Takoma Foundation.) The two components of phase three are: refresher and Senior intake training, planned for June 2009, and grant applications to initiate a full-fledged Senior Mediation Program in Montgomery County. In phase four, outreach to seniors in Montgomery County will begin utilizing methods tested during prior development phases.

Training in Dispute Resolution Skills

Wolfgang Mergner

An important part of CRCMC's mission is teaching people how to handle conflict. During conflict management training, experienced coaches help people understand some of the mechanisms and emotions that drive conflict by allowing them to test behaviors which escalate or diminish it. Exercises include role-playing various approaches to resolution and discussing outcomes. Skill-building drills enhance conflict awareness, strengthen problem-solving abilities and develop listening and other communication skills. Through training, people *can* learn techniques to manage conflict.

CRCMC provides training in Dispute Resolution to community organizations, government agencies, and faith-based and non-profit organizations. Our trainers conduct interactive workshops that range from a half day to several days duration. Shorter trainings focus on a few specific skills, longer trainings are more comprehensive. In the Montgomery County Public School System, CRCMC trains school officials as well as students.

Conflict management requires the cooperation of all participants in the conflict. Each person is encouraged to recognize and articulate his/her own needs and emotions and to listen to and respect the expressed needs and emotions of others.

Practicing conflict management does not mean avoiding problems. To the contrary, it means having the skill to address issues directly and the tools to help generate long-term solutions.

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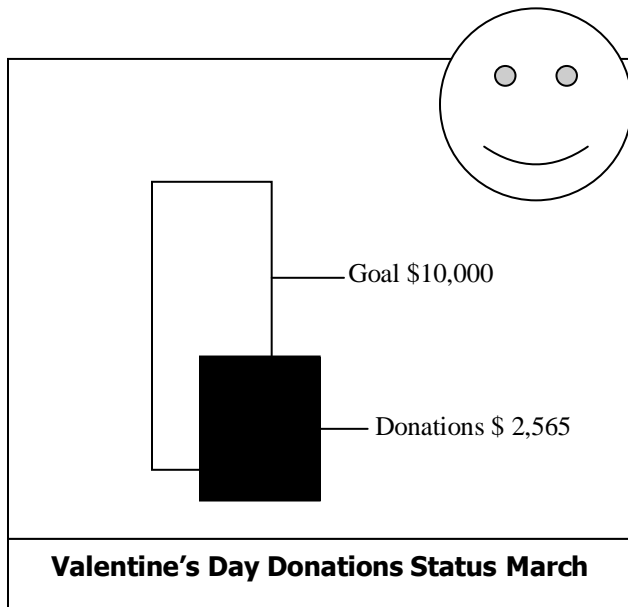
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The CRCMC Questionnaire

Judi Becker

While alternative dispute resolution often revolves around very serious issues, at times it helps to take a step back, for practitioners to view resolving disputes through another lens.

With that in mind, and with apologies to Marcel Proust and *Vanity Fair* magazine, we present The CRCMC Questionnaire. We ask that you thoughtfully consider all or some of the following questions. Please send your responses to: CRCMCnewsletter@verizon.net.

The CRCMC Questionnaire March 2009

1. What is your idea of the perfect problem that can be solved via mediation or facilitation?
2. What fictional character could have benefited from using mediation or facilitation? How would that have changed them? How would it have changed those around them?
3. If there was one thing you could change about any of the alternative dispute resolution processes, what would that be?
4. What is the trait you value most in a co-mediator or co-facilitator?
5. What comic book style super power would come in handy during community-wide facilitation sessions?
6. What historical figure could have benefited from having taken a basic mediation skills course? Would possession of such knowledge have changed history?
7. What do you consider your greatest achievement in an alternative dispute resolution matter?

(interview with Donnie Meurer continued from page 1)

Q. You came here from Community Mediation, the Baltimore City Mediation Center. What are some differences in program emphasis between the two Centers?

A. Community Mediation has 3 full-time intake employees working 40 hours per week, and a total of around 10 paid full-time staff. Half of their casework is State's Attorney cases—criminal cases—which require full intake procedures. On the other hand, half of CRCMC's casework is Day of Trial cases, which require no intake. CRCMC has a smaller paid staff but has many volunteers that are active in case management and other organizational functions. Otherwise, the range of community cases is the same in both organizations. Finally, many CRCMC mediators have mediation experience outside of CRCMC and there are many mediation training opportunities in Montgomery County; whereas, all Baltimore City mediators are trained in-house by Community Mediation staff.

Q. What do you enjoy most about your job?

A. I enjoy intake conversations--seeing a case through to the end and seeing how people respond when they feel heard. Intake also helps me develop my reflective listening skills. I also like to mediate and I'm getting more opportunities to do that. You may have noticed that I like to be on stage, so I also enjoy training. Because of our partnership with MontgomeryWorks and other initiatives, I get more training opportunities.

Q. Suppose you were accepted at Harvard Law for September 2009, what would you want to accomplish at CRCMC before leaving for school?

A. I don't want to go to school right now. When I graduated from Boston College, I didn't think of grad school. I was looking to go into service-oriented work. I was a Biology major but minored in Faith, Peace and Justice. Through the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, I was placed at Community Mediation in Baltimore City right out of school. I'm not thinking about law or any other kind of school right now. But you're asking what I'd want to get done if I were leaving CRCMC in September.

First, I'd like to see consistency in mediator standards. I want to continue setting up a system for volunteer communication. Both of those steps would keep mediator practice standards high.

Second, I'd like a more concrete idea of CRCMC's mediation package. I'm not saying we need to narrow our practice options just that we should be able to define our practice parameters--be they broad or narrow. This would help us know how to prepare clients for mediation during intake. It is also a quality assurance measure. CRCMC's strength is in its diversity but we need to know our standards for mediator feedback and for skill development needs. New volunteers have seen a lot of practice variation.

I appreciate everyone who came out to CRCMC's recent series of volunteer meetings. We're grateful for your feedback on how to improve the ways we work with volunteers. I think CRCMC has extraordinary potential in Montgomery County. I'm ready to put in the work to get that process started but volunteers are really the heart and soul of CRCMC so I look forward to working with you all to ensure this potential is realized.

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