

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence.

The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at www.tctv.net.

You can also watch the program described below (and more than 90 of our previous interview programs and special programs) at the Olympia FOR's website, www.olympiafor.org. Simply click the TV programs link to reach www.olympiafor.org/tv_programs.htm, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch.

Many of our website's TV program listings also include a .pdf document describing the program.

DECEMBER 2013

"HOW TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS"

by GLEN ANDERSON, PRODUCER AND HOST OF THIS TV SERIES

In a real democracy, people would empower themselves to solve problems – including interpersonal conflicts – in mutually respectful ways.

This is actually quite possible, with some basic training and skills – and sometimes with help from skilled neutral facilitators.

The Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's December 2013 TV program focuses on a methodology for helping people resolve conflicts. We also feature a local non-profit organization that uses those methods to help people do that.

Across the country and here in Thurston County, Washington, nonprofit organizations (and a few local governments) are bringing people together with support from skilled neutral facilitators, to help people resolve a wide variety of conflicts and disputes in mutually respectful ways. They achieve high rates of success.

The Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston County is a nonprofit organization that has served our community since 1991.

Our TV interview guests are three very active volunteers with Thurston County's Dispute Resolution Center – the DRC:

- **Terry Teale** is a Senior Mediator and Chair of the DRC's Board of Directors. She also helps with coaching and with training.
- **Joe VanSyckle** started volunteering at Dispute Resolution Center in December 2012. He worked many years doing organizational development work for a big corporation. He reached out to the DRC in order to understand how a non-profit organization builds a group of people to do this kind of work. He fell in love with the DRC's way of bringing people together to solve problems on their own.

- **Paul James** has been a practicing attorney for 30 years. While he has conducted mediations as an attorney, he appreciates the Dispute Resolution Center's very different ways, involving skilled mediators who are very neutral and client-centered.

If you watch movies that end with a gun battle – either a Western movie shoot-out on main street or a battle of bigger explosives in “action movies” – or if you look at the US government's willingness to attack other nations – you might think that violence is the only way to solve problems.

Nowadays there is so much cynicism throughout our society that people might be surprised that it really is possible to resolve conflicts peaceably and in mutually respectful ways at the grassroots level, without even going to court.

I appreciate our three TV interview guests and many other local volunteers for actually helping people resolve their own interpersonal conflicts in ways that help people maintain or restore broken relationships.

We invite people to contact the Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston County at:

PO Box 6184
Olympia WA 98507-6184
(360) 956-1155
www.mediatethurston.org

The DRC's Mission Statement is:

“Our mission is to empower people to resolve their disputes by providing conflict resolution, mediation and training services to South Sound community members. We envision a South Sound community that has and uses healthy and respectful conflict resolution skills.”

The DRC helps people developing parenting plans so children and parents can continue to interact in healthy ways even though the parents separate or divorce.

The DRC helps people resolve conflicts within families, among neighbors, within workplaces, and in other settings.

For a number of years the DRC has helped parties mediate disputes instead of going to small claims court.

Recently the DRC has been conducting many mediations about foreclosures.

The DRC provides some trainings and mediations for state government agencies.

Sometimes the DRC helps the general community resolve community-wide conflicts.

Some problems are resolved through “telephone conciliation.” Sometimes people don’t know how to proceed toward solving the problem, so they phone the DRC for help getting unstuck. The DRC asks questions to help the caller understand how they might proceed. Some people need guidance or coaching in how to begin an effective conversation with the other party. Occasionally the problems are more complex, and the phone conciliator will talk separately with each party.

Mediation facilitates actual problem-solving. It is NOT counseling. The DRC does NOT give “legal advice.”

Typically someone phones the DRC and says they’d like to resolve a conflict with someone. The DRC will phone the other person to ask if they’re willing. If they agree, they’ll meet with a pair of neutral mediators who do not know anything about the situation. The mediation session is a “safe” space where parties can start fresh and express their sense of what the issues and facts are. The mediators facilitate a confidential conversation in which the parties themselves generate a workable solution.

At the outset, the mediators explain the process and ask parties to abide by some ground rules for good listening and civil behavior. Mediators explain the process by which the parties themselves will create their own solutions.

Mediators invite each party to provide an opening statement of the facts and what they’d like to accomplish. The parties set an agenda for the specific topics to cover during the session. Mediators write this agenda on a board. Then the mediators asks the parties to turn to each other and make proposals about how they might resolve the conflict. The process seeks solutions, so people start thinking forward toward solving the problem instead of thinking backward and rehashing the “noise” from their conflict. What would the parties like this to look like in the future? If a one or both parties get stuck or a bigger problem arises, a mediator can caucus confidentially with each party. Sometimes the parties make agreements along the way toward the main solution. The parties produce and sign agreements that they can live with.

