

## Mediation Offers Potential for a Peaceful Future: Reflection of a Dispute Resolution Center Intern

My remote internship at The Dispute Resolution Center of Montgomery County, Inc. (DRC-MC) began on June 1, 2021, and I have learned so much about conflict and about how it can be managed these last two months. During my internship I have completed numerous tasks, including completing the DRC-MC's 40-hour General Mediation training; observing mediations and helping out with technology; doing mediations myself as a co-mediator; conducting research on restorative justice; as well as helping to facilitate Peer Mediation Training for high school students. In this article I will provide some background about Community Mediation and then I will discuss what observing and conducting mediations has been like for me as an intern at DRC-MC and why I encourage everyone, especially young people, to try it out.

Community mediation became an official part of the US justice system in 1976 with the "Pound Conference on Popular Dissatisfaction with the Administration of Justice", more commonly known as the Pound Conference (Cutrona, 2014). This conference was established for the legal community to discuss their concerns about the increasing delays and rising costs the court system was experiencing due to its design. Issues discussed included the inaccessibility of justice for those who cannot afford to go through the existing litigation process, the adversarial nature of litigation that leads to the unnecessary prolongment of cases and the overcrowding of courts. Because of the Pound Conference, a working group was established to address these issues and the courts were given the ability to re-direct small claims and criminal cases to mediation. Mediation service was offered by community-based, often non-profit organizations, typically called Dispute Resolution Centers, or DRCs for short. Ever since US courts began redirecting cases to Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), including mediation, the backlogs in referring courts significantly decreased (Cutrona, 2014). The DRC-MC where I am interning is one of the non-profit organizations that accepts cases from the local courts. They also accept mediation requests from the community, helping to resolve conflicts before they escalate or require litigation. More about what the DRC-MC does can be found at [www.resolution-center.org](http://www.resolution-center.org)

My interest in conflict resolution began at a young age: from the day that I learned about the concept of wars and that they are still happening today, my interest in conflict resolution has only been growing. As a young child, I remember despising the fact that other children my age were living in conflict-infested areas. The existence of mass violence, and especially the logic by which wars are considered reasonable, did not make sense to me. This is because I knew then that we can be better as humans and as a global community. I had experienced conflict resolution in my own life: when I would fight with my best friend in primary school, by the end of the day

we would make up and be on good terms again because we would talk things through. So, in my young mind I thought, why couldn't governments also do that? Why couldn't this be done on a bigger scale? As I grew older, and as my thought process developed, I began to think about wars and conflict on a more abstract, theoretical level, leading to my academic interest in conflict resolution. Right now, I am double majoring in political science and international studies, and minoring in history at Bryn Mawr College; I am researching the answers to these questions in my undergraduate career. This interest is what led me to apply to the mediation internship I am currently undertaking. It has been a dream internship for me because this is a practical application of conflict resolution, which is what I study in an academic setting.

After completing my 40-hour training, I began mediating with DRC-MC. In this specific organization, two mediators are usually assigned for each mediation, so I had the opportunity to mediate with experienced professionals. I have really enjoyed the process of mediation and learning techniques designed to help others resolve conflict. I feel like a sponge, soaking up all the information I can get from this new environment. Mediating can be intimidating at first when you are young due to all the complex vocabulary that your fellow mediators and the lawyers are using. However, this challenge is eventually overcome after a few mediations as you learn and feel more comfortable with understanding what is said.

I have also had the opportunity to observe numerous mediations. I have found that family mediations are the most complicated, yet they are the most interesting kind of mediation that I have observed thus far. Family mediations are often emotionally charged, and it is intriguing to see how skilled mediators manage these emotions. Each mediator has their own unique mediation style, and from what I have observed, some are better at handling situations of heightened tension and flowing emotions than others are. Some mediators have a very directive style, they speak a lot to guide the process and emphasize the need to be productive in moving towards an agreement. Others take a step back and let the parties express themselves, prioritizing that the parties' feelings be heard. I believe that mediators who give the parties the opportunity to express their emotions are often better equipped for family mediations because when people feel heard, they tend to be more open to productively negotiate in the mediation. There are many strategies that mediators use to guide the parties through emotional situations. One of my favorite techniques for getting past tense discussions of parental rights is when the mediator asks for the name of the child and says, "That's a beautiful name! How did you come up with it?" This makes both parents smile, brings their focus back to the child and invites them to feel the warm feeling from when the days were happier. There are a lot more such fascinating strategies that one can use.

In my mediation training class I learned, and then saw first-hand, that mediation is a more organic process of managing conflict than the limited methods that our legal system offers. Mediation caters to the needs of each individual and has the potential to break cycles of conflict.

It targets and resolves conflict at its root; it provides closure for the parties. It also allows them to design an agreement that best suits their needs and interests instead of having resolution imposed upon them by a judge who does not know them or their families. In many of the mediations I observed or took part in, the parties to the mediation were given space to improve the communication between them and in the end, they were able to understand each other better. In cases where the relationship of the parties is important, mediation also helps the parties learn how to communicate better with each other once the mediation is concluded.

Conflict resolution skills are important in all employment fields. Because conflict is such a core part of the human experience, you will see it everywhere. Conflict can be constructive, and an environment that embraces and correctly manages conflict can benefit from more creative outcomes, growth of the team, and more. Conversely, if conflict is not managed well; it can become extremely detrimental and even result in violence in the workplace. This is why having those skilled in conflict resolution as employees is very useful for every organization, regardless of its focus.

In closing, after learning mediation skills and practicing mediation techniques throughout my internship, I have come to believe that teaching conflict resolution skills to as many people as possible will drastically change the course of our collective future. This applies especially to every child and every young adult, who hope to succeed as leaders. When large groups of us are trained to approach and resolve conflict successfully, we are more capable as a collective to make the right decisions when conflicts arise. This will make us better communicators with one another and will lead to a better, more peaceful future as a result. The more mediators there are in this world, no matter the field they end up in afterwards, the better off we will all be. After expanding my horizons and after my undergraduate study in the field of political science I now understand why mass violence and wars still exist today, and I understand the logic behind them. However, I still believe that we can be better as humans and as a global community, because of conflict resolution techniques such as mediation. After experiencing it first-hand, I am confident that if more of us learn this skill we can create a more peaceful future.

## Bibliography

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**Bio:**

Varvara Lazaridis is a summer intern with the Dispute Resolution Center of Montgomery County, Inc., where she received her 40-hour General Mediation Training Certificate. She now mediates general cases ranging from neighbor disputes to corporate finance. Following her birth in Florida, she spent an international childhood in Greece and the UK but has since returned to the US where she is a senior at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. Her majors in International Studies and Political Science are preparing her for a career in conflict resolution.