After each mediation, both mediators debrief about what worked, what could have been done better, etc. This provides ongoing improvements in skills. Also, after a mediation, clients fill out feedback forms that go to the DRC’s office.

Some very important principles underlie the DRC’s work. It is voluntary for the two parties. They practice good listening and mutual respect throughout the process. The mediation process is confidential. Mediators facilitate a process in which parties work out a solution that is really their own solution. They sign a written agreement. These agreements have a very good record of compliance over the years. This process really works!

This is very different from going to court, where a judge has only a few minutes to decide a case (whereas the DRC typically schedules two hours) and often decides things with winners and losers (whereas the DRC helps the parties devise solutions that are acceptable to both parties).

This is also very different from “Dear Abby,” who renders a decision after having read only a few paragraphs of writing from only one party, rather than listening intently to both parties to understand what’s really going on. “Dear Abby” renders a decision that might be ill-informed or arbitrary, or fails to recognize the real needs of **both** parties.

Mediators are sensitive to recognizing problems that might arise during a mediation. These include “power imbalances” and getting stuck. Mediators can help the parties get around the problems and make progress toward solving the dispute at hand.

In many cases it is very important for the parties to retain a functioning relationship (*e.g.*, both parents will continue to interact with each other and their child(ren), both neighbors will still live next-door, the employees will continue to work together), so the mediation process provides some healing, or at least removes much of the toxicity that might otherwise remain from a conflict.

Sometimes miracles occur in which relationships are restored to health.

Judges – especially in Family Court and Small Claims Court – regard the DRC very highly.

One of the exciting and inspiring aspects of the Dispute Resolution Center’s work is that the mediators are volunteers. And another impressive aspect is that these volunteers are so thoroughly trained. The DRC’s basic training for mediators lasts 40 hours – including much practical experience – and continues with a rigorous practicum including observing senior mediators conducting actual mediations and debriefing afterward. The training is based on the accumulated wisdom and experience from the best experienced mediators. Experienced mediators design the curriculum and provide expert coaching. Newer mediators mediate jointly with senior mediators. There are additional steps in the process before certification. The whole process can take about a year. The DRC’s training helps prepare the mediators to deal with difficult situations.

The DRC’s staff is excellent, and accomplishes an enormous amount of good work by leveraging a great many volunteers.

The success rate of the kind of mediation that we are talking about is very high. When people devise their own solutions and mutually agree, they are very likely to follow through and do what they had agreed to. And the satisfaction with the process is impressive too.

Two guests shared impressive “success stories” without revealing any confidences.

The DRC’s website has a very impressive short video featuring people who worked out a parenting plan regarding their son Tucker. I watched the video and was impressed, so I encourage more people to watch this 6-minute video titled, “For Tucker: One Family’s Story” at www.mediatethurston.org/solveyourconflicts

Much of what we discuss during the TV interview would be useful for people in their daily lives – as people deal with various kinds of conflicts in our daily lives – even if we don't bring them to the Dispute Resolution Center for specific help. Good listening is crucial if we are to solve our day-to-day conflicts. Listen to discern what the real underlying interests are. Try to find ways to address these basic needs in a mutually respectful way. If people learn these skills, that's good for civilization overall.

The Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston County is a nonprofit organization founded in 1991. Voluntary donations are an important source of its budget.

We encourage people to interact with the Dispute Resolution Center in any of several ways. If you think you could use their services, visit their office on 4th Avenue downtown. It's open Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 4:30 pm. You can call (360) 956-1155 and refer other people to the DRC. Their website is www.mediatethurston.org

There are many ways to participate: Use DRC's services. Instead of feeling stuck, call someone and get help. Volunteer in a variety of capacities. Learn how to become a mediator. (Currently they especially need more men to serve as mediators.) Donate tax-deductibly. People of all ages and demographics participate and are welcome to participate. The DRC serves all kinds of people with equal fairness.

The DRC is active. Mediation sessions occur nearly every day.

They invite people to become trained to become mediators, and/or to take other specialized training.

Nearly everyone wants to live in a healthy democracy.

Nearly everyone wants to live in a truly sustainable society.

To move toward those goals, we need to solve interpersonal problems in peaceful, mutually respectful ways.

We can empower ourselves to do this, and we can get help from skilled neutral mediators.

We can create and support non-profit organizations to help with this.

If you live in a community without a dispute resolution center, please consider creating one.

Thurston County is fortunate to have the Dispute Resolution Center serving our community since 1991. You can contact this excellent local resource at:

Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston County

PO Box 6184

Olympia WA 98507-6184

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